



Leading Through & Beyond Coronavirus: 6 Best Practices for this Unprecedented Time

As I write this, I look out my window and see cars moving and people walking around which gives me comfort that the world, and the people of the United States, are still moving, working, and keeping their wits about them. That said, I realize that this is only going to get worse before it gets better. In coming weeks, leaders will likely face challenges securing supplies, keeping employees motivated to work, and, in some cases, maintaining bold strategic plans that have been years in the making from falling apart. Many young leaders have never faced such a challenge. Therefore, to assist you in guiding your employees and your business through this unprecedented time, we are sharing the following best practices we've assembled through conversations with our own network of clients and friends:

Lead with Agility and Humility

Leaders may automatically default to the bottom line and/or financial damage that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) is causing—and for good reason. However, your employees are typically not concerned with what this virus is costing the company, but rather they want to know that the leadership is also feeling what they are feeling. People need to know that even though their leader is employed to manage and run the business, he or she is also a human being—someone who cares for them and understands what they are going through. As a leader, you must lead from the front, exhibiting the values and behaviors you expect from your team.

Leading from the front, however, doesn't mean being isolated. For many leaders, one of the hardest things to do is to rely on the opinions and decisions of other people. But that's exactly what needs to be done in times of crisis, especially when the cause of the crisis is outside of your area of expertise.

Leaders need to be agile, not only in changing plans and work schedules, but also in their own leadership style. It is also very likely that different leadership styles will be needed as the year progresses through different stages. Right now, for instance, an affiliative and participative style of leadership, where decisions are made through consensus and based on relationships, may be best. Later, assuming that the virus runs its course, a pacesetter, "runs fast and keep up" style or more directive "Here's what we need to do to make up for lost time" approach may be in order.

Communicate Explicitly and Transparently

Leaders need to communicate with stakeholders during a crisis. Experts say executives must communicate quickly and clearly to be in front of potential issues rather than having to counter misinformation. Communications should be tailored to each stakeholder constituency based on their unique concerns. Communicating with employees about what protocols the organization is putting in place to keep them safe should always be first. With partners and vendors, you may need to establish a project team to monitor the situation and relay updates.

Experts say leaders need to be authentic and transparent. People are obviously nervous about implications of the virus, and it's essential to keep them engaged, informed, and safe. This is the time for Human Resources and management to show a supportive and steady hand. We don't want to be proactively alarmist, but managers should be prepared to support employees' concerns individually, as needs may vary widely. Sometimes that means admitting your fear to stakeholders, and other times it means admitting that you don't know something. Communications should always include "Here's what we know, and here's what we need to find out."

Keep Priorities in Check

Right now, the focus should be on keeping employees and their families safe and free from contagion. Making people feel safe and taken care of will help leaders get the workforce focused on preserving operations as best as possible as the outbreak spreads. This is also an opportunity for leaders to assess whether they can realistically achieve objectives on the timetables they've established. You can use this as a time to reset expectations internally and externally.

Develop Organized Remote Work Strategies

In many countries, with schools and factories closed, employees are working outside of the office. Remote work is increasingly a fact of life around the world, and experts are saying that COVID-19 is yet another reason why firms should invest in allowing workers to be able to productively work remotely. If firms don't have strong collaboration tools now, then they need to secure and implement them. Working remotely is not a panacea, of course. Research shows that productivity can decrease in the short term when workers go remote. For leaders, more people working from home more often, if not exclusively, creates a level of risk if the team isn't proactively managed. Many employees thrive in physical environments with face-to-face collaboration. The abrupt change can easily impact their engagement and leave them feeling unequipped to properly do their jobs. With that in mind, leaders need to be in daily, frequent contact with remote employees. One suggestion is to require that participants turn on their cameras or use FaceTime and/or Skype type methods to maintain that feeling of camaraderie.

The vacant offices caused by remote work could also bring up another dilemma: how to best keep an organization's property and networks safe and secure. Leaders need to increase vigilance at their organization's security operations center, monitoring abnormal behavior since more employees will be mobile. Now is also the time to be extra cautious with emails and spear-phishing attempts using COVID-19 themes.

Engage Your Workers

Leaders already struggle with engagement; surveys have shown that fewer than half of employees worldwide say they are highly engaged at work. That task is even tougher now as COVID-19 has employees not working in their usual spots or, worse, temporarily not working at all. Soliciting feedback through pulse surveys can give leaders information about what employees' concerns are, and what actions need to be taken to be most helpful to resolve those concerns. Just as critical, it is important to ensure that employees are energized once the crisis has passed. Gathering employee feedback about what would be most helpful to them as life returns to normal will ensure that leaders and managers focus on actions that will have the greatest impact.

There are three keys to effective surveys: listen to employees, act on the feedback they provide, and most importantly, communicate back the message "We hear you, and here's what we've done based on your feedback."

Lead Through and Beyond the Virus

Before COVID-19 appeared, many leaders were recognizing the power of prioritizing "purpose movement" issues over maximizing profits at their organizations. Explicitly stating a company's purpose, and then having the organization revolve around that purpose, has actually been shown to increase employee engagement and, in some cases, increase profitability.

One of the main questions critics have about the purpose movement is whether organizations will abandon their principles when the bottom line is at stake. But the best leaders can turn short-term tragedy that hurts their organizations into a sense of shared purpose that betters both their businesses and their communities in the long term.

So what does this all mean?

Indeed, the Coronavirus may help to identify the next generation of great companies and exceptional leaders. There will be people who see the connections between COVID-19 and opportunities to contribute to society while simultaneously providing business value. And whether you are in a position to impact the country, your community, your business, or only a small group of employees, now is the time to act. If we all do our part to support those we can affect, then together, we will emerge from this crisis stronger than ever.

Today, executives across the globe are being forced to navigate how to best lead their employees and organizations through a rapidly-evolving public health crisis. Whether you are a client or a valued part of the RRG network, we care about you personally and professionally, and we are here to help. Regardless of the unique challenges you're facing, RRG would like to offer our support via a complimentary consultative phone call with one of our certified management coaches. We may not be able to predict tomorrow, but we can certainly choose to be proactive today. Please call us at 708.738.5040 or email Lynn@RRGexec.com to schedule a call.