

Thoughts on Leading in the COVID-19 Crisis

Michael Burcham | March 13, 2020

These are unprecedented times. There is no playbook for what to do in such a crisis, yet leaders must step up now and guide our communities and businesses as we face some of life's most demanding challenges. These challenges may include large quarantine areas, limited access to essential services, and medical shortages for those who fall ill to this virus. Any one of these can also create paralyzing fear.

As the leader, you cannot always control the environment you find yourself. But you can always control your response, your attitude, your behavior, your words and actions. You can always choose to be proactive rather than paralyzed.

We as humans do not like being in isolation. We hate "not knowing." As leaders, we must recognize this - and see this crisis both through our own eyes as a leader - and through the eyes of our team (all of whom have more at risk than ourselves).

Our emotions are contagious. If you're freaking out and snowballing this crisis, so will your team. That much is guaranteed. So, watch your language – think carefully about what you are saying about the future. Acknowledging the fear lets your team know that you "get it" – you're not clueless or in denial. This is part of sharing your humanity and authenticity as a leader. But don't feed the fear. If you need to vent your own fears, share your concerns with a trusted colleague or friend outside of the workplace.

Build a plan. You owe it to your team to have a plan. It is one of the best ways to build trust and show leadership. Even if your plan isn't perfect, having a plan is better than no plan at all.

In **times of uncertainty**, when the fog is thick, our people want the **leader** to lead. What does that mean? Build trust. Be authentic. Be real.

As I consider the future during this COVID-19 crisis, four thoughts guide me as a leader:
Wellbeing first. Plan like you never planned before. Manage cash. This too shall pass.

1. Wellbeing First:

Do everything you can to take care of your people. And - yes - little things matter. Showing you care in a crisis situation will never be forgotten.

- Be open and frequent with your communication - even if you have no "new news" simply say so. Connect daily or almost daily with the team. This is essential during a crisis to keep your team informed in a 24-hour social media and news environment. Commit to dispel misinformation and become the source of trusted information.
- Be empathetic. Truly listen to their needs. You may not be able to do a lot - but you can certainly listen. And you may have ideas that can be helpful to them.

- Lean into generosity. Do what you think is in the best interest of the people who make your business work every day. For example: “we will pay for uber or parking to get to work for “x” days.” What can you do to ease their burden - even a little?

2. Plan Like You’ve Never Planned Before:

I simply cannot stress this enough: Plan like you’ve never planned before. I hope one day we can laugh about our teams’ being over prepared. I am happy to be the butt of jokes one day that we all planned too much -rather than face the alternative that we were not ready when the moment arrived. Those defining moments of leadership when we are tested beyond what we believed possible.

- **Think:** Work through scenarios in your head - then work them out on paper. Know in advance what you will do if... (and answer as many of those “what ifs” that you can.)
- **Focus:** As you plan - focus (as much as you can) on what actually is known and what is unknown. Defining these two in simple high-level bullets can be very empowering.

What is known? The present situation. We’re all in this together. There’s work to do now. We are resilient and resourceful. We’ll figure it out when the time comes. We will renew our commitment. We will practice our values.

What is unknown? The future of this pandemic. What will happen a week from now? When will this crisis resolve?

- **Keep Working:** Don’t let fear of the unknown become a scapegoat for not getting the work done. There is real work to be done today, tomorrow, and next week. You have customers who need you to show up 100% today (or make the effort to show up as much as you can). Focus on the top three strategic action items your team can accomplish this week for your customer. Your customers will always remember what you did for them in times of crisis. And when you reach the point you cannot serve them as you wish, call them personally and tell them what you can do.
- **Practice:** Football teams practice all week for one game on Sunday. They run a certain play 20-30 times in practice to use it once in a game (sometimes never). Why do they do this? So that when the time comes to run that play in a stressful moment, every player knows what to do because they have done it before. Humans excel at repetition. Making a play second nature is the key. In such stressful times, your decisions must be driven by such careful planning and preparation that you simply DO NOT HESITATE in your defining moments when decisions matter.

How can a leader apply this football mentality to COVID-19?

Think about the following scenarios in your head right now. Then *write* down what your response would be and work it through with your team what you would do in these situations. While your mind is (somewhat) calm and no undue influence, think of what you would do so that when the moment does come you react as second nature and execute-- like a football play.

Example Scenarios: What would you do if:

- a. **One of your employees tests positive.** What does communication look like to the organization? Your customers? Your vendors? Others? Knowing they will be greatly shaken up; how can you offer support to them?

Sample plan: Should this happen, you have to respect the individual's privacy as much as possible while planning the work should they need quarantine or hospitalization. Simply saying "Tom has tested positive and will be out for a while" is enough. Then have a plan on how the work of the business can go on. Can Tom assist a bit from home? If not, how will Tom's work be re-distributed.

- b. **Children cannot go to school.** What happens when your employees' children are required to be home and there is no day care available? Do you have a work from home plan? Is that even possible?

Sample plan: Given schools are closed, we are implementing a split shift office - meaning half come one week and half stay home then switch. If you are a single parent, we will make every accommodation possible. What NOT to do: Turn your office into daycare - you risk spreading the illness to everyone and putting the entire company at risk.

- c. **An employee's child or significant other tests positive.** What do you do if one of your employees' children or significant other tests positive? Do they stay home? What does "work from home mean"? Do you have a policy on work from home requirements? Do they have the tools to do it? Do you have IT set up to allow them to work from home?

Sample plan: If someone in your immediate household tests positive for COVID-19, please contact us immediately. We will certainly respect your privacy, but you cannot come into the office. We will either find a way for you to work from home or redistribute the work we can to others until you are in a position to return to work. (As the leader, fill in the blank about sick leave, using vacation time, etc. if you have such options to buffer the employee's loss of income while they are unable to work.) Of course, if this person was just in the office, what does this mean for everyone else in the office?

- d. **You the CEO get coronavirus.** Who takes over if you are hospitalized or cannot make choices? Who handles decisions when people disagree? How do the essential business decisions get made when you aren't in position to make these decisions.

Sample plan: In the event I acquire COVID-19 and require either quarantine or hospitalization, here is the plan we will follow... and have a plan so that decisions can be made in your extended absence.

There are dozens of other things that could happen. And while you cannot plan for all of them, you must develop a mentality and a framework through which all decisions are made.

You need a decision tree as a guidepost for choices - that live within your company values and provide you the opportunity for your business to survive this crisis.

3. Manage Cash:

It is not always the strongest nor the smartest who survive such challenges, but those who are willing and able to adapt. Those who have a plan and make the hard decisions quickly.

- SOME OF THE BEST COMPANIES IN THE WORLD MAY NOT SURVIVE THIS CRISIS. WE MUST ALL ADAPT AND MAKE CHANGES NOW AND PRESERVE CASH. WITHOUT CASH, YOU WILL NOT SURVIVE THIS.
- The speed and magnitude of decisions may spell life or death for companies. Failing to act quickly, appropriately, and with substance may result in a cost-cutting death spiral.

Sample: At “___” trigger (meaning sales went down by “X” percent) we lay people off or tell all employees we are firing nobody but going to only pay people ____% of their wages indefinitely until the world stabilizes. (Or consider a furlough till the crisis is over. I can’t suggest what you should do, but you must simply have a plan.

4. This too shall pass:

What you do now defines the future when this crisis is over. As the leader, you set the tone for the company. Your strength and courage staves off panic. During times of crisis, people want to hear from their leaders, so communicate at least daily or every-other day.

- Frequent email communication to the team is essential. But if someone tests positive, an email to them is not sufficient. Make a call. Check on them. See what you can do to help.
- The little things you do to show care and concern for your team and your customers will be remembered more than anything you could ever say in an email. And these things, done consistently with your values, will define - once the crisis is over - who wants to work for you (or your company).
- Communicate across your professional and personal networks. Be creative and share great ideas and tactics. You and your team will come up with some good ideas. So will others. Sharing those will help build a broader, stronger community.
- Don’t neglect your family. They are why you work. Don’t get so caught up in managing the business through this time of crisis that you forget that they are scared too - and need you more than you realize.
- Take care of yourself. Take deep breaths, read something inspirational, find a way to “recharge” yourself. You are leading through a very difficult situation. That drains your emotional battery faster than you can even imagine. Be kind to yourself.

My Final Thoughts:

Don't let uncertainty undermine you or your team's efforts. Stay on course. Focus and finish what must to be accomplished now. Acknowledge the fear, but don't feed it. Be courageous and live your values. And care for your team - to every extent you are able to care for them.

Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out with your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love --
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

From "Pandemic" by Lynn Ungar

Finally – there is strength in numbers. We live in a great country. We are all part of a shared family - and a network of great resources. Let's help one another through this challenging time.

My best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Michael Burcham". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr. Michael Burcham