

Leadership during Covid-19: Create stability and hope

Leaders need to create stability and hope during this tumultuous time, says WomanUp co-founder Carol Bolger

During this time of huge distress, anxiety and uncertainty, there is much we can learn from leaders that can be applied to our daily lives. In times of challenge, great leaders stay in control of the things that matter and they get out of people's way.

This unprecedented crisis is testing for everyone, including business leaders. There is no playbook or rulebook for what we are experiencing, although leaders who are strategic and have taken contingency planning very seriously have an obvious edge in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis.

Some business leaders are particularly gifted at articulating how they lead, in times of crisis. "My job as a leader is not to put more stress into a system that is already stressed," Julie Sweet, the CEO of Accenture, recently told the *Financial Times*.

Leadership attributes

There are three leadership attributes that are important at times of crisis. Firstly, you need, in so far as possible, to stay in control. To lead effectively in a crisis, you have to lead yourself first, to focus on your wellbeing and mindset, keep a positive perspective and maintain healthy habits.

Remaining calm, compassionate but also being truthful and transparent are essential. You also need to take a long-term view and, where possible, not get consumed by the considerable daily crisis management tasks. Effective leaders have an excellent understanding of what is within their control and what is outside of their control. We cannot control much of what's happening around us that is induced by Covid19 but we can control how we respond to it.

For me staying in control means staying mentally and physically strong and the key enabler for me is my fitness and exercise regime. With the gym off limits, I've adapted to a twice daily 15-minute online exercise class that doesn't require any equipment and it's working,

Communications

The second leadership attribute is communications. Great leaders are also great communicators, as various academic studies have shown. They provide clarity for their teams in a time of confusion, trust them to deliver and absolutely don't micromanage. They ensure communication is authentic, honest, clear and consistent. If that authenticity trickles down to others within the business, the impact is powerful and can result in positive sentiment among customers and other stakeholders.

At present, leaders need to maintain visibility but do so in different ways. Technology helps. Many leaders are at their best when they are in face to face contact with customers, staff and other stakeholders. Now they have to rely on virtual meetings or calls as well as emails. While I'd be the first to admit that I miss face to face contact, I am finding that it is possible to be highly effective 'virtually' and get serious business done often in a shorter timeframe.

Stakeholder management is the third leadership trait that is essential to crisis management. It's so important to stay close to your colleagues, customers, suppliers and others. Have you a stakeholder map? Have you connected with your most important stakeholders? Are you aware of their most pressing issues? Do you know how you can help and support them?

Managing teams

Among your teams, leaders need to recognise that some people thrive on crisis management, want to do more and put in very long hours. But they must also recognise that some people may be struggling and will need to do less and should not be forced to emulate others within the business. Getting that balance right is critical.

Finally, having experienced at first hand the distress caused by the financial crisis, I feel it is important to stay positive and not to lose hope. Focusing on what is within your control and not letting yourself get drawn into fretting about things that are outside your control are key. Leaders should be able to point to that “north star,” to recognise that this crisis will pass and, also, new consumer trends and potential new business opportunities will emerge.

We need to create stability and hope in these tumultuous times.

Carol Bolger is a Chartered Director, an executive coach and a tutor on the Institute of Director's Chartered Director Programme. She is a non-executive director of An Post, Link Asset Services and Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital. Carol is a co-founder of WomanUp, which aims to strengthen the female leadership pipeline through a programme which gives mid-career females the insights, skills and confidence to progress to leadership roles. Over 40 women in Bank of Ireland Group have participated in the programme to date. For more details on the programme, visit the [WomanUp website](#)

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