

Leading During Difficult Times



By Kristin Powell, Ph.D. | April 6, 2020

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We are all out of our comfort zones right now. By this time, most, if not all of us, have been directly or indirectly impacted by COVID-19. Here are some tips and words of encouragement based on leadership best practices and recent conversations with leaders during this difficult time.

1. Set the Tone within Your Organization

In addition to dealing with the threat of physical illness, we are all making efforts to manage our heightened emotions. We are all human and are experiencing a range of emotions, including anxiety, fear, worry, anger or frustration - to name just a few.

This is a great time to go out of our way to genuinely ask people how they are doing and listen and respond with compassion, understanding, and grace. Listening carefully to employees, customers, partners, and communities will go a long way towards understanding and prioritizing their evolving needs.

While on a recent call with her team, a leader was interrupted by her school age daughter who had a question about a homeschool work assignment. As she assisted her daughter, she briefly excused herself and the team kept talking, with none of it being dismissed or disguised by the leader. When she came back to the call, she used this as an opportunity to discuss the realities of her family life with her team, and in turn asked her team how they are coping, which made them feel at ease about sharing their specific work-life difficulties and needs. Over the following weeks, she noticed that her team experienced more open communication, had greater alignment, and was more willing to follow her direction.

This is an opportunity for leadership to set a tone that demonstrates empathy and concern for the predicament that many individuals, families, and communities are in right now. Leaders can display compassion, understanding, and an ability to be flexible based on the needs of their stakeholders, which can go a long way towards building trust. Some helpful questions to consider are: Am I being truly empathic now? Have I really put myself in their shoes? How would I feel? What would really help?

2. Stay connected

Although social distancing is essential to slowing down the spread of COVID-19, we as human beings still feel the need to connect with one another, comfort each other and be comforted, and remain engaged. During this time, be intentional about remaining socially and emotionally connected to each other, especially if your organization is working remotely.

It may be helpful to set a reminder on your calendar to check in with others, including your immediate staff or department, management team, executive leadership, board members, and other important stakeholders on a regular basis due to the lack of natural social cues in a remote work environment. More people are asking to use videoconference calls, which are an opportunity to connect, be authentic, and see each other as we really are - imperfect and human. Online meetings could be a prime opportunity to show our humanity and use our people skills by being curious and learning about someone's elderly parent or other aspects of their personal life.

3. Use Time Wisely

Although this varies by industry, many business leaders have unexpectedly found themselves with extra time as they have transitioned the way in which they work over the past few weeks. While the next few weeks may be filled with more challenges and uncertainties, it could also present opportunities to slow down and think.

For example, many leaders are using this unexpected gift of time to think more broadly about their organization's future business model. Many are contemplating the following questions:

- What steps can I take to provide stability during these difficult times?
- What parts of our work can be done remotely?
- What can I learn and model from other businesses or industries that have found creative, viable solutions to current challenges?
- How do I want to be useful to others?
- What can I do to create value or be useful when others feel paralyzed?
- Are there opportunities to use our strengths and talents for good?
- What personal and organizational values will guide these decisions?

Existing organizational values should provide a foundation that will guide your actions during this time. Alternatively, this could be an ideal moment to define or refine your organization's purpose, mission, or vision.

Many leaders are also using this time to evaluate processes with the goals of reducing waste and achieving greater efficiency. For example, many businesses have realized that their meetings are often disorganized, inefficient, and distracting, which makes it difficult to complete other work tasks throughout the day. These businesses are now having shorter meetings, eliminating many meetings altogether, or designating "no meeting" days in order to increase productivity.

Others have utilized technology to streamline their operations, such as relying less on printing and using virtual means to communicate information and implementing task management software and other technological solutions to make business more efficient.

4. Continue to Coach and Develop

Effective leaders commit to continue and even accelerate their practice of coaching and developing employees as they quickly recognize that many practices, such as the traditional “command and control” leadership style will no longer work. Successful leaders must develop the skills and capacity to unleash energy, fresh insights, and commitment out of people with whom they work, which is especially needed during times of crisis and uncertainty.

For example, many leaders are not only sharing crisis execution plans with their employees and other stakeholders, they are soliciting input and engaging them to discuss the difficult decisions being made and even forming teams to break up siloed thinking; thereby bringing a new generation of leaders to the forefront.

With the right tools, practice, and feedback anyone can become a better coach. Try to suspend judgment and doubt, actively listen, speak less, and ask more open-ended questions that demonstrate your interest and belief in the person you are leading.

How Will You Lead During This Difficult Time?

We are grateful to all of you who are making personal and professional sacrifices for the good of our communities. One day this will be behind us, and we will resume our work routines. Hopefully, we will have a greater appreciation for the things that we take for granted each day, including the ability to be in the same space and work together. At the end of this crisis, there will also be many dramatic and welcome shifts in the world of work. While some work practices will resume, many will not be the same, as we adapt and realize this is an ideal time to test new practices. We hope that you use this time to demonstrate compassionate leadership, stay connected, think broadly about the future of your business, and utilize coaching skills to unleash the talent from your team.

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