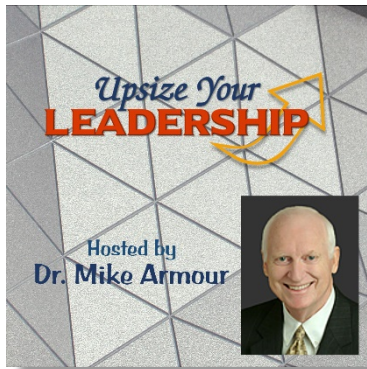


Five Leadership Lessons from COVID-19

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I'm recording this podcast on Memorial Day, a time when I would normally be out enjoying a three-day weekend. Instead, like much of the country, I'm stuck at home, waiting for the corona virus lockdown to come to an end.

But an end does seem to be in sight, even if it is still weeks away. Nationally, we seem to have turned the corner. Before long a barrage of retrospectives will begin on what the pandemic taught us.

So, I thought I would fire an early round in that barrage by offering a retrospective on lessons which leaders can learn from the corona virus shutdown. The lessons which I've selected apply to leadership in any kind of organization. No matter where you serve, these lessons will help you Upsize Your Leadership.

Wholesale crisis is a telling time for leaders, especially protracted crisis. It quickly separates those who are truly leaders from those who merely wear the title. In protracted crisis, it soon becomes apparent which leaders are strong, which ones are weak; which ones are good, which ones are not so good.

Protracted crisis also provides an exceptional opportunity to learn more about the needs and nature of people in general. And such lessons are invaluable to leaders. After all, leadership (as I define it) is the art of rallying people around a shared purpose, then motivating them and mobilizing them to achieve it. Leadership is people-centric. Take people out of the picture, and there's no need for a leader.

So, in today's program I want to talk about five lessons for leaders from our experience with the corona virus shutdown. And I will draw my examples exclusively from North America, since I've not had an occasion to witness firsthand the experience with COVID-19 elsewhere. But people being people, I doubt that experiences are significantly different in other countries heavily impacted by this pandemic.

A Compelling "Why"

The first lesson which I would highlight is what tremendous change people are willing to make when they are given a compelling why to make the change. Six months ago, when the American economy was the envy of the world, when unemployment in almost every demographic was at its lowest point in history, when economic records were being shattered one after another, who

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could have imagined the vast majority of the nation's small businesses being shuttered by mid-spring and tens of millions of people without jobs by mid-year.

Yet, we've seen these very realities unfold. And no less amazing is the equanimity with which people have accepted the changes which led to these developments. While there have been some sizable protests regarding the shutdown, by and large they have been peaceful. No riots in the streets. No buildings torched. No widespread destruction of property.

What accounts for this general spirit of calm acceptance when people see their livelihoods being vaporized? The answer, I believe, is in the principle behind Simon Sinek's now oft-quoted statement, "Start with why." Humans are meaning-making creatures. We have a fundamental drive to make sense of what we experience. Meaning is another way of answering the question, "Why?"

If people are going to sacrifice their daily routine, relinquish cherished freedoms, and suffer enormous financial loss, they need a compelling reason to accept these changes without fighting back. In this case, the "why" was ready-made. In a matter of weeks, the public developed a rather general consensus that this disease posed an enormous global threat. In the public's mind, the perceived magnitude of the threat justified immediate and extraordinary measures.

As a result, people quickly gave up their daily routine, took up social distancing, started wearing masks wherever they went, and accepted dozens of inconveniences which would have seemed unthinkable just a few weeks before. They had a compelling "why" to make these changes.

This lesson has implications for leaders whenever they are implementing change. People will accept sweeping change when they have a compelling "why" to do so. All too often, leaders approach the implementation of change by stressing *what* will change and trying to sell people on making the change, never taking the time to help people understand the "why" behind the change. People are adaptable. Leaders must give them a reason to adapt.

The End Game

The second lesson from COVID-19 is the urgency of leaders communicating an end-game early on. Then sticking with it. Even though there has been general calm in response to the corona virus shutdown, as this podcast prepares to air, public pushback against imposed restraints is becoming more pronounced and the objections more vocal. The "why" which was once compelling is breaking down.

While a number of factors contribute to this changing mood, one of the colossal contributors is the confused message from political leaders with regard to the end-game. Political leadership at every level of government originally justified the shutdown on the basis of a rationale which has long since been satisfied. We were told that we had to shut ourselves off from other people and forego privileges which we had always taken for granted for one simple reason. We had to slow the spread of the disease so that it did not overwhelm our healthcare system. This gave rise to the phrase which was soon part of everyone's vocabulary: "flattening the curve."

Flattening the curve was the compelling why. Not only could people easily see the importance of this why, they also assumed that once the curve was flattened, the restrictions on business and social life would be lifted. Thus, as the curve began to flatten, people rightfully anticipated that

they would soon be out from under the most onerous shutdown restrictions. Instead, something altogether different happened.

Governors and local officials began changing the rationale for keeping the lockdown in place. And sometimes they added even more restrictions. No longer was the objective to flatten the curve. It was now some other objective, often not one which was clearly spelled out. No two governors seemed to be reading from the same playbook. Each state – and sometimes, each community within a state – had its own end game.

As clarity on the end game became obscure, the compelling why also started to dissipate. Flattening the curve was an outcome which everyone could easily envision. It has now been replaced with targets which are often unclear, are not easily envisioned, or do not constitute a sufficiently compelling why in people's minds.

Political leaders misinterpreted the initial peaceful acceptance of the shutdown. They mistakenly read this acceptance as a willingness of people to passively acquiesce to whatever restrictions government might impose. In reality, the initial acquiescence was the product of a compelling why and a clear end game.

Missing this point, political leaders failed to cultivate a concise, cogent rationale which laid out an adequate "why" for people to remain compliant once the curve was flattened. In the absence of that rationale, the public began to push back with outspoken comments and open demonstrations. Rather than seeing this development as a product of their own failures of leadership, some political figures reacted by scolding people, attacking their motives, or trying to shame them into quietening down.

The message here for all leaders is this: when asking people to change, don't move the goalposts. If you find that you have no other choice, then clearly describe – repeatedly – where the new goal post is located. And beyond that, regularly communicate a compelling why for making this relocation.

The Danger of Detached Decision-Makers

The third lesson from the pandemic shutdown is the danger of detached decision-makers. Ironically, not a single key player in setting shutdown policies – whether we are talking about decision-makers at the national, state, or local level – not a one of them has lost a single day of pay during this entire episode. They are all in exempted positions which allow them to continue to draw a government salary for however long the shutdown endures.

They therefore feel none of the emotional distress, worries about survival, or career disruptions which consume every waking moment – and many sleepless nights – of millions of ordinary citizens. It's not a broad generalization to say that statements from political leaders during the shutdown have been long on policies and regulations and very short on genuine expressions of empathy for the millions whose lives and futures have been turned upside down; for the vast number of spring graduates who have few prospects for job interviews, much less a job; for the hundreds of thousands with chronic, painful, or potentially life-ending medical conditions who cannot get relief because the surgery or procedure which they need has been deemed non-essential.

In a word, most political leaders and their supporting bureaucracy feel little urgency to enunciate and implement an end game. Or if they do sense this urgency, they certainly do not feel it nearly as deeply as millions of American workers. National political leaders were able to put a patch on this situation by offering a broad array of direct payments and expanded unemployment benefits to displaced worker. And the government added subsidized loans to the mix to aid struggling businesses. But it's only a patch. And many have not benefitted from the patch at all. I talk regularly to independent contractors and owners of small businesses which fell outside the guidelines for government relief packages or who applied for government bridge loans, only to be turned down.

In circumstances such as this, it's easy for people to start questioning whether leadership cares about them or whether their leaders are even competent. In either case, faith in their leaders is lost and the credibility of those leaders is decimated. Without credibility, leaders can only gain compliance through coercion, which by its very nature communicates a lack of caring concern for those who are coerced. When people conclude that their leaders are neither competent nor caring, resistance to leadership sets in and pushback starts to mount.

Earlier I alluded to Simon Sinek's book *Start with Why*, He has a more recent volume entitled *Leaders Eat Last*. The expression is not original with him. It's part of the leadership philosophy taught at West Point and elsewhere in the military. The maxim basically boils down to this: until your people are taken care of, put your own needs on backburner. Eat last, once your troops have been fed. It's a great outlook for every leader.

When we are implementing significant change or dealing with a challenging crisis, it's easy for us as leaders to get so bogged down in the details of the change or crisis response that we fail to spend enough time on actions which assure people that we grasp their concerns and anxieties. Always remember, changes which may seem minor to us may be perceived as major changes for our people.

Innovation and Ingenuity

A fourth and important lesson to take away from the pandemic shutdown is the tremendous innovative capability of people. I happen to live in Texas, where state officials have been at the forefront of reopening businesses and establishments which were closed early in the crisis. As I frequent businesses which have recently reopened, I'm struck by the creative and imaginative ways in which various businesses have implemented safety protocols by changing traffic flow, store configurations, the way in which employees interact with customers, checkout procedures, and even the positioning of work stations.

None of this is the product of a government bureaucracy or some legislative body dictating a specific blueprint to be followed. It's entirely a manifestation of the ingenuity of the business owners and their workers. They have figured out how to do business within the current constraints and to do it efficiently. They have restructured their business in ways which they could hardly have imagined just a few weeks ago.

This is an expression of the indomitability of the human spirit. Humans rise to a challenge, and find fulfillment in doing so. One of the greatest tragedies in history occurred in 1349 and 1350, when the Black Plague swept across Europe. One-third of the population of Europe died. Entire towns disappeared, never to rise again. As this event unfolded, it must have seemed to those caught up in it that the end of the world and of civilization was at hand. Yet a mere half-century

later, in less than two generations, Europe was in the height of the Renaissance, the greatest flowering of art, architecture, and scientific discovery that the world had ever seen. Humanity has a long history of rising to seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Leaders need to internalize the implications of this truth. They have in their people a great well-spring of ingenuity and the ability to innovate. Creating a work culture where innovation and ingenuity are encouraged is one of the most powerful ways for leaders to enhance the success of what they seek to accomplish.

Fear and Rational Thought

The fifth lesson from the pandemic is the power of fear to overwhelm rational thinking. We did not need this crisis to alert us to this danger. But the pandemic response illustrates the danger dramatically. To put it simply, many of the regulations in various jurisdictions make no sense whatsoever, at least from a purely rational perspective. Yet, these regulations were instated and the public accepted them because fear ruled the day.

One of my favorite examples of irrational rules is the closure of public parks. When people are cooped up in houses for days on end, denied social interaction with anyone other than immediate family, it's a sure-fire formula for many people to slip into depression. When that happens, what people desperately need is sunshine, fresh air, and exercise. What better place to get all three than a large spacious park, where maintaining social distancing is no problem whatsoever?

And one of the reasons that fear has been so pervasive is because of the way leaders and the press have talked about the pandemic. The public has been inundated with statistics on deaths and death rates. When public officials hold press briefings, one of their first topics is the current growth in COVID-19 cases, current admission rates to hospitals, and the total number of deaths to date. Scant attention – and sometimes no attention at all – is given to survival rates. Yet, the survival rate is quite high. Why not daily reports on the increase in the number of survivors?

In times of stress and anxiety, people hang on every word from leaders in hope of hearing something which will give them clarity and the insight to make important personal decisions. When messages from leaders are overwhelmingly about threats and dangers, fear understandably grows at an exponential rate.

Over the past few years, advances in neurological science have helped us understand why fear impedes clear thinking. The brain's prefrontal cortex manages our higher-level thinking. It's where we process concepts, form strategies, work through contradictions, and solve thorny problems. It's what makes us reflective creatures, not merely reactive creatures. High states of fear and anxiety, however, trigger a release of cortisol through the body. And cortisol signals the prefrontal cortex to go into retreat. In moments of terror, cortisol may shut down the prefrontal cortex entirely.

As a result, to the degree that organizational culture is rife with fear and anxiety, creative and critical thinking are compromised. That's why managing through fear and intimidation is so destructive. Fear and intimidation shut down the best thinking in the organization. The fear triggered by COVID-19 has had a similar effect on major portions of the public and on far too many leaders, as well. You can't expect highly fearful people to be consistently rational in their decision-making.

As you encounter episodes of irrational overreaction to the virus – whether from government, business owners, or members of the public – be reminded of how vital it is for leaders to keep fear and anxiety at bay. In times of crisis or unsettling circumstances, you want the best thinking possible to prevail in your workforce or volunteer community. Fear will always thwart that possibility.

So, five leadership lessons from the pandemic. First, the importance of giving your people a compelling why when you ask them to change. Second, the need to establish clear end games and stick with them when you ask something extraordinary of your people. Third, the danger to leadership credibility when decision-makers are emotionally detached from their people. Fourth, the tremendous innovative capability found in people and what that means for leaders who successfully tap into it. And fifth, the powerful threat which fear poses for clear, rational thought.

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