

Thrive Business Leaders Summit

Breakout Workshop: Leading in Crisis

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In futures studies, COVID-19 represents what is called a wildcard event. It was unanticipated and not associated with a trend yet has a powerful impact on the present and future. COVID-19 has triggered unprecedented impacts similar yet different from the Great Recession. When events like this occur, there are significant leadership needs and opportunities. How we respond to crisis will test our leadership. Many can lead when things are going well, but it is a smaller percentage who lead well in a crisis. This webinar focused on seven factors that will improve our leadership in times of crisis.

First, leaders set the tone by being active, visible, and courageous. When a crisis hits all eyes turn to leaders. What will you do? How will you help? What plays will you call? Followers want to know that their leaders are actively taking steps to respond to the crisis. Followers take comfort when they feel like their leaders are “with them.” Part of being with them is being visible on the front lines. For many leaders this is not a comfortable position—it takes courage to get out of your comfort zone and address a crisis, especially when there is a lot that is unknown. Courage isn’t the absence of fear. Rather, it is the control of fear.

When engaging in strategic thinking, start by considering the 2-4 most critical factors to accomplishing your department’s mission. Focusing on too many things deludes our energy. In reality, the list of the most critical factors is relatively short.

Second, respond vs react. Responding with emotional intelligence is important. There are four domains of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, and relationship management. In times of crisis, leaders may react rather than respond without being aware of how they are coming across. On the other hand, leaders may be self-aware, but not able to manage their behavior in ways that help the situation. As a leader, where are you vulnerable? What are your “trigger points” that can contribute to anger or reacting in ways that you later regret? It is also important to pay attention to how the crisis is impacting your staff. This is social awareness. During a crisis, staff may get caught up in conflict, fear, or other emotions. Emotionally intelligent leaders help staff focus on a common vision of how to respond to the crisis in tangible ways, rather than fighting among themselves.

Third, communication is the lifeblood of an organization and is critical during times of crisis. In fact, leaders almost can’t over communicate. When a crisis occurs, it creates angst and “blank space.” If leaders don’t communicate, staff will fill the information void with other information, often gossip or less informed sources. Give your staff timely and frequent updates.

When you do communicate, there are several important considerations. Use structured messaging, which entails identifying the 2-4 most important points a group of people need to know, the rationale behind the message, and reiterating those points consistently. Keep in mind that staff may process new information differently, such as verbal vs. written (visually), so make the information available in different formats. So many leaders rely on impromptu messaging and leave out the rationale. This latter approach contributes to confusion, rather than clarity.

Depending on the urgency of the message consider which form of communication is most appropriate: face-to-face, conference call, or memo. Keep in mind that according to one study, words, voice inflection, and body language are represented by the following percentages 7%, 38%, and 55% respectively.¹ For example, a very important communication should ideally be communicated face-to-face, since this includes words, voice inflection, and body language. Often, the message will need to be repeated more than one time. Lastly, be straight and honest in your communication. If there are aspects you cannot share, then let them know you will share what you can and provide more details when you can do so.

Fourth, combat fear and the unknown by instilling hope and encouragement by being inspiring and positive in speech and attitude. When a crisis happens, staff can find themselves reeling from the impact. Fear sets in—will I be able to pay the rent or mortgage, what if I get the virus, or how long will this go on? The unknown makes us uncomfortable. We want answers, but there aren't any. Leaders need to instill hope—we will get through this, we are in this together, and we have much to be thankful for. Encouragement is “the action of giving someone support, confidence, or hope...persuasion to do or to continue something.”² According to the Work of Leaders, best practices in creating inspiration involves being expressive and encouraging. Expressive is being demonstrative and convincing in your speech. Encouraging in this context is proactive—we can get through this...I believe in this team.

Fifth, demonstrate empathy for the impact on staff and their families. Empathy is “...the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.”³ Crisis impacts people. Consider the impact of the current COVID-19. Many people have been laid off, had their hours reduced, suffered a decline in business, lost their child care services, saw their investments rapidly decline, live in fear of getting COVID-19, struggled with family members who may be sick or dying, sheltered-in-place for weeks, and the list goes on. Your staff want to know you care about them and are

¹ Philippine Business School, Effective Communication is 55% Body Language, 18 February 2019, Retrieved 2 December 2019, from: <https://phbusinessschool.com/effective-communication-is-55-body-language/>. Numerous cites attribute these stats to UCLA Professor Albert Mehrabian.

² <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/encouragement>

³ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>.

empathetic to the impact on them. Can you take the time to listen? Can you help them in some small way? Can you express your concern for their wellbeing? Can you let them know that you are truly sorry for the impact that COVID-19 is having on them? When we express empathy we are demonstrating, “You matter, and I feel your pain...I care about you.”

Sixth, give staff a voice and a place to go to get up-to-date information, or share ideas. Staff have thoughts about the crisis and want to express them. They have fears and concerns, so give them the best information you have and/or point them to resources that do have up-to-date information. For example, the Center for Disease Prevention and Control and the World Health Organization have extensive information on COVID-19. Staff may also have ideas about how to cut costs, add value to customers, better leverage technology, and/or creatively provide services so look for the opportunity to engage them in brainstorming, working on special projects or task forces.

Seventh, engage your respective leadership teams in sharing the responsibility. As a senior leader, you may feel like everything rests on your shoulders. Rather than carry all the load, engage members of the leadership team in sharing the responsibility. Delegate aspects of the business to others. When you engage in brainstorming, break tasks down into smaller parts and give these smaller pieces to different people, even those outside of the leadership team. Leverage the brainpower, creativity, strength, and relationships of your leadership team—and others—to address the challenges that come with a crisis. Many leaders have a tendency not to delegate. When this occurs, they can become a bottleneck to the organization, end up working longer, neglecting self-care, and/or not focus on tasks that are at their paygrade.

This call to action starts at the top but must cascade down through the leadership ranks. All seven points can—and should—be practiced at each level of the leadership team from top to bottom. Don’t forget to include lead workers. This is especially true in smaller departments where there isn’t much of a leadership team.

Crisis is an opportunity for leaders to shine. It is a test of true leadership. These are steps that all leaders can take. Don’t wait for someone else, start leading in crisis today—your staff is counting on you!

Thank you for participating in the webinar. If you would like Dr. Switzer can assist you, please contact him at 916-622-3545 or by email at Merlin@SwitzerOnLeadership.com.