

Response

Leadership in the COVID-19 crisis

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The importance of building personal resilience

Effective leadership in the current crisis requires prioritizing your mental well-being alongside that of your employees

It's safe to say that nearly every leader has been faced with moments of crisis, ranging from brief bumps in the road to more sustained issues. It's also safe to say that the current crisis involving the COVID-19 pandemic is different than anything we've faced in over a century, one that looks to be a prolonged and possibly existential challenge for organizations. Effective leadership in a prolonged crisis with such serious consequences is absolutely necessary for an organization and its people, and requires physical, psychological and emotional fortitude.

Several of the contributors to this article served as former law enforcement agents assigned to the FBI's Critical Incident Response Group; they have experienced long-term standoffs, worked in post-attack command posts, and responded to crises that strained even the most seasoned professionals. Leaders who have succeeded in navigating such crises recognize that effective management blends static, core values of crisis management with dynamic adjustments to meet their own personal needs and those of the workforce during critical incidents.

Successful leadership relies on a manager's adaptive capacity, described as "an almost magical ability to transcend adversity, with all its attendant stresses, and to emerge stronger than before." In this pandemic crisis, resilient leaders must respond and adjust to fluid circumstances across the organization in a climate that changes day by day and hour by hour. As we begin a prolonged adjustment to the "new normal," responsible, thoughtful leaders must prepare for a significant shift in operational priorities. Your leadership style – which likely has served you well up to this point – will need to be revisited and adapted to this extraordinary and unprecedented crisis.

Leaders who thrive during normal operations or even during temporary crises can struggle to sustain personal fortitude during a prolonged crisis that impacts their organizations, their communities, their families and themselves. To maximize your effectiveness as a leader and carry you and your organization through the coming months, consider the following strategies:

1. Recognize susceptibility to decision fatigue

Decision fatigue refers to the idea that your willpower or ability to make good choices deteriorates in quality after an extended period of critical decision-making. Under prolonged stress and fatigue, functions such as judgment, strategic thinking and even rationality can deteriorate and cloud complex decisions. It's common to have difficulty concentrating and to feel unfocused or adrift when faced with a perpetually shifting cycle of updates and uncertainty. As a leader who is forced to make hard decisions with potentially severe consequences throughout the day, you may experience a growing difficulty in accurately assessing the risks and gains associated with different courses of action.

Unsurprisingly, during a crisis many leaders frequently fail to recognize (or accept) the real impact and cost of fatigue. Ironically, the common perception that leadership in crisis requires tireless engagement and ceaseless energy may directly contribute to reduced effectiveness as decision-makers. As we are reminded on every airline flight, in an emergency you must first take care of yourself so that you can care for others, and the same applies to organizational leadership in times of crisis.

Everyone has their limits. Your organization needs you to make critical decisions, and that ability can deteriorate as a crisis continues.

2. Lead by example: Avoid burnout

During this pandemic, it can be tempting to think that, as a leader and manager, you always need to be front and center. Being the first person online in the morning and the last to sign off may demonstrate that you are energetic and committed...yet at what cost? You also want to be accessible, patient and level-headed, qualities that can run low when you are physically, mentally and emotionally depleted.

If your workforce observes this decline (and they will!), they may come to believe that all employees must similarly push themselves to the brink of exhaustion. Of course, during extraordinary times we operate at an enhanced level and there are increased expectations around availability. Yet during a prolonged crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, organizational leadership must adapt to a modified level of operations – one that maximizes output without fostering burnout.

Leaders, therefore, need to model good self-care and demonstrate the importance of rest and recovery to the workforce. When you step away from work, truly step away. Appoint someone you trust to assume the leadership role and take a break from your e-mails. Instruct your back-up to call you only in a true crisis and be clear that you will not be looking at emails during time off. Be disciplined in this and others in the organization will get the message that rest is a priority.

Similarly, respect the down time of others. Do you absolutely have to send an email out at 10:30pm or can the non-urgent, administrative issue wait until normal operating hours? Your actions set the tone during a crisis.

Finally, lean on other leaders and seek out assistance from each other, especially when identifying all available mental health and financial resources. Everyone in this global crisis is impacted in some way.

Recognize that you and your employees all have physical and emotional limits. Demonstrate the importance of rest.

3. Empower alternates

It's tempting during a crisis to become the decisive executive who boldly pulls the organization forward through the storm to safety ("I alone can solve this..."). Yet, even executive managers must eventually rely upon secondary leaders, a middle-management "deep bench" that becomes even more essential during sustained crisis management. While CEOs can and should remain the key voice setting the tone for the organization, an alternating schedule can adjust expectations for the long term. Extended crisis events like that brought about by COVID-19 are best served by decision-making processes that are consultative, rather than unilateral, in style.

When the CEO or an executive must attend to other matters (including sick leave) without advanced warning, this can naturally promote anxiety and concern in the workforce. By routinely calling upon backup or secondary leaders before it becomes a critical need, executives protect the organization from future panic and demonstrate organizational fortitude should the coronavirus impact the C-suite. Importantly, routine incorporation of secondary leaders in day-to-day operations buys time for executives to recover from fatigue, while providing critical opportunities for reflection and the creation of long-term solutions.

Make the deliberate decision to involve secondary leaders and middle managers to a greater degree than you would during normal operations. Recall that the old adage "people tend to support what they help to create" applies in a particularly meaningful way during a severe crisis, where employees are looking for ways to make meaningful contributions for the collective survival of the organization.

Ensure that trusted alternates are informed and empowered to make decisions.

4. Be conscious of straining your crisis management team

At the beginning of a crisis, it is normal to adopt an "all hands on deck" approach. It is also typical to overburden your "go-to" team members, the high-performers who push themselves to the point where stress and fatigue compromise their decision-making. Adaptive capacity in this context means the dispersion of tasks and the preservation of energy.

For instance, dividing a medium or large crisis management team (CMT) into two or more teams will allow for shift work and will sustain effectiveness over a prolonged crisis event. Make sure that your high-performers aren't overused or drained to the point of exhaustion. They may resist taking down time and may need to be directed to rest.

Given the enormity and scope of a pandemic, consider that some CMT members are now being pulled in new and unforeseen directions. It's safe to say that most CMTs have not prepared for a pandemic of this proportion and impact. Your teams likely feel inadequately prepared or trained, increasing the likelihood of compromised team confidence. In addition, many CMT members will be placed in a position where they are providing both technical and emotional support to co-workers and clients, a multi-directional drain that can quickly squeeze even the most resilient of teams. Empowering teams through training opportunities

and eliminating non-essential administrative tasks may preserve mental and emotional bandwidth.

Organizations that are faring well in the crisis tend to have a CMT that is closely supported by various operational teams (e.g., finance, supply chain). The operational teams handle relevant administrative tasks, research and analysis, freeing up the executive CMT to absorb the most crucial information to guide critical decisions.

Adaptive capacity in this environment may call for extraordinary and aggressive caretaking of the workforce. Consider having scheduled EAP counselor days available for CMT members (e.g., EAP counselor on site or available online every Wednesday from noon to 4pm or on remote standby for exclusive CMT service), particularly if the crisis stretches into months versus weeks. Remember that your CMT members may have their own caretaking responsibilities on their minds as they constantly triage incoming matters of critical urgency.

Plan for the long game. Create multiple teams and avoid overburdening the same employees.

Enhance access to EAP services in order to better care for your CMT members.

5. Be open to sharing your personal experience

Crisis leaders must recognize that this is an unprecedented moment in the lives of their employees and in their own lives. While containing your own feelings and emotions can be important in leading your organization through a crisis, the suppression of these feelings can actually harm your effectiveness as a leader.

As employees struggle with fear, anxiety and uncertainty, they may wonder if management experiences the same challenges, particularly in light of different compensation levels. It would frankly be odd for a leader in such abnormal circumstances to behave as if things remain “business as usual.” You may not typically be expressive in talking about your personal life with your employees, but adaptive capacity in this area calls for empathy towards those employees who are uncertain and anxious. Don’t be afraid to show how you have been personally affected by this crisis and the emotional impact it has had on you.

Balance is also key when it comes to communications and interactions between leadership and employees. Every day provides reminders that a crisis is underway, and many internal communications only serve to reinforce that. Capitalize on opportunities for more positive interactions that will help your workforce to feel connected, particularly if you’re working remotely. Share in some of the frustrations of social distancing and moments of levity, such as when the dog decides to bark during a Skype or Zoom call. In doing so, you are showing that in these extraordinary times we are all members of a community doing our collective best to navigate uncharted waters.

Demonstrate emotional intelligence. Sharing emotions and personal impact stories with the workforce creates an environment of empathy and resilience.

Your energy, focus and resilience become precious commodities during a prolonged state of crisis. The same goes for your employees. Embracing adaptive capacity in functional,

pragmatic strategies should be complemented by your own personal steps for self-care, and can set you, your organization and its people up for long-term resilience in the face of COVID-19.

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