Leading people through a crisis

Leaders face challenges on an almost daily basis. From new competitors entering the market and retaining great people, to the disruption brought by technology and how to accelerate agile team working.

The Coronavirus challenge is turning out to be something else altogether. It’s a rapidly changing situation with a constant feed of conflicting information and no single solution. This is both confusing and distracting for leaders and their people.

With such high uncertainty people are experiencing emotional responses triggered by the threat to their safety. There’s a tendency to want to hide or revert to default behaviours until things ‘get back to normal.’ Yet we don’t know when that is or whether that normal will exist again.

There is no playbook available for how to lead people through a crisis like this and the way things were done in past may not be helpful here.

One thing is certain, it’s a time for strong leadership and a time for leaders to act.

Here are some things to focus on:
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1. **Don’t be afraid to act**

   As the situation changes daily, information needs to be processed quickly and decisions made. These decisions will often be difficult, and you can’t afford to wait until things ‘get back to normal’.

   The information will most likely be conflicting, which means it might feel safer to do nothing because the moment you do you are open to criticism. In a crisis people are already disrupted, so now is the time to act boldly whilst people are out of their normal patterns of behaviour and routine.

   You might not get it right every time, the important thing is accepting feedback and being willing to adapt and self-correct where necessary.

2. **Communicate constantly**

   When the situation is uncertain people seek information and when it’s missing it becomes a distraction. Frequently communicating information and details around new goals and information, including any changing priorities helps settle the brain. This is particularly important during times of heightened anxiety.

   Communication should match the changing circumstances and level of anxiety, so even when you have nothing particularly new to say it’s important to keep doing it. It’s also not meant to be one way, so listen carefully and be empathetic.

3. **Provide stability and hope**

   With people’s career, financial, social and physical wellbeing all at risk, people need stability and hope. One way to do that is to provide a clear purpose to anchor them to. As a leader, be clear on the purpose and connect people with it, communicating the actions, values and behaviours that will enable the organisation to reach it. For example, some might put the safety of their employees first and this helps inform what counts, the decisions you make and when you need to make them by.
People are experiencing a range of different and difficult emotions as well as juggling other responsibilities, such as parenting and taking care of elderly parents. How you manage and support people will determine their productivity, engagement and loyalty to you and the organisation for the long term. They will remember how their leaders responded at a time when they needed you most.

When people are working from home, they need to feel connected, yet in practice it’s hard to move from one conference call to the next, particularly when you’re trying to balance different responsibilities. Work with individuals to understand their schedules and timelines and trust that they will do their best to honour them. Embrace what it really means to have a flexible work culture and allow people to get things done later in the day or early in the morning when they’re able to give it the proper attention.

If you’re someone who usually focuses on business, take the opportunity to share things about your own personal situation, even if it doesn’t come naturally to you. This will help to create trust and demonstrate you empathise with the different and potentially difficult situations that others might be going through.

During times of uncertainty and fear individuals are looking for reassurance. When they don’t have it, they begin to monitor the behaviour of their leaders and fill in information gaps for themselves. So, it’s important to demonstrate the behaviours needed for success in overcoming adversity.

As a leader you probably already know something about being resilient and have accessed resources both inside and out of yourselves to get through a tough time before. This means you can call on these resources again. Manage your emotional energy by removing any of the things that drain your time and energy to support your own balance and well-being during this time.

Sustain yourself for the long haul by making room for what inspires you, such as a space to ‘think’, a walk or other form of exercise. Identify the people who lift you up and reach out to them for support.

Stay focussed on what you can control and influence and don’t spend time on the things you can’t do anything about. Help your team develop their confidence and resilience by supporting them to do the same.
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Got something else on your mind that you need help with? Email us at:

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