

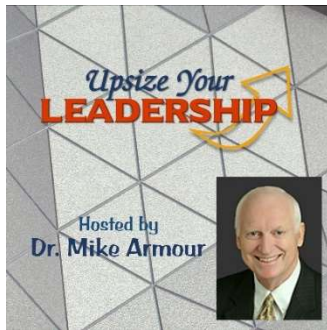
Leadership in the Corona Pandemic and Beyond

Five Things to Get Right

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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I believe that today's program is particularly relevant. It's my contribution to the broad commentary going on all round us about the corona virus pandemic. This is a time which begs for the very best which leadership has to offer. It's a time for us to draw lessons from what we have seen in great leaders during other moments of immense crisis.

In this episode I capsulize five of these time-proven lessons. Whatever your level of leadership and management, these five lessons will serve you well in the present crisis and position you to Upsize Your Leadership.

In the field of history, there is a long-standing debate about crises and leadership. Does crisis force certain people into roles where they then learn to be great leaders? Or does crisis merely provide the setting in which those who are already gifted leaders become evident? Strong arguments can be made either way.

Whatever the case, there's no denying that crisis – particularly protracted crisis – begs for great leadership. In my trainings on leadership I often say that leaders frequently take people where they have never been before. Extraordinary leaders, I add, take people someplace that even the leader has never been before.

We now face such a moment worldwide. The corona virus pandemic begs for extraordinary leadership and innovation both on a global scale and at every level of society. If any historical moment is rightly described as “unprecedented,” this is truly such a moment.

As I produce this podcast, we are a week into a nationwide shutdown of the economy. At this point, no one knows how long the shutdown will last. Nor can we conceive what its total economic impact will be. But one thing is certain. The pandemic's health crisis will pass long, long before we emerge from the economic disaster which it is spawning.

Small businesses will have to be rescued. Supply chains will have to be rebuilt. Local governments which have lost billions of dollars in sales taxes will have to re-engineer their slate of public services. Schools will have to rebound from months of disrupted instruction. Non-profits will have to reduce their scope of services because of lost contributions in the economic

downturn. The domino effect of the pandemic will demand leaders at every level to take people somewhere that the leader has never gone before.

Let me devote this podcast, therefore, to lessons which history has taught us about crisis and leadership. Whatever the crisis, whatever its scale, whether in companies, institutions, government agencies, churches, non-profits, or communities, there are certain principles of leadership which are essential. Without them, leadership will inevitably falter at a time when it is needed most.

First, leaders must make themselves highly visible. You can't manage a crisis from a back room or hunkered down out of sight. In crisis, no aspect of leadership is more important than the role model which the leader provides. And if the leader is not visible, people are denied that model.

Recall the images of Winston Churchill stumping his way through the bombed-out ruins of once-beautiful Coventry, England, grit and determination on his face. Those pictures, splashed across newspapers everywhere in the United Kingdom, renewed confidence by sending the message, "We will not be deterred. We will fight on."

He furthered his visibility through speech-making, particularly his radio addresses to the nation. He used these broadcasts to prepare his people for war, then to sustain their resolve in the midst of Germany's relentless bombing campaign. His wartime speeches are a textbook study in effective leadership communication at a time of crisis.

Second, leaders during times of crisis must constantly communicate hope. The first priority in any crisis is merely to survive it, to cope with it. Human beings are amazingly resilient creatures. When they have hope, they can cope with the unthinkable and prevail. Great leaders tap into this coping skill by keeping hope alive.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth century German philosopher, once wrote that if you give a man a "why" to live, he can cope with unthinkable "hows." That is, people can endure the unendurable if they have reason to do so. In crisis, leaders give their people that reason to press on by keeping the embers of hope aglow.

Hope is an antidote to panic. That's why political figures from the president to governors to local mayors have rarely made comments about the pandemic without offering assurance – often more than once in their remarks – that we shall surely overcome this adversity.

Third, leaders in crisis must maintain hope while simultaneously being realistic and forthright. Ultimately the power of leadership rests on its credibility. There is no faster way for leaders to lose credibility than to paint a rosy picture which differs markedly from what people know to be true. When leaders make this mistake, they convey one of two messages. Either they are out of touch with reality. Or they are being purposefully deceptive. Neither message serves the purpose of building credibility.

Leaders must therefore be realistic in how they describe circumstances surrounding the crisis. The key is to be realistic without seeming pessimistic. When things go wrong on a wholesale basis, people tend to be drawn to pessimism. Leaders must do nothing to reinforce this tendency.

The very wiring of our brain, you see, makes us susceptible to pessimism. Our brains are super attuned to danger or threats. When threats seem overwhelming or too numerous to overcome, the brain amplifies the magnitude of the threat. The result can be a sense of helplessness, which sets the stage for despair and pessimism.

Some people, as you've no doubt observed, seem habitually pessimistic. Their outlook always seems to be gloomy. In times of trouble, no one turns naturally to them for leadership. People want leaders who see promise in the worst of circumstances and who can instill that sense of promise in the hearts of those who follow them.

Fourth, in communicating a hopeful message, leaders must concurrently show concern for the emotions which people are feeling. When the pandemic passes, for instance, many will return to work in small businesses which have laid off dozens of workers. While the ones resuming their jobs will be relieved to have a paycheck again, they will be reminded on every turn of missing co-workers. Friends whose job loss was permanent. Colleagues who will never be back.

With these daily reminders, a sense of loss and sadness is inevitable. Some people will even feel guilty for having a job to return to, when many fellow-workers do not. In addition, there will be worries that some unexpected spike in the rates of infection may lead to another round of shutdowns. And in smaller enterprises in particular, returning employees will have anxieties about whether the company has the financial wherewithal to cover the cost of rebuilding.

Leadership can ill afford to be dismissive of these feelings, as though they are unimportant. Leaders must not convey a message, either directly or indirectly, that "we just need to put these emotions behind us and get over them."

Instead, leaders should acknowledge these feelings, affirm that they are understandable, and express sympathetic support for those who are struggling with them. In times of crisis, and during recovery from it, people yearn for a leader whose care for them is genuine. And that includes a leader who truly cares about their emotional well-being.

Fifth, in the midst of crisis, leaders need to spell out concrete, specific actions which people can take to help weather the storm. Moreover, leadership communication should offer regular reminders of how important these actions are. Crises threaten to paralyze constructive behavior. They bombard us with so many challenges that we see no clear path forward. This then triggers anxiety and indecisiveness.

By spelling out specific actions for people to take, leaders create a sense of movement, a sense of pushback against the dispiriting consequences of the crisis. That movement helps lessen the anxiety. At this point the leader does not need a comprehensive plan of action. What the moment calls for are near-term, specific action items whose value people recognize for battling the crisis or recovering from it.

I compare it to what happens in the aftermath of a tornado. Once the initial shock wears off, people immediately start cleaning up. They remove debris. They cut up fallen trees. They dig out cars which have been buried. They clear streets. They make temporary repairs to damaged houses.

These individual efforts appear rather puny against the backdrop of the massive destruction in the path of the storm. But for the person performing these actions, the impact is calming,

therapeutic, and motivational. It takes their mind off of the worries and the uncertainties which would otherwise preoccupy them. It helps them feel that they are doing something significant, something which makes a difference in response to a disaster which makes no sense at all.

These initiatives in the wake of a storm, of course, are largely voluntary and done in a rather ad hoc fashion. In organizational life, leaders should not rely on ad hoc volunteerism. They should single out specific actions which they encourage. These may be actions for everyone to take or particular actions for particular groups.

We see examples of both of these approaches in the national response to the pandemic. The government has called on everyone to practice social distancing. And it has urged those who show symptoms to self-quarantine. In a crisis of any scale, leaders do well to point people to specific, recommended actions.

In addition, leaders should remind people repeatedly of the actions asked of them. Any crisis confronts us with an abundance of distractions. These distractions can easily cause us to lose focus on what we have been requested to undertake. Leadership's function is to maintain that focus and keep it strong.

In summary then, when leading in times of crisis, here are five things which leaders must practice as a matter of routine.

1. Stay visible as a role model to your people.
2. Find ways to give your people a sense of hope.
3. Be realistic in sharing your assessments without lapsing into pessimism.
4. Respect the feelings which your people need to process in adjusting to the crisis.
5. Spell out specific, concrete actions which people should take in pushing back against the crisis.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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