

3 Strategies for Leading Through Difficult Times

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Summary. Leaders have had a very tough two years, trying to reassure and focus employees in the face of constant uncertainty, often struggling with their own stress and burnout as they address the rising mental health challenges of their employees. How can they stay...more

For the past two years, leaders have been performing a high-wire act: seeking stable footing while dealing with a disruptive and unpredictable pandemic, struggling to hire amidst a 15-year high in talent shortages, and revamping policies to meet employee demands for more flexibility at work. Multiple waves of coronavirus variants and an outbreak of war in Europe have left leaders in a daunting place — trying to reassure and focus employees in the face of constant uncertainty while having no real clue what will happen next. They are being told to “embrace uncertainty” as if that’s a natural and easy thing to do. (It’s not.) And their own struggles with stress and burnout often take a back seat as they address the rising mental health challenges of their employees.

So many leaders are now caught in the middle of wanting to provide a clear and upbeat message to employees and yet are having to back-pedal and pivot quite frequently as conditions change. It’s an exhausting proposition.

More than ever, leaders need practical strategies for taking care of themselves and their teams. At Potential Project, we have coached thousands of leaders, and we start in a somewhat unexpected place — helping them to understand and manage their minds. Unfortunately, none of us can physically control our mind which neurologically has its own patterns and default modes, but we can train it so that it’s working with us and not against us.

Here are three things we recommend to leaders to lead in these uncertain times.

Beware of your ego.

Though most of us like to see ourselves as having the best interests of others in mind, the truth is that our ego is a powerful force, committed to our self-interest and self-preservation.

As we rise up in the ranks of leadership, our ego can naturally become inflated. When it does, this puts us at higher risk of poor decisions and missteps. An inflated ego narrows our vision and makes us look for information that confirms what we want to believe. We lose perspective and end up in a leadership bubble where we only see and hear what we want to rather than the full picture. And, in the face of setbacks and criticism, we find it harder to admit and learn from our mistakes.

Last summer, we witnessed a good example of ego in action. Despite the appearance and then surge in the Covid delta variant, James Gorman, CEO of Morgan Stanley, confidently asserted that his employees would be back in the office by September. He even threatened pay cuts for those who didn't follow the plan and return to the office. When his vision failed to materialize, Gorman at least had the good sense to admit publicly that he was wrong rather than doubling down on a failed plan. "I was wrong on this," he told CNBC in December. "I thought we would have been out of it and we're not. Everybody's still finding their way."

Ego can kill our ability to be agile in an unpredictable world. Keeping it in check gives leaders the freedom to be wrong, to make mistakes, to admit to being human, and to move on.

Choose courage over comfort.

As human beings, we're hardwired to embrace certainty and safety and to avoid danger and discomfort. In fact, sometimes we'll do nearly everything we can to convince ourselves that staying in our comfort zone is the best thing to do. This is where courage comes in. Courage is different from fearlessness. We can still experience fear about making a difficult decision or delivering negative news, but we find the inner strength to overcome the fear, to shift out of our comfort zones, and to move forward.

Pamela Maynard, the CEO of Avanade, a 45,000-person global technology company, shared with us her experience with fear. In 2020, just six months into her role as CEO, she needed to deal with the realities of the global pandemic. Many organizations were reducing workforce numbers to keep their business afloat. But early on, Pam committed to protecting jobs, even as that felt like a risk. "As a new CEO, it felt challenging to make this decision because I wanted to come in as a leader, drive growth, and hit my targets," she said. "But in this truly once-in-a-lifetime situation, my most important responsibility was to take care of our people. There was no other option and no greater priority."

Pam removed chargeability requirements for consultants in the early months of the pandemic and lifted PTO limits as people needed to step away. As a leader, she saw an opportunity to demonstrate real courage to steer the ship through difficult times. She shared a principle that has guided her throughout her career: “Feel the fear and do it anyway.” In this moment, she faced her fear of negatively impacting company performance and disappointing her stakeholders and demonstrated Avanade’s values in action.

Choosing courage over comfort puts us in a vulnerable position because we will likely take heat and make mistakes as we venture into uncertain territory. But this vulnerability opens the doors for others to be vulnerable too. If we face our fears and mess up sometimes, we allow people to see our humanity and invite them to share theirs too.

Practice caring transparency.

McKinsey has reported that more than three-quarters of the C-suite executives they surveyed expect the typical employee to be back in the office at some point for three or more days a week. At the same time, nearly three-quarters of the 5,000 employees surveyed indicated that they would like to work from home for two or more days per week. It’s understandable how leaders view a return to the office as a positive thing. For some, it signals an end to the chaos, a return to the known and manageable. For others, it may seem the best solution to the real experience of disconnect and fatigue that working remotely has burdened us all with.

But the disconnect in expectations and the public communication of plans that run counter to employee sentiment is a dangerous brew that can erode trust. The answer is not for leaders to avoid strategies and plans that are unpopular but necessary; this is often the hard work of leadership. But the caring and compassionate approach is to be as transparent as possible.

Caring transparency means getting ideas and thoughts out in the open – to make visible what can often be invisible, under the surface. It means being open and honest about what is on our minds and in our hearts. We don’t hold back important information out of fear of how it will be received or how we will be viewed. By doing this, we strip away the power that comes with exclusive knowledge and level the playing field. As a result, people know where they stand and what comes next and can better plot their course in life. Transparency is distinct from candor in that you can be candid and still conceal information. When you are transparent, people know what is on your mind. And when you add caring to transparency, people also know what is in your heart.

Caring transparency helps to put leaders on the same page as their employees which in turn drives positive outcomes. In research by Potential Project, we looked at the outcomes when both leaders and their followers see the leader as leading compassionately (with courage, presence and transparency). Job satisfaction improves by 11%, organizational commitment grows by 10%, and burnout decreases by 10%.

Leading others is difficult in normal times, but in these unprecedented times of constant change and uncertainty, it is especially tough. Needing to determine the best path forward amidst imperfect information, and to make decisions that are unpopular can leave one feeling like they're trapped in a dark bubble. Our advice to leaders is to let the bright light of your own humanity pop the bubble and reconnect you with those around you. Admit mistakes when you're wrong, choose courage even when it makes you feel vulnerable, and share what's on your mind and in your heart. It can be scary at first, but it's the very best thing you can do for your teams and for yourself.

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