

Leading Through COVID-19

Finding hope and opportunity in a global calamity.

Eric J. McNulty • March 06, 2020

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The coronavirus that causes the disease known as COVID-19 is rocking the world. People are hoarding supplies. Markets are gyrating. Governments are restricting travel. Amid abundant

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organizations plan their activities seems to be the resource in shortest supply.

The technical aspects of the response are the most straightforward: The experts are known, resources are being allocated, and increasing amounts of data are being gathered to guide decisions. While there is no instant fix to an infectious disease outbreak, and there are many potential missteps, the path to a solution is well illuminated.

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organizations, and communities — are the human dimensions of the response. The ill must receive care, the families of those who perish deserve comfort, and those who are well need to keep functioning despite their fear, or the consequences will be a global, social, and economic catastrophe. This need for continuity in spite of unnerving disruption falls on the shoulders of organizational and community leaders. As Linda Ginzel of the Booth School of Business always reminds me, leading is about guiding people into the future despite its risks and uncertainties.

Over more than 15 years of field research on crisis leadership in a range of incidents, such as hurricanes, terror attacks, and public health events, including this one, my colleagues and I have found that there is an art to leading through the darkest hours — and, just as important, that mastering that art makes

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There are two overarching takeaways from our work. The first is that while an initial crisis may not have been preventable, the secondary crisis of a bungled response is avoidable. The second is that every incident has narratives with victims, villains, and heroes. We are still early enough in the story of COVID-19 that executives and organizations can shape the role they will play. Rising to the part of hero requires intentional choices to put some measure of self-interest aside in order to contribute to a greater good. This is a situation where the stakeholder-centric intentions of the [Business Roundtable's famous 2019 letter redefining corporate purpose](#) are put to the test.

The art of effective [crisis leadership](#) focuses on three interdependent areas of activity that help foster sustained high — even heroic — performance by

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Adaptive capacity. Crises evolve over time, especially long-duration events such as an infectious disease outbreak. Organizations and their leaders must execute a series of pivots as the facts on the ground and their operational context shift. Often, they require parts of the organization that do not normally work together to come together seamlessly. They may also flatten the hierarchy, with subject matter experts suddenly engaging directly with senior executives, perhaps even leading them. There is great potential for fear, friction, and conflict.

A successful pivot requires planting one foot on something solid and moving the other to change direction. In the disruption of crisis, an unshakable commitment to core values and principles creates an island of certainty that facilitates more fluid action relating to strategy and

people come first, ensure that all of your decisions in this time reflect that. Support people throughout the company who make decisions using those tenets, even if there are short-term financial consequences. Value contributions no matter who offers them — this is no time for politics.

Resilience. While many play defense during a crisis, there is an opportunity to be aspirational as well. Imagine that the adversity of the situation coalesces your team to rise to its absolute best. Think about how you may all emerge from this incident stronger, more engaged, and more capable than you were before. Creating such conditions calls leaders to reassure and encourage everyone throughout the enterprise that “we can do it” and then supporting them both at work and at home.

Lucy English, PhD, vice president of research and science at

resilience, shared with me that research shows approximately 50% of people are “worst-case thinkers.” In a crisis, they will be operating from fear — contributing negative energy and sharing doomsday scenarios. English said that the antidote to this is for leaders to operate from a realistic assessment of what is most likely to happen. This, she said, “reframes the situation to one that is inherently less scary.” With that most-likely-outcome assessment, leaders can then challenge the team to move the needle into more positive territory.

Trust. Our research has shown that trust is at the foundation of cooperative and collaborative leadership. The COVID-19 outbreak offers numerous tests of trust as well as the opportunity to be a hero to associates, customers, and communities. The question for leaders to ask is, “How can we be fully trustworthy to each of our stakeholders during

proclamations and intentions; involve those affected in defining in tangible terms what trust means in these circumstances.

As this is a global situation, short-term share price is most likely to be driven by general market conditions unless your products or services are directly related to the response. This lack of control can be liberating. When better to demonstrate your loyalty, compassion, and commitment to workers and customers? [When better to be a good neighbor?](#)

There will be conditions that affect us all and that are beyond the control of any individual company. For example, a city (or, in the case of Japan, an entire nation) may close its schools. That choice will create consequences for families, including logistical, emotional, and economic hardship. Helping mitigate those risks internally with your employees and perhaps even externally with customers and partners creates enduring bonds

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corporate support or creating ways for people to help one another.

Decisions made and actions taken in trying times resonate far beyond the present. I have worked with executives whose leadership during the Great Recession, the Arab Spring, and other significant events helped define their organization's culture for years afterward. Forecasts about climate change, global urbanization, and aging populations indicate that pandemics and other disruptive events will increase in frequency. Eventually, there may be one with a high, 1918-level morbidity rate that pushes our social and economic systems to their limit. The lessons we can learn and the practices that can be put in place now make our organizations healthier today and better prepared for future turbulence.

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I.H. Chan School of Public Health and Kennedy School of Government. He is also coauthor of *You're It: Crisis, Change, and How to Lead When It Matters Most*.

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