

## Leading in Uncertain Times

### Description

To say we're all facing some challenges right now is an understatement. As I write these words, the World Health Organization has declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Travel has been restricted. Events across the U.S. have been canceled. The stock market has been a rollercoaster ride. We're in an economic downturn, and there's a lot of talk about whether it may turn into a recession in the days to come. And many businesses are already feeling the pinch.

As the pandemic takes hold, we're all being impacted in various ways, many of them pretty dramatic. While you may not know someone who has contracted the virus, I'm willing to bet there's a loved one or two you're keeping a close eye on. You've almost certainly altered your life in some way. And if you're like many, you may be feeling more than a little fear and anxiety about the future. Uncertainty will do that. It always does.

Yes, as human beings and as citizens, we are in this boat together, and we're all struggling with the same emotions. But we're also *leaders*, and that means we can't just think of ourselves and our immediate families. We have employees, coworkers, and customers to consider as well. In a way, they're our family, too—and right now, more than ever, they need us to truly lead.

While we can do our best to avoid and contain the coronavirus—frequent handwashing, social distancing, and so forth—for the most part, we have no control over what's going to happen on a global or even local scale. But as leaders we actually *can* have a positive impact on the employees who count on us. This is both a human responsibility and a privilege.

So, what should leaders do? First and foremost, we need to get focused and intentional about how we respond to this pandemic. What you do and how you behave over the next few weeks (or possibly months) will stay with your employees for a long time to come.

A few tips:

**Create a plan for your business.** There's no specific advice here, as different sectors (retail, manufacturing, travel & tourism, etc.) are being hit in different ways. So are different types of employees: Some can work from home; others can't. What I *can* say is to think through your plan and manage your response carefully. Give it some serious attention. Don't make rash decisions—but also don't leave things to chance. Even if you risk a misstep, I find life usually rewards action. You may have to modify your plan as events unfold and that's okay.

**Communicate often and well.** Bring everyone together by video chat or phone and communicate the plan. Hold a daily meeting if necessary. When employees hear nothing, they expect the worst. They'd rather hear the truth, even if it's bad news, than live in uncertainty. Keep the lines of communication open and make it clear you are always available to talk.

**Read up on what's going on.** Make sure you have a good grasp on the virus, your customers, your

industry, and the economy in general. You don't have to be an authority, but you do need to know enough to help give perspective.

This could be a fulltime job in itself! There is so much information out there that having a few trusted resources to turn to is key. I suggest taking advantage of membership in groups like the Chamber of Commerce and relevant trade associations. These institutions are great clearing houses of information, and can effectively and efficiently keep us connected.

**Be honest about what you know, but don't pile on.** Embrace the "facts, not fear" mantra you've probably seen all over the media. Discourage others from awfulizing. There is too much speculating, myth-spreading, and general negativity swirling around without leaders adding to it. Be the voice of calm rationality.

**Encourage people to know the facts, but not overload on the news.** Explain that constant exposure to bad news affects our psyche. It keeps us distracted and unable to concentrate. It feeds anxiety and fear. This is not good for job performance, but even worse, it feels bad. It keeps us from enjoying our life.

**Equip frontline supervisors with answers to FAQs from employees.** This is likely where employees will feel most comfortable talking.

**Relieve anxiety where you can, even if it's not work-related.** This pandemic has far-reaching implications. It doesn't just impact people's work life; it impacts their health, personal finances, and family. As much as you can, know what each employee's "what" is, meaning what they care about more than anything else. This will help you calm them in a way that truly resonates.

**Build up your emotional bank account.** What you do to make people's lives easier really counts right now. Some employees may have trouble with kids as schools shut down. Others may need to care for elderly parents who get sick or who just need extra help with shopping and chores because they're staying at home. Be sensitive to individual needs and accommodate where you can. It's a good time to build relationships.

**Think about what your company already does that could help those impacted by the virus...** For example, some pharmacies are waiving home delivery fees for prescriptions for the elderly and others at high risk. Some cable companies are offering free access to Wi-Fi for 60 days to certain students who need to move to online learning, and one moving truck company is offering to store students' belongings for free (as they rush to vacate dorms). Some restaurants are delivering meals to high-risk people. Helping at a time when people really need it builds goodwill. It also helps employees feel better...and it's just the right thing to do.

**...or find other ways your team can serve.** If you don't have a product or service needed by those who are struggling, you and your employees can help in other ways. You could deliver food or care packages to those who are quarantined. Or your team could help out nonprofits that are experiencing volunteer shortages because their usual volunteers (often seniors) are staying home. This may dramatically boost morale. We all feel better when we can give back.

Finally, one of the best things a leader can do is to remind people that the coronavirus won't last forever. Things *will* get better. Helping people put this moment in time in perspective may help more

than we realize.

Tough times make great leaders. People have long memories. Reputations are often built during times like these. Once this pandemic has passed and life returns to normal, employees, coworkers, and partners will remember how you behaved. They'll remember whether you held things together and led them through the hurricane...or whether you made a bad situation worse.

We're all making choices right now that build our reputation and impact our company's brand. We owe it to ourselves and to those we lead to choose wisely.

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