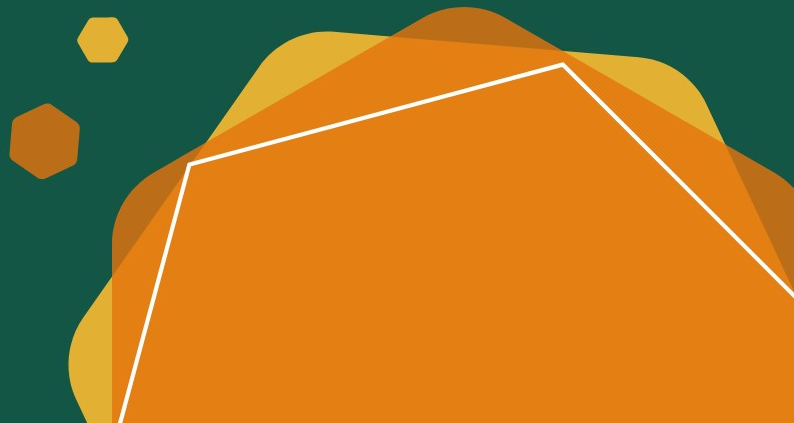




NAVIGATING THE COVID LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE





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Challenges, disruption and even crises are not new to leaders. Most, if not all leaders, have dealt with their fair share of challenges. As the world grapples with COVID-19, the reality is that this ongoing pandemic may be the most challenging situation many leaders will face in their lifetime.

The COVID-19 leadership challenge is unique in many ways. People, including leaders, are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress and worry about physical health and the ability to provide for their families and their own needs. Additionally, all aspects of professional and personal life continue to be disrupted.

Across the organisation, people are experiencing challenges in satisfying a broad spectrum of needs including physiological, safety, love & belonging, esteem and self-actualisation, and there is high uncertainty about what will happen in the short to medium-term. The environment is rapidly changing and there are competing sources of information that may be disorienting for leaders and staff. Lastly, leaders are placed in the unenviable position where they may not have the answers for the countless questions from staff and other stakeholders.

The significance and unprecedented impact of COVID-19 requires that leaders act. How leaders act in this time of crisis will determine if their organisation will survive and possibly emerge stronger on the other side of COVID-19.

— The Challenges

The COVID-19 leadership challenge is multidimensional. Some of the challenges leaders face include:

- **Striking the right balance**

Striking a balance between comforting and inspiring staff; addressing stakeholders' competing needs; and pushing on business performance in order to survive the crisis, may be one of the most challenging dimensions of leadership at this time.

- **Effective Communication**

At a time of remote working, social distancing and disruption of supply chains and distribution channels, communicating is challenging at best. Leaders must find effective ways to maintain strong connections and visibility and communicate with staff and other stakeholders throughout the organisation.

- **Employee Engagement**

While some organisations have previously engaged in some level of virtual work or remote working, few have experienced working completely remotely, as is the case with many businesses today. Leaders must find ways to keep their teams engaged, motivated and committed in a work environment that may be completely virtual.

The Leadership Opportunities

While the impact of the COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented and at times seemingly insurmountable, there are significant opportunities for leaders to weather this storm and emerge stronger. These are some recommendations to demonstrate effective leadership:

Stay calm

During times of crisis, leaders will encounter all levels of fear and uncertainty in themselves and in others who are looking to them for answers. A leader's ability to exercise emotional self-control and stay calm is critical in addressing intense situations. Sometimes, this may mean taking a short pause and stepping away, seeking guidance, using stress management techniques or even developing key skills to improve your emotional intelligence. Heightened emotions can be a leader's worst enemy at a time like this.

Be empathetic, honest and fair

The COVID situation requires leaders to exercise empathy. The need to demonstrate care and understanding for staff, as people struggle with a wide range of emotions and difficult circumstances, is the number one priority. Being compassionate, listening and being honest in discussions is key. As the need arises to make decisions regarding the organisation's long-term success and creating a stable work environment, be fair in addressing all pieces of the puzzle. One of the most important things a leader should communicate and demonstrate, is that the same rules apply to everyone.

Strengthen communication and engagement with your team, the organisation and other stakeholders

Now is the time to strengthen leadership communication and engagement. This may mean increasing the frequency of communication, using different media, and being honest. Be proactive and prepare. However, do not pretend that you have it all figured out. Communicating with integrity is more important than overconfidence at this time. It is important that leaders reach people where they are. This may also call for customising how you communicate and engage with various groups by using a range of traditional and new communication tools (telephone calls, group video meetings, virtual collaboration tools). Remember that everyone is learning and the focus should not be perfection, but growth and improvement.

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Demonstrate decisiveness with empathy

This time will challenge many leaders to make difficult decisions for medium to long term organisational success. Every effort should be made to take care of people first. There may be times when leaders will be required to make difficult decisions and they will face significant discomfort. However, it is necessary that leaders work through their discomfort and make the best decision in the midst of uncertainty and no guarantee of success. Tough decisions that impact people should be made with empathy and communicated with compassion.

Develop and communicate your vision and plan for building resilience and emerging stronger

As a leader, where do you want the organisation to be in the medium to long term? What is your plan for success post COVID-19? Now is a good time to assess, strengthen, build resilience and ensure that the organisation emerges stronger. Take time to develop and communicate your vision and plan for success. Communicate clearly: what are the actions, behaviours and values required for medium to long term success; what must the organisation address to become more resilient; how do we need to evolve our business model and approaches to accelerate recovery when things begin to improve?

Remain flexible, adaptive and innovative

Take a look at the current situation through different lenses. Reframe elements of the situation in a positive way. What are the opportunities for improvement that the organisation can address at this time? Become more open, flexible and adaptive to ideas such as remote working, new technologies and new approaches to create value. It may be difficult, but now is the time to encourage staff to innovate and create opportunities for people and business success.



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