

Leading in Times of Disruption

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COVID-19, a Global Black Swan, disruptive on all levels, is teaching us to adapt quickly and with great agility. Were there signs the swan was on its way? Some (especially scientists in Asia based on past epidemics there) say we had the necessary information. However, these were weak signals, easy to ignore or misunderstand. More on this in another post. For now, how to find our path and help others who work with us?

Disruption creates chaos and opportunity, as we all already know all too well. It's a time of confusion and we crave answers, clarity, meaning, and hope. Fortunately, there are a few actions leaders can do immediately to strengthen all who are now trying to adjust and remain productive in this intense VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) period which also includes lack of direct interaction with friends and coworkers due to working virtually and social distancing.

The Basics: During times of chaos and crisis leaders need to be visible and engage more frequently with their employees. Although this may feel challenging, here are five key leadership behaviors to engage in immediately, especially if you are working remotely.

Actively build trust. In times of disruption, people want someone they can trust and seek to follow leaders with integrity. To build trust in these chaotic times, focus on:
Providing credible, authentic, and timely messaging. Now is the time to "tell it like it is," while making sure to celebrate small wins, including achievements and contributions.
Transparency is critical. People want to reduce uncertainty so the more information you provide, even if not always uplifting, or directly relevant to their role, the more you build trust. This transparency also reduces rumors, which tend to be negative.

Communicate key messages relentlessly. When routines are changed and the future is uncertain, distraction is increased, making it harder to retain new information and develop new behaviors. Therefore, when it comes to communicating in times of disruption focus on:

Identifying your key messages and prioritize clearly.

Repeat key messages relentlessly. A good rule of thumb is three to four times more than you think necessary.

Use multiple formats to deliver important messages, including creative forms such as mimes, infographics, etc. In addition, use multiple channels to communicate these messages (e.g., virtual meetings, E-mail, Slack, etc). To sustain clarity, be vigilant in maintaining consistency across channels and messaging. Everyone knows changes are now on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis and messaging will change. Nevertheless, be upfront there are changes, just be sure they are communicated across all channels.

Clarify. People can't just "pop in" or run into you in the corridor to ask questions, so work hard to explain and communicate from the perspective of the listener, to be sure your message is understood from their viewpoint.

Listen. Being attentive to suggestions and concerns is part of empowerment and a source of critical information and ideas. Your team may be dispersed, and as a result have more access to unique and diverse sources - build on them and encourage initiatives.

Be prepared to be surprised. You may find great insights from unexpected sources. For example, your junior member may have the best ideas for how to stay in touch with customers remotely and creatively.

Be accessible. Let people know how, when and what is the best way is to reach you. Be sure to repeat this information as it reminds them you are available to them.

Be emotionally astute. Many are not at their emotional best right now and may tend towards negative thinking. Here are some ways to help:

Be empathetic and benevolent. Let people know you hear them, with no judgment. Some concerns may seem trivial or irrelevant to you, however, it's hard to judge other peoples' stress. What stresses you may not stress others and vice versa. As a leader, its best to know what is top of mind for your team so you can help mitigate concerns. Doing so also builds the benevolent aspect of trust.

Stop the negative contagion and turn it around. Being empathetic does not mean adding to the pessimistic discourse and increasing negative contagion. Instead look for opportunities to create positive cycles by focusing on positives such as how people are supporting each other, new solutions created during this time of disruption, progress in other industries, best practices and more.

Use humor. There are many ways to joke about COVID-19 and we have all seen endless toilet paper hoarding jokes, not to mention the joys of being an introvert these days. Many leaders are now starting their virtual meetings by having folks share their favorite recent COVID-19 joke or feel good story of how colleagues, neighbors, friends, and even strangers are helping others. Bottom line, in addition to avoiding spread of negative

contagion, help build positive contagion, which in turn will help support more creative thought patterns.

Role model – How would you like leaders to engage with you these days? And, how would you like others to respond to you? Now, go ahead and show up! Next, actively seek input from others on what they need or want from you, as they may include what you can easily provide.

Reframe – A key tool for overcoming cognitive blocks and decision bias is to reframe a problem. Guide others to think differently about problems, challenges, and solutions. Sometimes it is as simple as turning the problem inside out and asking about the opposite. For example, instead of asking what we need to do to survive this crisis, asking who we could become if we don't survive, may lead to new thinking of additional business opportunities relevant to COVID-19 times. Or asking how can we contribute with our current technology and resources to create value during these tough times? For example, several startups and even larger organizations have already switched course and use their technology to create much needed support during this pandemic. Or instead of focusing on how hard things are, reframe to see how hard it is for your customers and how to provide them with added value. And, in doing so, you are also strengthening your team by re-connecting them to purpose, how they add value and make a difference.

Dramatic change creates dramatic needs and opportunities. COVID-19 created a Global Black Swan and we need leaders. Regardless of your organizational role, building trust, communicating key messages relentlessly, being emotionally astute (including empathy and humor), role modeling, and reframing are five basic steps to leading others in times of disruption. We have been through tough times before, and we will prevail, in part, because of leaders like you!