

COVID-19: The Role of Leadership in Response to Disruption

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Abstract

COVID-19 has created unprecedented circumstances throughout the world that resulted in a disruption to "Business as Usual". The world economy has been shaken enormously, scores of lives have been lost, and a "New Normal" has been adopted by everyone. In this atmosphere, leadership becomes a high commodity, and a well-sought after skill. Therefore, individuals everywhere turn to decision-makers at the top of the hierarchy for their leadership skills. This paper provides examples to illustrate the importance of leadership to turning disaster into efficient response.

Keywords: COVID-19, leadership, pandemic, disruption

Introduction

By the end of 2019, the news spread throughout the globe that a virus started sweeping across Wuhan, China. This virus has become known as COVID-19. The scientific consensus is that this virus has a natural origin, and may have been the result of people processing bat carcasses and guano in the production of traditional Chinese medicines. The virus COVID-19 has common signs of an infection including respiratory symptoms and may cause death, for example, the New York Times printed the names and memories of 100,000 individuals that died as a result of being infected by this virus (NYT, 2020).

At the start of the year 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) started disseminating information regarding COVID-19 to the United Nations' (UN) countries (WHO, 2020). Throughout the world warnings to "Business as Usual" have been issued. A number of countries closed their borders; many airlines made a considerable reduction in their national and international flights; almost all sports events and competitions were cancelled or suspended; educational institutions closed their doors and sent students home; and businesses deemed unessential were required to close their doors by official government agencies. For example, the U.S. Homeland Security Department identified 19 guidelines on essential services such as financial institutions, medical and health care, food and agriculture, and law enforcement (Milliken, 2020). The World Economic Forum surveyed 350 senior risk professionals. This is to assess their perceptions regarding the most worrisome for their companies (Clift & Court, 2020). The results of this survey revealed that the top concerns were (prolonged recession of the global economy, 63.3%); (surge in bankruptcies, 52.7%); (cyberattacks and data fraud due to sustained shift in working patterns, 50.1%); and (failure of industries or sectors in certain countries to properly recover, 50.1%).

March 2020, Gallup.com published the results of a survey on what employees need from leaders, in response to COVID-19. The results revealed that employees strongly agreed with the survey statements as follows: (the employer communicated a clear plan, 39%); (I feel well-prepared to do my job, 54%); (My

immediate supervisor kept me informed about what is going on, 48%); (the organization cares about my overall well-being, 54%) (Harter, 2020).

Under these conditions of disruption caused by COVID-19, organizations turn to decision-makers at the top of the hierarchy, and rely on their leadership skills. This paper provides examples to illustrate the importance of leadership to turning disaster into efficient response.

Leaders and Risk Mitigation

As the coronavirus continues to spread, leaders need to evaluate their disaster recovery and pandemic plans. This will help them more in preparing for and responding to challenges. Overall, leading through a crisis requires taking the long view, as opposed to manage the present. However, leaders need to recognize that the return to work should happen in stages, and pandemic management protocols should be reviewed and refined. To help turn disruptions into productive and proactive business operations, and to maximize the odds of success, a set of steps were suggested (EY Americas, 2020). These include:

- (1) Create a coronavirus crisis management plan, and recognize the difference between traditional disruption and pandemic-related disruption.
- (2) Appoint a crisis management team with representatives from each business function with direct line to the CEO.
- (3) Establish communication plan for employees, customers, vendors, and the public.
- (4) Determine the potential impact of COVID-19 on disrupting your operations.

In the context of disruption to operations, especially the impact on the workplace, the MIT Sloan Management Review run a survey (Smarp, 2020). The results revealed that the top five issues that employees have on their minds are job security, personal health, childcare & home schooling, personal finances, and remote work. The authors of the report appear to suggest that the best way to manage a crisis is to stay ahead of it. To maintain operations, there is a need to determine which parts of the organization to prioritize. For this purpose, a recovery playbook was suggested (Renjen, 2020). This playbook suggested a mapping between six macro outcomes and their corresponding core strategic questions. These outcomes mainly relate to profitability, digital transformation, workforce support, and stakeholders' expectations. The core strategic questions relate to the impact of this disruption on consumer behavior, the move toward digital transformation, the social contract with workers, and social and institutional expectations.

Turning Disaster into Efficient Response

The COVID-19 pandemic have changed the workplace, and disrupted the functioning of organization. One consequence of this disruption is the struggle to lead employees. Leadership is not synonymous with management. In this pandemic experience, leadership takes you into a new territory. Specifically, a leader's response to a crisis is much more than speeches. Neuroscience research shows that people learn and pay attention to the emotions a leader exhibits. Positive emotions spread, but negative emotions travel faster and further (Becker & Cropanzano, 2020).

Crisis like this may force leaders to change and adapt at extraordinary speed. According to McKinsey report, the business implications of the coronavirus outbreak highlighted first and foremost a human tragedy (Watson, 2020). Therefore, empathy and flexibility are important leadership qualities all the times. This is significant when employees experience sudden and radical change- such as the need to work remotely or in highly restricted workplace for extended period (Strack, et. al., 2020). One study showed that 48 percent of employees will likely work remotely at least part of the time, and 32 percent of organizations are replacing full-time employee with contingent workers as a cost-saving measure (IW Staff, 2020).

To succeed in a world of increased remote work, employees need to know that they are the most valued company asset. This can be demonstrated through the promise of avoiding layoffs and doing what they can do to minimize financial hardship (Strack, et. al., 2020). Employee's experience- a combination of culture, trust, and work style- is linked to competitive position, company growth, and employee sentiment (Insley, 2020).

Conclusion

Essential to effective leadership is the awareness that there is no easy route through this pandemic. While being isolated from friends, extended family, and colleagues, employees are expecting their leaders to be open without ambiguity about the evolving nature of the crisis. In addition, leaders should display fact-based communications, empathy, flexibility and adaptability, humility, and active listening (Brownlee, 2020; De Cremer, 2020; Gelles, 2020). Overall, leadership is the engine that moves people to produce outstanding results. Furthermore, the post COVID-19 workplace will put a premium on efficiency and agility (Schwantes, 2020).

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