

Leadership in Times of Crisis



Now, more than ever, leaders are being called upon to guide their teams through uncertainty. From small emergencies to natural disasters, there have always been challenges to leading people through turbulent times.

Poor leadership can cause considerable damage at a time when people need guidance and direction to regain a sense of calm and confidence that things will get better.

However, a global analysis from the international executive search firm, Odgers Berndtson, reveals that [only 15% of executives](#) believe their companies' top leadership is positioned to succeed. This lack of confidence is especially alarming since 95% of executives also believe that managing disruption, including unexpected events like pandemics, climate change, and ever-evolving technology, is now critical to the success of companies. The challenges companies are facing now require an evolution of leadership and will require a shift in mindset as well as a skillset. Steve Potter, CEO of Odgers Berndtson U.S., explains, "As a firm, we have certainly been thinking about what this means for us, and are making changes through use of artificial intelligence, in pricing, additional leadership and organizational offerings, and other services that will benefit our clients as they innovate for the future."

How can we, as leaders in business and our broader communities, make sure we are stepping up to the challenge of leading through disruption? Are you ready to lead your team through the current COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic realities related to taking appropriate safety measures?



THE PSYCHOLOGY OF A CRISIS

Leaders should be aware that people process information differently during a crisis. According to the [CDC's](#) guide on crisis and emergency risk communication, we should adjust the way we communicate to be most effective.

Simplify your messages. When people are under stress and experiencing informational overload, they can miss the nuances of words and won't remember as much information as they usually would.

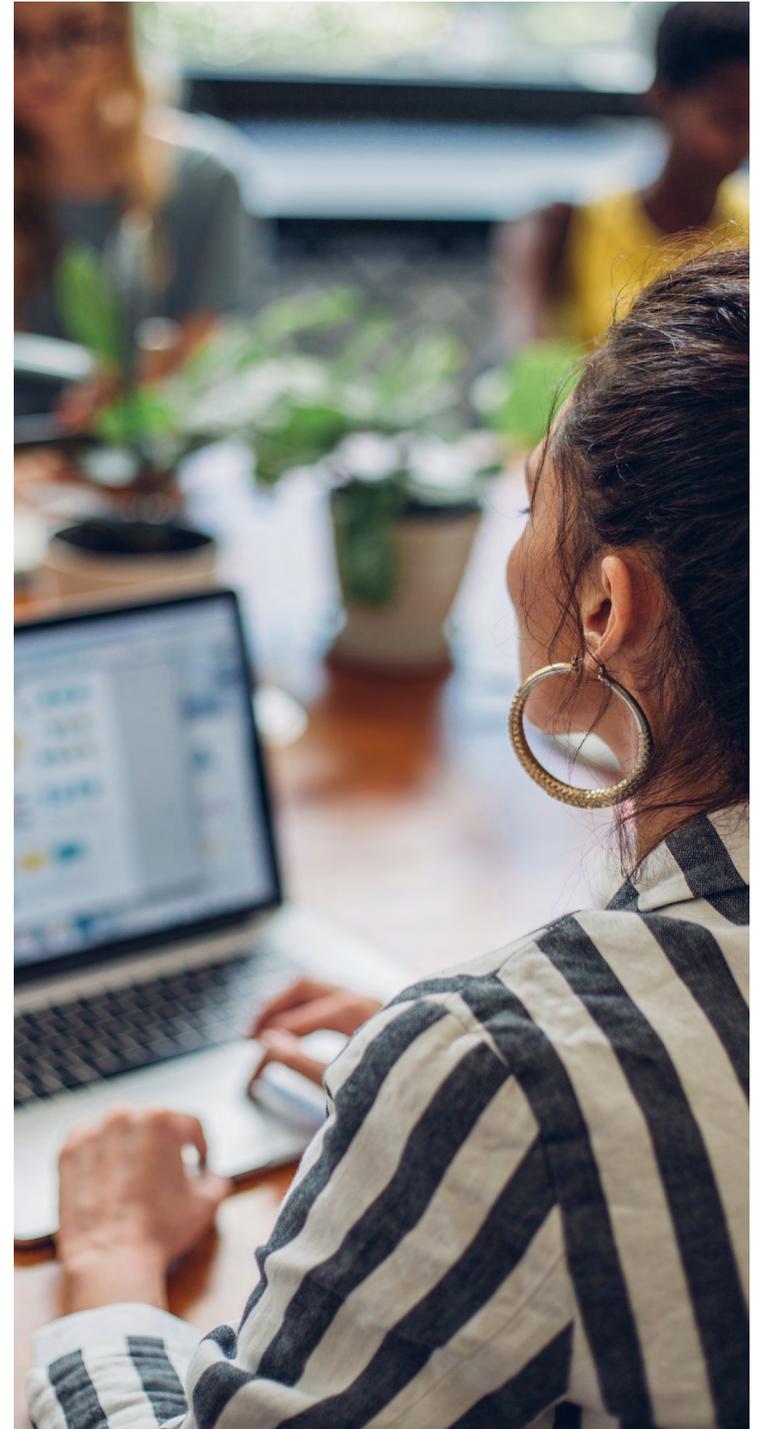
You should also know that people will hold on to current beliefs, and will resist making changes in their routine. For example, it can be hard to convince people to seek shelter from an approaching storm when the weather looks beautiful at the moment. You may notice this in the current COVID-19 pandemic that people are initially reluctant to follow safety guidelines like social distancing and self-isolating if they have possible exposure. This could be because they haven't seen anyone get sick, or are in denial about the potential dangers of a global pandemic.

Stay informed by seeking credible information. Watch and read news from multiple sources to see if they are sharing similar warnings. Confirm your data before sharing it with your team or organization. People tend to believe the first messages they receive, so be careful not to spread bad information or rumors that will cause confusion inadvertently. However, release accurate messaging as soon as possible.

Delays in communication only add to the uncertainty and fear your teams might be facing.

Your communication efforts will be of utmost importance during any crisis. Some leaders will focus solely on client communication, wanting to be sure they feel taken care of and are aware of the company's efforts to help. However, remember, you need to focus on your team members as well. If you can reassure them and provide a good example, they will stay engaged and continue to work hard for your organization as you navigate uncertain times.

According to a Harvard Business Review article on [Crisis Communication](#), there are some simple things you can do to reassure your team when the future is uncertain. First, you should center yourself. Take a moment to make sure that you can present a calm, rational demeanor to your colleagues. When you feel anxiety, it is easy to transmit that to others as they take social cues from you. Next, always put yourself in your audience's shoes. Try to anticipate their concerns, and what their most immediate needs will be.



You should also make sure to speak confidently even when you are communicating uncertainty. You can be transparent about not knowing all the answers right at that moment, but make sure you still sound in control of the situation. Finally, have some specific next steps.

In times of disruption, having tangible actions to take can help give your team a sense of control, and make them feel like they are contributing to a solution.

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

It is also important to remember that in a crisis, leaders must be able to adapt rapidly. Remember that your first response may not be the final response, and your overall strategy might change quickly as new information becomes available. You must continue to take in new information and cannot be insistent on a singular approach if the situation changes.

The landscape of business operations is currently changing by the hour, and the ability for individual leaders and organizations to take on the process of change is vital to success. Leaders will need to discern what is necessary and what is expendable very rapidly.

Leaders need to be able to pivot quickly to adapt to evolving situations.

Schools, gyms, and yoga studios are moving to online live-streaming classes. Restaurants are changing to pick up and delivery service only. Technology leaders are developing apps to help everyone stay connected and keep working.



One way many organizations are adapting to current conditions is to have their workers work remotely to follow advisement about social distancing to slow the spread of COVID-19. Changing your business operations quickly can be difficult under the best circumstances. It can be difficult to lead in a virtual office environment effectively. Best-selling author and global researcher, Marcus Buckingham recently shared some tips [about leading in remote work environments](#). He reminds us that the ADP Research Institute did a comprehensive study of engagement and found that some of the most engaged employees work remotely 80% of the time. It is possible to keep your team engaged and connected even if you can't physically meet in person. He recommends weekly virtual check-ins with the team. However, Buckingham warns against trying to be a therapist during these check-ins by addressing everyone's feelings. Instead, focus your team's attention and provide them with a sense of what they can control at the moment, such as making progress on a particular project, or responding to client inquiries.

As Buckingham rightly points out, "The best leaders take anxiety and turn it into confidence."

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Today's successful leaders are adopting the basic philosophies of servant leadership, focusing on enriching the lives of individuals, building better organizations, and creating a more caring world. In the current concerns over COVID-19, cities are grappling with canceling or postponing large revenue-producing conferences and festivals, marathons, and movie premieres. Restaurants are being stopped from providing dine-in service to customers. This results in lost revenue and jobs, and spreads uncertainty in the economy.

How leaders respond to this is critical on both a global and local scale. Some organizations have taken [immediate steps to help](#) in the face of shutdowns. Microsoft has committed to continue paying hourly employees that serve their office buildings even though they have asked their teams to work from home. Google has established a fund that enables temporary staff and vendors to take paid sick leave if they have symptoms or are quarantined. They are also working on making an app for people to order pick up orders online available for free to help restaurants stay open. The Shine Distillery in Portland started producing and giving away hand sanitizer after learning there was a shortage in their area. There are many more examples, and hopefully, we will continue to see more business leaders finding innovative ways to help in a crisis.

Helping others in times of need will also strengthen your organization's reputation and brand in your community.

Sometimes servant leadership will require making painful decisions. Recently the City of Austin, Texas, made the difficult decision to cancel their annual South by Southwest® (SXSW) conference for the first time in 34 years, just days before it was to begin. The cancellation of this event will result in over \$350 million in revenue being lost to the city's economy.

However, the city remained focused on the greater good of the population instead of the immediate economic cost.

While this immediately created chaos and uncertainty for SXSW as an organization, one of the first actions they took was to [compile resources](#) to help the local businesses, artists, and service industry workers that would be most affected and share that information. They moved quickly to communicate specific actions people could take to support those hit hardest by the cancellation, demonstrating true servant leadership by thinking of others and serving the community first.



The principles of servant leadership can be very effective in times of crisis. [Jeffrey Hayzlett](#), author of *The Hero Factor: How Great Leaders Transform Organizations and Create a Winning Culture*, explains that servant leadership is about what you can do for others outside of the organization as well as being a servant to your own values and building a culture around you that reflects those values. Hayzlett suggests four necessary steps you can take to become a better servant leader:

Encourage diversity of thought.

Encourage your team to think outside the box and consider everyone's perspective when it's time to make a move. Are you giving everyone a seat at the table? What valuable input are you missing if you aren't focused on collaboration and exchanging ideas?

Create a culture of trust.

Especially in times of uncertainty, a leader must be transparent and have a clear purpose. Communications need to be specific and disseminated to every level of the organization top to bottom. Trust is earned and hard to repair once broken.

Have an unselfish mindset.

Remember that it is not about you. Where would you be without the people on your team? Or the clients you serve? Hayzlett reminds us that many leaders make the mistake of viewing people and profits as two separate issues. However, you cannot have one without the other. Show your team and your clients that they are valued, and during difficult times, do your best to make them feel supported.

Foster leadership in others.

Develop future leaders in your organization through coaching and mentorship. Take the time to teach someone the ropes, bring them into meaningful conversations, or consider enrolling them in a [leadership development program](#).

If you are consistently developing your leaders, your organization will be ready to face any challenges that come your way.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES

When handled well, crisis management can produce very positive outcomes for you and your team. There can be a feeling of strength and empowerment, and a renewed sense of community that comes from coming together to get through uncertainty.

Organizations that make the right moves now will become stronger and more viable.

With the right leadership, your team, your organization, your community cannot only make it through a crisis but learn from it and become better because of it.

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