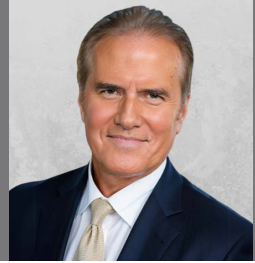


Leading During Uncertain, Trying Times – Five Essential Practices

By Henry S. Givray
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The accelerating pace of news and impending impact of the COVID-19 crisis can be scary, numbing, stressful and overwhelming, creating angst, fear and even panic in people. The two companies I served during my tenure as a CEO faced high-stakes external crises; one company with the dot-com crash and 9/11, the other during the 2008/2009 Great Recession. I am proud that both companies were successful in confronting and overcoming the trauma, shock to normalcy and potential fallout during those uncertain, trying times. Our collective success was due to many factors including extraordinary management teams, talented and dedicated employees, a well-articulated and aligned culture, accomplished and engaged board members and of course some luck. In part, it was also due to my lifelong passion and learning around the qualities, behaviors and practices that distinguish true leaders.



Through a process of exploring, discovering, adjusting and applying, I developed and put into action five essential practices that helped people cope with and endure the crisis while implementing the necessary steps to ensure a better tomorrow. My hope is that they are useful to you as head of an organization as you and your teams navigate this latest crisis. Your organization could be a corporation, department or division, partnership, small business, government body, association, educational institution, charity or other organized entity.

1. Communicate incessantly with meticulous clarity and context

Our brains are naturally conditioned to be influenced by and dwell on bad news, traumatic events and perceived impending peril. Our brains are also wired to think the worst when faced with vagueness. Psychologists refer to this as the negativity bias. Adversity – real or imagined, immediate or anticipated – expands and intensifies the negativity bias. This in turn can trigger angst, fear, anxiety and even paralysis. You can help mitigate this

natural human phenomenon and help others better cope by communicating incessantly with meticulous clarity and context. This means frequent, credible and open communication free from vagueness, ambiguity and over-equivocation. It requires dogged, relentless focus and discipline as well as pushing and prodding others on our teams to ensure the information we are receiving is not confusing, hazy or nebulous.

Practicing these principles faithfully and without compromise will prepare and materially enhance your ability to communicate with others in all situations – one-on-one and large audiences, face-to-face and in written form – so you

can correct possible misconceptions, fill in information blanks, reinforce key positive points, provide additional context, clarify misunderstandings, offer different but credible and more positive points-of-view, uncover issues requiring further investigation, and share hopeful and empowering stories and anecdotes.

2. Stay “up” by enduring stress and demonstrating resilience

Your attitude, demeanor, mood and temperament will positively or negatively impact others and ultimately outcomes. And because of your position and authority, your disposition will tend to be magnified and reverberate instantly.

When I was 14 I was diagnosed with cancer. Doctors gave me little chance of surviving past nine months. My mom, always smiling and in good cheer, would continually reference the future in countless and varied ways. Seeing my mom “up” bolstered my spirits and gave me hope and strength. Reflecting on my mom’s actions, I learned that confronting difficulties and hardships while maintaining an optimistic frame-of-mind with courage and conviction can lift spirits, give hope and build strength in others. ➤

Note that I am not referring to a Pollyanna or “what, me worry?” persona which can fall trap to wishful thinking and self-delusion. Rather, you always have the “big picture” in mind. And you recognize that your attitude can and will have a profound impact on the people around you. This in turn will either enable or inhibit performance, critical thinking and problem solving.

3. Focus and enhance your senses to hear the unheard

Sharpen your skills to listen to the spoken by staying neutral, paying attention to words and their meaning, asking questions for clarity and understanding, and removing distractions. But even more importantly, focus and enhance your senses to hear fears not revealed, concerns not disclosed, doubts not displayed and pains unexpressed. Doing so will help you prepare for and meet the true needs of others. You will demonstrate authentic empathy, compassion and kindness; after all, you cannot win people’s hearts if you don’t genuinely care about their welfare and well-being. You will earn trust and build loyalty. And you will be better equipped to create favorable conditions toward a successful crisis journey.

4. Cultivate and improve cohesiveness on your management team

Cohesiveness is a much higher state of teamwork. Cohesive teams comprise individuals who are united in purpose, possess common values and develop shared meaning. As a result, their efforts are multiplied rather than summed. Good teams achieve specific results based upon set goals, assumptions and work plans. But cohesive teams produce desired outcomes regardless of new challenges, changing conditions or unfavorable surprises. They do so by exemplifying and consistently exhibiting certain behaviors and group dynamics.

By cultivating and improving cohesiveness on your management team, you will strengthen efficacy, increase speed and build capacity in order to boost performance, overcome obstacles, solve problems, ignite new ideas, resolve conflict, loosen logjams and ultimately produce better outcomes. You will accomplish this among and between the individuals who are accountable and responsible at the highest level for making a positive impact on people and on the success and endurance of the organization they serve.

To learn more about the behaviors and group dynamics of cohesive teams and what you can do to build, nurture and sustain team cohesiveness, check out my 2013 article, [Building-Cohesive-Teams](#).

5. Create the conditions for a better tomorrow

Leaders visualize and communicate a desired future state. While navigating through a crisis, a better future is about successfully withstanding and minimizing the negative impact to people and to the organization. It also means acquiring learning and initiating change toward an ever-higher standard going forward. Though true leaders pursue desired future outcomes with determination, relentless commitment and a steadfast work ethic, they know they can’t do it alone. They must mentally prepare others and capture their hearts to join in the journey. My first four practices above speak to how best to accomplish that. But communicating your vision isn’t enough. Nor does it suffice to convince others to join in the journey through your eloquence and charisma. You must create the conditions to achieve the better tomorrow by:

- Providing needed resources
- Supplying the right tools
- Removing barriers and clearing pathways
- Lending passive and active hands
- Surfacing, confronting and resolving conflict
- Monitoring, measuring and reporting, and,
- Applauding achievements, celebrating wins and rewarding performance

It is both certain and inevitable that you will face and deal with crises in your organization. And the consequential triggering events are often unforeseen and unplanned. Though you cannot control their timing, severity or length, you do have 100 percent control on how you respond to them. By consciously applying and continuously honing the five practices and their corresponding actions above, you can make a meaningful difference in helping others cope with and endure adversity. You will also have the means and the opportunity to create the conditions that ensure better tomorrows.

Henry S. Givray is former Chairman, President & CEO of Smithbucklin Corporation, the world’s largest association management and services company. He served as President & CEO from 2002 to 2015 and Chairman of the Board (non-executive) from 2016 to 2020. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and national news media, and he has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings, and educational forums. One of Henry’s most enduring achievements has been his creation of comprehensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The programming has evolved to include two offerings under the brand Leadership’s Calling®. The Diverse Cohort Program is for CEOs and other C-suite executives, vice presidents, directors and managers at all levels, business owners, entrepreneurs, individual practitioners, and high-potentials from all types and sizes of organizations representing varied industries and professions. The second offering is an exclusive program for a CEO (or head of an organization) and members of his or her senior management team, participating together.