

Navigating the leadership challenge in these unprecedented times



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These are unprecedented times for leaders. Leaders face tough challenges in tough times and it would be easy to place dealing with a pandemic on the 'too hard to do' list. Leadership has never been so important for navigating the current climate. Operating under lockdown, leading your people to behave and work differently, competing priorities between business, home and mental wellbeing. This is uncharted territory; we have never been here before in our lifetime.

This raises a myriad of questions for leaders: How can we protect our business and people? How can we minimise risk? Can we survive? And if we can, how? And for others, it's about how are we coping with this absolute peak in demand? What are the critical essential services that we offer? And how can we deliver given new restrictions and social distancing?

Journalist and thought leader Matthew Syed, says that the global pandemic creates unimaginable challenges for leaders but also great lessons for learning. It's easy for those on the outside, the 'armchair critics', to pass comment on leadership capability in the current climate, but let's not underestimate the pressure of time, pace and contradictory demands placed on leaders, alongside having to make decisions based on rapidly

changing and conflicting data and being surrounded by experts who themselves are divided.

Leaders need to find resilience, reduce complexity and accept vulnerability. This is a difficult ask when leaders, like everyone else, are feeling worry, uncertainty and fear.

In my view, there are certain fundamentals that leaders should focus on during these challenging times. My five main insights for leaders in the current climate are:

1. Be human

A key starting point is to be human. By this, I mean demonstrating compassion and empathy for others. American speaker, trainer and blogger Matt Monge suggests that we need to summon the courage to be human; people helping people, people serving people, at scale. Great leadership, during tough times, requires 'human leadership'. Leaders who are human don't put on an act, behave like they know it all or refuse the help of others. They demonstrate 'humanness' and vulnerability; they are open about their flaws, insecurities, mistakes and fears. During tough times, people look to leaders to be calm, steady, resilient *human beings* who will guide them through the uncertainty.

Leaders should also show humility. Satya Nadella at Microsoft described how he and his team worked to shift the cultural mind-set from a know-it-all to a learn-it-all culture. Humility means recognising your own strengths but also acknowledging your weaknesses, being prepared to listen and learn from others. There is always something you can learn.

2. Be vulnerable

Crisis is a time for leaders to be human and authentic. Author and vulnerability expert Brené Brown suggests that, when we find ourselves in a new situation where we have no previous experience or relevant expertise – such as navigating your first global pandemic – the uncertainty and fear of these first times can be overwhelming. But it's okay to admit that you don't know - showing up and pushing ourselves past the awkward, learner stage and feeling vulnerable is how we become more courageous.

We need to learn how to embrace our vulnerabilities as a source of power and choose 'courage over comfort', to cultivate the courage, compassion and connection needed in the current climate. Vulnerability is absolutely not a weakness; it's the only path to courage. Any act of courage requires uncertainty, risk, emotional exposure or fear. Ultimately, our vulnerability is the bedrock to building trust with others.

3. Be clear on why we are doing this

Writing for The Times, Daniel Finkelstein says suspicion that the government delayed its response to the coronavirus pandemic due to having too much faith in behavioural science is wrong; if anything, behavioural science is being underused and we should have more faith in it, not less.

Behavioural science is a valuable tool to motivate behaviour, for example, getting people to sing *Happy Birthday* twice as a way of ensuring thorough hand washing, or by stressing the sheer number of people who are complying with restrictions across the nation. We humans copy each other, we can be nudged towards better or new desired behaviour.

Leaders can apply behavioural science when planning how to lead and motivate their people to adopt new behaviours and ways of working. Be clear on what you want people to do and why you are doing this - and that you are all in this together. Stress the amount of compliance, not the occasional failure. Reward compliance and build a sense of community around everyone doing this for a shared purpose; for the survival of the company, community and nation.

4. Be there, be present

Connection during crisis is a powerful leadership tool. Executing physical distance doesn't have to mean social distance and virtual distance. Stay connected with your teams, peers and wider communities. Be present, be visible, be involved; be there for your people. Show empathy, compassion and that you care. Show them you are all in this together. And that there will be an end point. Give them hope.

Connection through collaborative thinking is key. This situation is new to everyone, we need to listen and collectively learn how to navigate the situation together. In his book "Rebel Ideas", Matthew Syed believes that only collaborative thinking and diversity of thought can unlock human potential and help resolve issues in a crisis.

Personalisation of communication adds to impact. Speak to people in person, ensure communications are personalised, participate in your communities and create a sense of 'likeness'; when people are feeling uncertain, they are most influenced by others 'like them'.

5. Take time to do your best thinking

Easier to say than to do, but we all know in the current crisis, the focus needs to be on critical priorities. Be clear on what needs to happen now and for the medium term, once the pandemic subsides. Use any spare time in the coming weeks (if you're lucky) and months as an opportunity to step back;

take time to think. Clarity of thought will result in clarity of decisions and clarity of communication.

Take time to think about your leadership differentiators. How can you optimise your strengths during these challenging times? Leadership is all about relationships and learning, it's about doing your best possible thinking, challenging assumptions and truly taking time to think and reflect. This will enable you to reduce your 'busyness', eliminate interference and breakdown the complexity to do the right things that will have the most impact.

Disruptive times call for disruptive leaders. The team at Corporate Rebels believe that disruptive leaders are focused and flexible, they experiment and adapt to the situation and priorities. Corporate Rebels advocate 'supportive leadership'. Supportive leaders challenge the way things are done and do everything in their power to remove barriers and help employees thrive. They also refer to the 'iceberg of ignorance', whereby executives only see four per cent of problems and therefore can't possibly know it all.

In summary

Leaders have never before faced the challenges of the current climate. By demonstrating humanity, vulnerability and compassion, by taking time to think and being visible and present, you will demonstrate to your teams and communities that we are all in this uncertainty together.

Thanks for reading. How can you apply these tips to your leadership responsibilities in the current climate? What else do you think is important? Leave a comment and share your own thoughts and insights...

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