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## Effective Leadership During the COVID-19 Crisis

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## **Effective Leadership During the COVID-19 Crisis**

### **Introduction**

It is difficult to imagine a crisis as an opportunity, especially one in which we are experiencing today. However, leaders who do will move their organizations in positive ways. Dealing with a crisis as significant as the COVID-19 pandemic will test the mettle of leaders throughout an organization and across all sectors of the economy including institutions of higher learning. Engaging interprofessional teams is especially important throughout the crisis and beyond. Diverse insights will strengthen the organization's understanding of what went right, what went wrong, and how things should improve.

### **Manage the Crisis, but Take Care of Your Employees**

Times of crisis expose the strengths and weaknesses of a leader. Glenn Klann, a former military officer and crisis management expert, emphasizes three themes that must prevail during and after the crisis. They are 1) communication, 2) clarity of vision and values, and 3) caring relationships. Although these themes reflect good leadership principles during normal times, they are all the more important when a crisis arises. (Klann, G., 2003).

Communication should be clear, concise, and occur frequently. Truth telling is paramount. Failure to tell the truth breaks the trust employees have with their leadership. When communicating, clarity of vision and values is crucial to focus employees on the future (vision) while dealing with present events (values). In addition, refrain from lofty platitudes when employees are struggling with their daily workloads otherwise leaders appear to be out of touch. Effective leaders should nurture caring relationships in times of chaos. Employees will work hard if they believe their leaders actually care about them while in the midst of the crisis.

A significant part of leading through a time of crisis is communication. An April 2020 article from MIT SLOAN Management Review, describe what employees need to hear during a time of crisis (2020). The author suggests three things.

First, keep employees informed and updated. The more they know, the more confident they feel about their leaders. Information will change, sometimes rapidly. However, employees who believe they are being kept in the dark will lose trust in their leaders. Second, they need to feel seen and heard. This means their concerns are not being ignored and they are being treated like professionals. Leaders must remember that employees are the ones who will make or break the organization's return to normal. Trivializing the issues they bring forward in any way does irreparable damage. Third, keep the organization on track and focused on the issues of the day. Assist your employees in differentiating between what is urgent and what can wait. Empower them to make decisions and praise them when they demonstrate good judgement. If the only time they hear from you is when something goes wrong, that is a failure of leadership and there will be a price to pay.

Another leadership expert describes nine leadership strategies that are critical during a crisis. Box 1 includes these strategies. Each are described below.

1. **Don't ignore the anxiety people feel. It just amplifies it.** Empathize with people and make it safe to share their thoughts and feelings.
2. **Actively define reality.** People can deal with reality. It is the unknown that paralyzes us with fear.
3. **Create a new starting line for your employees.** Don't get fixated on the losses. There will be plenty of time to evaluate the crisis response once it is over. Keep moving forward.
4. **Use urgency as an alignment ally.** Don't wander around your problems. Engage and empower employees to successfully respond in real time to what is in front of them.
5. **Establish new check-in routines.** Frequent check-ins are imperative. They must be brief, focused and clearly communicated.
6. **Celebrate all victories, large and small.** Recognize individuals and teams when they perform well.

7. **Scout the possibilities.** Identify opportunity scouts and reward innovation.
8. **Communicate the score.** Tell your people how the organization is doing with a core set of metrics that meet the moment.
9. **Highlight the rays of light.** When good things happen, and they will, those need to be a part of the narrative too.

### After the Crisis

When the crisis is over, it is imperative to evaluate how the organization performed. This must be done in an organized, structured manner and as quickly as possible to ensure accuracy in the accounts of employees. The gold standard for evaluating performance is the After Action Review (AAR) (World Health Organization, 2019). An effective AAR engages all employees at every level of the organization. An AAR, originally developed by the U.S. Army, should focus on four key questions:

- 1) What was expected to happen?
- 2) What actually occurred?
- 3) What went well and why?
- 4) What can be improved and how?

Other key principles of the AAR include:

- 1) Use a skilled, unbiased facilitator. Worry about the organization's brand should not be a part of the AAR.
- 2) Conduct the AAR as quickly as possible.
- 3) Avoid the blame game.

## Box 1. Leadership Strategies

1. Don't ignore the anxiety people feel. It just amplifies it.
2. Actively define reality.
3. Create a new starting line for your employees
4. Use urgency as an alignment ally.
5. Establish new check-in routines.
6. Celebrate all victories, large and small.
7. Scout the possibilities.
8. Communicate the score.
9. Highlight the rays of light.

Once the AAR is completed, leadership needs to integrate improvements based on priorities. In addition, recommendations need to be added to the organization's Crisis Response Plan (CRP). The CRP, which all organizations should have, informs the response to a future catastrophic event (Watkins, 2002).

## **Conclusions**

A crisis can lead to anxiety and chaos. For the sake of the organization, leaders must be able to convey a sense of calm, not only for their chain of command and employees but also for their organization's sphere of influence: consumers, vendors, and the communities they serve. Most importantly, they must be able to lead themselves and deal with their own insecurities and emotions. It is a heavy lift. Many organizations get through a crisis, but how the leadership manages it may be the difference between an organization that thrives in the future and one that is crippled and broken for many years to come.

The aggregate effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic are not yet known. That is what makes this crisis so complex. It is not a single event, but a series of serious events and outcomes, which are unprecedented. Leaders must meet this challenge head-on to ensure their organizations remain intact. Effective leaders engage interprofessional teams in the hard work of addressing and resolving the crisis and this engagement is even more important when rebuilding the organization after the crisis is over.

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