

Leading Organizations During Times of Crisis

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“We are continuously faced by great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems.”

- Lee Iacocca

The crisis are events that occur abruptly and without prior warnings so they possess a great potential of impacting the normal routines and thus they are a real test of leader's capabilities. Either the leaders identify their hidden talents under the pressures posed by a crisis, or their innate weaknesses get exposed. COVID-19 is such a crisis that has not only impacted the businesses, but it has also greatly disturbed the social patterns, lifestyles, economies, political scenarios and generally everything the world used to consider 'Normal' before the pandemic hit in 2019.

In this environment of worldwide crisis, the organizations and eventually the business leaders are at the apex of managing this chaos and leading through it. Here I am discussing some pointers for business leaders to help them lead through the worst of crisis.

1. Be Cautious, But Remain Calm

The crisis situations always bring panic and distress and eventually the distress increases with the level of responsibility, so it is understood that leaders at top are the ones to be most under stress. But here's the key point! A leader's distress has to be contained, and the leader must possess a calm demeanor, otherwise it will enhance the panic and anxiety among those who are looking up to the leader for saving them. Secondly, a demonstration of calm behavior and courage spreads the message among followers that they will also be dousing their fears and taking actions and counter measures for handling and reducing the impacts of crisis. Thus the leader's ability to disconnect from a tense situation in order to think clearly about how they will navigate through it, is one of the core character aspects of the leader which will help in handling crisis and lead in the quest of positive outcomes.

2. Be Confident, But Stay Realistic

Demonstrating courage is one of the core tools possesses by a leader facing crisis. But being too forward and too courageous in a very obviously troubling and dark situations might make the leader look unrealistic or ungrounded and eventually project the leader to lose his credibility. So it is more effective for leaders to display optimism and confidence that the organization will find a way through its hard-hitting situation but also show that they understand the depth of uncertainty that this crisis has brought and have started to deal with it by collecting more information, doing collective brainstorming and being more vigilant and thorough. However, when the immense crisis passes, then this courage and optimistic behavior will prove to be more beneficial without being much unrealistic.

3. Assess and Act, But Keep Updating

The crisis situations always include many surprises and unknowns, and the facts do not get clear early enough to make timely decisions. In this scenario; if a leader waits for receiving full facts before deciding what actions need to be taken, or if they ignore everything and just move ahead using their intuition as a base for decisions, both these situations are not suggested.

The Best option that leaders have today is to first assess (gather maximum information as best as they can) and then act (make a crisis response plan based on information gathered and act accordingly), but it needs to be understood that since crisis have many unknowns and only time decides that what will unfold next, so the plan of action need to be flexible where the leader and his team will have to frequently pause from their crisis management plans just to revisit the whole situation around them, update the latest facts and information about crisis, anticipate what will happen next based on information collected and revise the crisis management plan accordingly. This assess-act-update-revise cycle should be continual, because it will help organizations avoid shocks of latest information if they are regularly keeping themselves updated.

While this is easier said than done, but it might be the only face and life saving option that the leaders today have as a tool. There will be times when leaders won't have the opportunity to gather or access the information before making a decision, but well, that is the cost of crisis.

4. Be Open in Communication, But Have Empathy

In a mega-scale, multi-geographical crisis which pose a great life threat to people themselves and their families, the situation is far from that of a normal. People's natural instincts are of survival and leaders need to understand that as the first step of crisis management. These are the times when a leader must take charge and communicate himself instead of assigning their secretaries or HR departments to communicate on their behalf. Also, in their communications the leader need to first acknowledge the challenges that people are facing during crisis, both on personal and professional levels.

Having a clear communication is a vital aspect of business life, but its importance multiplies several notches during the time of crisis, because the absence of communication from leader allows people to fill that void through rumors which is precisely what will turn crisis into a disaster and shall be avoided at all costs. Leader need to take his people in confidence about the latest situation, available options and what steps the organization is going to take to mitigate the effects.

5. Find Opportunities, But be Innovative

When they say that one meaning of the word 'Crisis' is 'danger' but the other meaning is 'opportunity'; they are right. The crisis is known to almost or complete seize the current operations and activities of organizations, where mostly people dread the worst scenarios because everything seems to be over. But at the same time, this is the moment for a leader to take a deep breath, renew the focus, and give a new hope to his followers.

Against the common belief, finding opportunities is not only about identifying a new business altogether, nor it is financially viable for most businesses. Finding opportunities includes being innovative. Where you need to learn from the crisis and its aftermaths on your business and economy, brainstorm about the ways that can help you come out from the crisis and also the new ways of doing things that you have already been doing. Devising a new method of doing the operations will go a long way for many businesses to come back in the business. innovation is the key. These are the times when people need to be creative, think out of the box and discuss every idea that comes your way. No idea is small enough if it helps prevent a disaster no matter how small.

Last Words

The COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching implications are no doubt challenging the business leaders in every industry and every country around the world. No doubt, it is already speculated that the consequences of this mega scale crisis will last for much longer even after the pandemic is over. This long-lasting uncertainty of business and economic situations is the core reason for leaders to devise crisis response plans and hold onto the practices described in this article and more. I wish it will help in not only establishing but also strengthening the initiatives and behaviors that might support their organizations during this crisis and also prepare them for the next long haul after the crisis is over.

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