

Leading through Uncertainty

By Tiffany Shortridge, Ph.D. |
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The rapid impact on the spread of COVID-19 has quickly become the world's largest invisible fear. The disruption that this virus has had on individuals globally has been like no other, leading to strong negative effects on both health and the economy.

With so much conversation today about adapting to the new unknown, it's clear that many organizations, and the people that work in them, foresee an uncertain environment now and into the future. Many employees are becoming teleworkers for the first time in their careers- whether they prefer it or not. Many parents are learning how to assist their school-aged children through e-learning, while other parents might be struggling with child care needs to balance both work and life at the moment. And, everyone is worried about the effect that COVID-19 could have on their loved ones.

Organizational leaders are concerned about their people and their bottom-line. This is truly a test of leadership capability. It's true that change has arrived quickly- and that as organizational leaders, we must work to lead through the unknown, the fear and the challenges.

In light of the current global context, Saville Assessment, Willis Towers Watson thought it worthwhile to share the collective advice from leaders on leading through uncertainty:

1. Flexibility is key

Our research shows that leaders who can think optimistically, invite feedback and embrace the uncertainty are more likely to be viewed by others as forerunners in adjusting to these uncertain times. It's critical to lead with positivity and show employees that while our world may have encountered a crisis, we need to be able to handle the ambiguity and uncertainty well in order to lead through it.

Leaders who can engage in behaviors that show a strong adjustment to change will be more equipped to lead through these uncertain times. We would encourage leaders to work with your staff to set up 'task force teams' to assist the organization in this period.

A few areas that task force teams might focus on could be:

- working remotely for your company
- coping with integration of now work and family life
- focusing on your wellbeing and safety
- Creating microsites or hubs where information pertaining to COVID-19 can be easily accessed

2. Your employees want to be heard and to hear from you

It's critical during times of uncertainty that employees see their leaders not as 'heros,' but as real humans who understand the fear as well. No one expects leaders to have all of the answers, which is perhaps sometimes why leaders feel it unnecessary to be open and communicative with their employees during uncertain times. Yet, a simple 'thank you – I understand this is a hard time,' can go a long way.

Employees are not expecting weekly virtual town-halls, but do want to know that if needed, there is a 'virtual' open door policy in place. Hearing from all levels of leaders is also important to show concern and care for employees' well-being. An email from the CEO acknowledging the uncertainty is just as welcomed as being asked to work on a virtual team to assist others in a particular topic.

3. Empathy is needed

For the large majority of employees who are accustomed to working in an office, their daily lives have now changed. How they conduct work, interact with others, or even stop work to start family time has now all changed – and quite abruptly. Many working parents are now having to work remotely, while at the same time care for children or assist with the elderly, all while still needing to be on conference calls and provide work deliverables.

Employees are fearful of the uncertainty, on top of having to adapt quickly to a new life style in just a matter of days. They need to know that their leaders care about them and will continue to put the safety and health of their employees first, above all else. Empathetic leaders are ones who care to listen and aim to truly understand what you are going through. They care about you, your family and society. The health implications of COVID-19 should lend leaders to have a 'people' first focus.

4. Know that you are not alone

In working with leaders for developmental purposes, we sometimes hear the phrase "It's lonely at the top" – which can imply that leaders carry the stress, responsibility and fortitude that is often not felt by other levels within an organization.

With COVID-19 though, we all have been affected; from students in the educational system through to the elderly. There's very few that this pandemic has not impacted in one way or another. In this moment in time, leaders truly are not alone. Some leaders are learning how to work remotely, just like their employees are. Others are juggling work-life integration and trying to determine when to stop work and start family time.

While the organizational decisions and stressors have not gone away, the life stressors that leaders are experiencing as a result of COVID-19 are truly being felt by all. Despite origin, religion, location, or any other factor that makes us unique and who we are – there is one overarching theme that runs through this pandemic: we are all in it together.

In this time of unprecedented change, what feels like a challenge can quickly become an opportunity. Leaders who spend time focusing on their people first, being open to change and empathetic, as well as understanding that we are in this together will start to emerge out of this crisis.

While it might not always feel like it in the day-to-day, there is another side to this mountain of a pandemic, and coming out of it, there will be leaders who have forged us through the uncertainty. It is often times like this that the very best of leaders are born.



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