

Rising to the challenge as a leader during COVID-19

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Part 2 in our blog series about COVID-19 as a forcing function in the workplace: How it's leading to progress whether we're ready for it or not

There is no question that COVID-19 has put incredible pressure on leaders and managers to be present in ways that have never been necessary before. Employees are burdened with a whole new slew of challenges and anxieties about remote working, reduced hours and pay, shifting priorities, and homeschooling and childcare adjustments, not to mention health concerns stemming from the virus itself. Furthermore, the impact of the virus striking everywhere, all at once, with no clear end in sight.



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I reached out to 20 or so leaders from organizations of all shapes and sizes, spanning multiple industries in the public, private and academic sectors, to gain insights about the impact COVID-19 was having on their business and their industry. It's no surprise that leadership in general was a consistent theme.

Their feedback coalesced around five main categories:

Decision-making

Leaders know their job is to analyze, respond, adjust and make difficult decisions when crises occur. They have been doing so, most likely, for much of their career. However, during the early days of the virus, their decision-making had to increase in both speed and magnitude, across every layer and every dimension of the business. Decisions that were previously more concrete in nature were now more existential.

Planning and motivating

Leaders have often had to navigate turbulent times, for example getting the company online after a hurricane or rebuilding after a fire. In these instances, leaders are (or should be) equipped with a disaster recovery plan. COVID-19 brought a new twist – there was no end in sight, and the novel nature of the virus presented so many unknowns. Leaders had to come up with ways to successfully plan and motivate others when there was no clear finish line in sight.

Communication

It quickly became evident that reliable, clear communications were more critical than ever, especially as fear and misinformation were swirling about. This required leaders to get more comfortable being completely transparent and communicating even in uncomfortable situations.

Connection

The sudden, extreme change in work environment from every day, personal interaction to random, remote interaction made it clear that more attention was necessary to keep employees connected and to ensure that they felt cared for. Leaders had to make time every day to touch base with their immediate team members and extended teams. Traditional views held about the effectiveness of working remotely while juggling work and family were being re-shaped.

Team dynamics

While employees grappled with the major changes from COVID, it became clear that strong teams were finding success in new, innovative ways. The teams who already had a strong sense of shared accountability didn't look to place blame – they had each other's backs while adjusting to the transition. Teams with fissures in their foundation gave way to fracture and internal hurdles including decisions making, communication, and/or alignment. These managers needed to dig deep to identify underlying issues and avoid the impulse to place the blame solely on the new work environment.

Leadership Coaching Tips



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Connection:

Whenever possible, make use of the video function for your conference calls, rather than phone conference. While video isn't the same as being in the same room, it is better than a dis-embodied voice on the phone. Create some connection within and across your team using video.

Communicate: Over-communicate, keep information clear, simple and frequent. This reduces rumors and enhances a sense of

stability. Don't be afraid to tell employees: "We just don't know the answers right now but we are working on finding answers."

Team:

If you think your team is broken, don't give up. At the same time, if your team needs work don't apply a band-aid, get to the root cause and work with a professional. There may not be a quick fix; be willing to put in the necessary time and resources.

In summary, work from home has pulled for more dynamic and enlightened leadership. COVID has certainly set organizations on their collective heels. That said, progress has been made. While leaders have always battled for the betterment of the company's mission and purpose they are now battling for the very existence of the business. Perhaps most notably, we have seen leaders becoming more authentic and compassionate, less rigid or fixed on "leave personal at the door." The pandemic has been a forcing function to acknowledge or recognize people in a more wholistic manner, with a goal towards a work-life blend versus a more traditional either/or mindset.

This is part two in a five-part blog series. Watch for future blogs that address Financial Performance, Technology and Employee Safety in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.