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Dale Parmenter

## Leadership in a time of crisis



**It's fair to say that leading from the front during the COVID-19 pandemic is a tough ask. From heightened sensitivity and exposure around decision-making, to workforces being asked to be separated completely from their teams, social distancing is throwing up a whole new set of challenges to an already difficult job.**

According to a recent survey by management consultant Lee Hecht Harrison, 67% of leaders said they regularly felt stressed by their job and 80% of people in total said they felt stressed by their manager's actions.

Add a global pandemic into the mix and suddenly managing teams becomes a very difficult job indeed. Luckily, there are plenty of things that leaders can do to not only manage stress but help both colleagues and employees to work as normally as possible when conditions are tougher than usual.

## Communication

There's a reason why communication is the most prominent feature in this article. As many as 75% of employees feel like they miss out on important news and information due to a lack of communication from their seniors, which sounds surprising, until you realise that 60% of companies globally do not have an internal communications strategy in place.

During a crisis, the lack of even a basic communications strategy, or at least some short-term tactics, will certainly lead to problems big and small. Whether it's employees filling in the gaps on company policy or doing the wrong thing because they cannot see the leadership team's recommendations, all the way to full-blown action complaints, strikes or resignations, failing to share the vision of the leadership team during a time when uncertainty and fear is running riot is a recipe for disaster.



One tactic that many organisations are turning to during the current pandemic is a sudden reliance on the communication tools that may have been used when they were fresh, then shelved as organisations revert back to trusted emails. In the last two weeks of March, Microsoft Teams, the workplace connectivity tool that allows users to video call, share documents and collaborate, saw the number of daily users rocket by over 12 million.

As well as encouraging teammates to work together via these tools, companies are also encouraging employees to take lunch together, make calls to each other that aren't work-related and even take part in broadcasting activities like quizzes to help recreate some of those 'watercooler moments' that are lacking at the moment.

## Transparency

Even at the best of times, leaders simply aren't trusted. Edelman's 2020 'trust barometer' highlights that 82% of employees don't expect their manager to always tell the truth. This is bad enough when it comes to the day-to-day running of organisations, but when health and potentially lives are at risk, leaders need to understand this statistic and work on transparency.

Within businesses, figures and actions often remain confidential until the time where they are needed in order to help protect organisations and maintain confidence. However, in times of crisis, it is always better to be crystal clear with the truth from day one.

Delaying hard decisions or relaying numbers that have been skewed to try and boost morale will only create potentially worse issues that will need to be addressed further down the line. Leaked information also has the potential to run at a much faster pace than in 'normal' situations, especially during a time when over three million Britons applied for unemployment benefits in March, long before any concrete business help arrived.

It seems that taking a 'warts and all' approach is the way forward. Transparency breeds trust, so even when life gets back to normal, employees will appreciate that you were honest about their careers, even if the conversations were tough. It may even have the effect of reinforcing an employee's commitment to the business. Many people may be willing to take voluntary pay cuts, work reduced hours or even take a sabbatical, but if these options aren't communicated, then no one will act upon them.

With honesty comes humility. Part of the distrust that many employees have is the fact that their boss doesn't want to be seen as incompetent, so the things they get wrong are sometimes swept under the carpet or denied completely to maintain face. During a crisis, admitting fault is the only adequate response.

You may have seen that Mike Ashley, who aimed to keep his sports and clothing stores open during the UK's lockdown, backtracked on the decision as soon as both the Government and public turned on it. He may not be seen as the most ethical leader in the world, but his response shows that despite the pantomime villain persona, Ashley understands the importance of humility and its impact on teams.



## Share the load

As well as the statistics on stress at the beginning of this article, many leaders report feelings that they are 'lonely at the top.' With all eyes pointing upwards and varying expectations in the chain of command, leaders may suddenly feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility, especially if livelihoods and salaries are being discussed.

There's a reason why leadership conferences, meet and greets and other networking events exist: it's difficult for leaders to always make the right decisions, as there often isn't anyone else in the organisation in a similar position. By speaking to leaders from other organisations, leaders can gain fresh perspectives and solutions. Plus, it'll help organisations to see that there's always a way out, even if the pressure is becoming too much.

Sharing problems doesn't have to be done sideways or with strangers either. Cascading problems to the teams underneath leaders is a great way to find solutions, especially creative ones. Leaders who ask their subordinates for help are also (often unwittingly) showing that they trust their workforce, especially if the advice, solutions or ideas are taken onboard.

An extremely important thing for leaders to consider is their own wellbeing. With difficult situations for employees, clients, customers, suppliers and virtually all stakeholders in full flow and with more yet to come, it could be easy to get dragged into the doom and gloom of the COVID-19 pandemic and its inevitable aftermath. Leaders must remember to check their own situation now and again too. After all, businesses rely on their leaders, so being in a good place will cascade to those who rely on you.