Leading Through Uncertain Times: 3 Actions to Navigate a Crisis

As executive leaders, it is imperative to apply the lessons learned from navigating a crisis to enable the organization to successfully address the next challenge. This research covers three actions that will enable you to lead your organization in uncertain times.

Overview

Key Challenges

- In times of crisis, it is critical for executive leaders to challenge the status quo. When emerging from a crisis, organizations expecting to return to "business as usual" will experience a drop in employee engagement.

- Disruption increases stress. Stress reduces cognitive capacity, which can have negative implications on day-to-day work and customer interactions.

- Stress has a cumulative effect and, in times of crisis, leaders and employees are working 24/7 and are not taking the time to recharge. Burnout is a reality.

Recommendations

Executive leaders intent on successfully navigating through a crisis must apply the lessons learned from previous hard-fought challenges and:

- Reassess personal leadership practices by scrutinizing everyday practices that are working and those that are not.

- Recreate work practices by challenging the status quo, changing work processes and testing innovative practices with a focus on how these practices can continue.

- Recharge themselves and avoid burnout by prioritizing personal commitments to seek true work-life integration.

Introduction

This research has been adapted from 3 Actions Leaders Can Take to Navigate Through Crisis, which helps IT leaders apply the lessons learned from navigating a crisis to enable the organization to successfully address the next challenge.

In a period of unprecedented change and disruption, work, personal and financial aspects of life are impacted. The combination of these impacted areas creates stress for employees, as all facets of our daily routine require new attention as a result of:

- Working at home and feelings of isolation

- Children at home, home-schooling and family care

- Grocery shopping, meal planning and preparation

- Exercise location and time slots

And there is the daily onslaught of news as well as the pace of change. According to Holmes and Rahe, stress is cumulative. [1] Using their scale, this puts many near a stress level where they have an 80% chance of developing stress-related disorders. Stress has been shown to reduce cognitive capabilities and this can have business implications on:
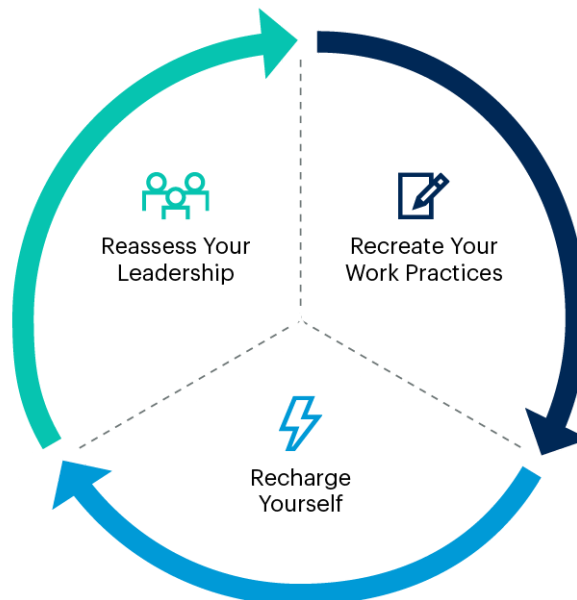
- Memory

- Focus

- Decision making

- Problem solving

- Quality

- Willingness to take risks

- Team dynamics

- Customer service and brand reputation

- Financials

As a leader, how can you deal with not only your day-to-day job responsibilities and your own stress, but also the unanticipated need for your entire organization to work through a crisis? This research will guide you on how to use the model illustrated in Figure 1 to organize the following actions:

- **Reassess your leadership**: Uncertainty will test your leadership.

- **Recreate work practices**: Working at home is changing the format and fabric of the workday.

- **Recharge yourself**: Your mental and physical resources are tested in times of stress.

Figure 1. Three Leadership Actions to Navigate a Crisis

Leadership Actions to Navigate a Crisis

Reassess Your Leadership

Recreate Your Work Practices

Recharge Yourself

Source: Gartner

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Gartner.

Analysis

1. Reassess Your Leadership

Uncertainty will test your leadership. "Being human" has never been more important, especially when dealing with so many uncertainties as a crisis takes a tight grip on our lives and everyday norms. Here are some actions you can take:

- **Have empathy**: Be patient and realize everyone is learning new habits and juggling home and work commitments. Your experience as a leader may not be the same for employees, particularly those in other geographies.

- **Be attentive to employee experience**: Give employees the right tools and provide tips on basic use. Reset expectations as to how much work employees can handle. Share best practices across the organization and provide resources via the most accessible channels such as intranet homepage. Use every interaction as an opportunity to ask employees what you can do to help. Ensure proper ergonomics are understood and practiced.

- **Increase interactions**: Conversations are critical as staff worries about layoffs and negotiates how to work remotely. Have more frequent and shorter meetings across the organization. Create new meeting types — check-ins at start of day, check-outs at end of day, hangouts for socializing — and scale them across the organization. But keep employee preferences for meetings and work schedules in mind as you schedule these meetings to avoid perceptions of micro management.

- **Encourage leadership teams to conduct leadership debriefs**: Motivate and enable your leadership teams to focus on sharing information consistently so that all employees hear the same messages. Encourage them to be transparent — say "I don't know" and acknowledge the uncertainty.

- **Be responsive**: Remove frustrations and barriers quickly (use check-out meetings for this).

- **Show vulnerability**: By sharing your own stories and feelings about adjusting, you become more accessible to your staff.

> **"Our teams feel more connected now in the virtual world than in office. There is an increased level of connections. Employees are seeing the executives more, managers more, because we are checking in and making sure they are comfortable. How might this change when we go back to the office? We need to be more visible."**
>
> *— CIO roundtable participant*

Use your values as a moral compass to guide how you act as a leader. When you look back six months from now, will you be proud of your leadership? Be prepared to learn and stretch. This is a time to grow as a leader and embrace changes.

2. Recreate Your Work Practices for the Future

Working From Home

When a crisis results in the majority of the workforce working from home, it is obvious that we need to modify and recreate work practices and routines. How teams work together when colocated doesn't necessarily plug and play into working at home. We must rethink how we spend our time, how we communicate with each other, how we conduct meetings and how we get work done as teams. And, more importantly, we must be keenly aware of new practices, be open to constantly learning and adapting and remain agile to apply these new practices.

We hear from clients that everyone works longer hours during a crisis. [2] As a result, it may be necessary to be extremely clear about priorities, otherwise errors and other stress-related actions may occur. In times of crisis, employees may also worry about job loss, and work long hours and risk burnout.

Ensure your leadership teams monitor how their teams are collaborating and performing. Is anyone withdrawing? Are there more team tensions? Are they collaborating and jumping in to help others on important outcomes or focusing on their own work? These are early signs that attention needs to be paid to how teams work together and how employees accomplish objectives.

Times like these offer the opportunity to build great teams. Below are some actions you and your leadership teams can take to do so:

- **Co-create new ground rules** for working together. Don't make assumptions that this will just happen. Teams may work differently and have members with different work styles, so there isn't a "cookie cutter" approach.

- **Explicitly connect** a team's daily work to organizational goals.

- **Socialize "focus sprints"** to create focus in 20-minute increments (using concepts such as the Pomodoro Technique). [3] Recognize the progress made during these sprints to give employees a sense of accomplishment and control.

- **Instill gratitude** as a daily practice. Every employee takes five minutes and answers the following questions: "What did I accomplish today?" and "What is something a co-worker did that I want to recognize/call out?" This creates positive feelings about one's work and fosters collaboration and respect for others to help build a great team.

- **Allow time for employees to share** challenges and create mechanisms to escalate and solve problems that are interfering with critical work.

- **Foster virtual social hours** to share and connect. For employees in the same time zones, take lunch or dinner together. Encourage breaks to step away, exercise, meditate or do yoga. Keeping physically fit reduces stress.

- **Make challenging the status quo the status quo,** and take advantage of assessing current work policies, practices and management oversight and supervision. Unnecessary work overhead will become apparent and employees will be stepping up and empowering themselves and their teams. Make identifying these practices a weekly objective. Make challenging the status quo the status quo when the crisis has passed. Remote work is likely here to stay. [4]

> "We are developing the ability to pivot quickly as a team. We are learning how to take smart risks while also being conservative depending on the situation. Think sprint and marathon paces and how to do both. This can grow the skills of employees."
>
> — *CIO roundtable participant*

Returning to the "Next Normal"

Employee engagement will drop by 25% if leadership and organizational practices go back to "business as usual."

The same proactive planning done to make remote working at scale possible is also required when the crisis subsides. Demonstrate the agility of the organization by implementing new practices and continuing to foster mindsets that challenge the status quo when there is a return to the "next normal" working condition.

There will be an initial "euphoria" with lifting of restrictions and employees returning to work. Seeing colleagues, socializing and being together. In approximately two months, this "glow" will begin to fade. Employees will expect changes. If they don't see them taking hold, disillusionment will set in and employee engagement will drop. [5]

There is unquestionably a connection between these three facets of the model that will not only help us all to get through the current pandemic, but also, in the near future, provide the means to experiment with new ideas and reshape the fabric of the workday for the long term. Use the model not only to guide leadership and work practices now, but also to continually reinvent your enterprise.

3. Recharge Yourself

With the added burden of an unclear future, an abundance of fear, uncertainty and doubt (FUD), and, consequently, more challenging daily lives, we need to make time to recharge and take care of ourselves, both physically and mentally. It is irresponsible not to. If we do this effectively, thereby keeping ourselves fit and mentally sharp, we will not only feel better for it, but, importantly, we will keep the door open to creative thinking in a more human-centric fashion. This, in turn, allows us to work on what else we can do to evolve, improve, and recreate work practices and ourselves as leaders.

Your mental and physical resources are tested in times of stress. Ensure you make time for your own personal commitments and family. If you become exhausted, you will not be showing up as the best leader you can be and won't have the energy or creativity to recreate work practices. Be a role model and share your practices and struggles with your team. Here are some actions you can take:

- **Define what work-life integration means for you.** Ensure you find the right balance between the two, as the distinction is easily blurred. [6]

- **Exercise or find some quiet time each day.** Try to stick to a routine, otherwise it is easy to get lost in work.

- **Reflect on "bright spots"** and the good work your organization is doing. Put time on your calendar to do this. Employees need recognition.

- **Keep it light**. Find ways to laugh and have fun every day.

- **Create social time.** Put a virtual coffee break on your calendar and spend time socializing.

- **Give personal time equal priority.** If you can, protect your evenings. Pass off responsibilities to leaders in other time zones or offshore resources.

- **Prioritize and focus on what is important.** Allow yourself and others to decline meetings. This can be a good test to see what meetings are relevant and which ones can be dropped.

- **Be patient and give yourself a break.** There is no roadmap and each organization has a different culture and ways of working.

Most of All, "Be Human"

In times of crisis, it is natural to feel overwhelmed. Share your own vulnerabilities and stories with employees. We are all in this together. Now is the time to become the leader you are meant to be. We will emerge smarter, more connected and better equipped to deal with the next challenge. [7]

Evidence

[1] Social Readjustment Rating Scale known more commonly as the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale uses "life change units" to compile the cumulative impact of events and provide a rough estimate of their impact on health.

[2] State of Remote Work 2019, Owl Labs.

[3] Does the Pomodoro Technique Work for Your Productivity? Lifehack.

[4] Work-From-Home Policies Won't End After Coronavirus Is Defeated, Experts Say, Forbes. Thirty-seven percent of jobs in the U.S. can be done at home. Currently about 5% of workers work from home. See also Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Managing the Remote Worker.

[5] Evolving COVID-19 Responses of World's Largest Companies,Gallup. Managers and leaders are reformatting their engagement strategies for remote-only workers — more frequent communication, for example, or more time dedicated to team socializing — as well as frontline workers who are most at risk and most vulnerable to burnout. These efforts have positive effects on engagement, as Gallup analysis consistently shows, that will outlast the pandemic and help companies bounce back.

[6] Work/Life Integration, Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley.

[7] Roundtable sessions were held with CIOs and IT leaders between 28 March 2020 and 20 April 2020. The insights are synthesized from client discussions during these sessions.

Recommended by the Authors

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