

Leadership in lockdown: strategies for effective management

Not all business leaders are handling the workplace crises of Covid-19 as well as they should, with those who combine a war-like approach tempered with humanity and compassion proving the most effective, say their executive coaches in a recent study.



© Pop Nukoonrat – 123RF.com

Dr Nicky Terblanche, senior lecturer in Management Coaching at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) interviewed 26 executive coaches across South Africa, the UK, USA and Australia to uncover the underlying truth of leadership in a real-time crisis.

“The saying ‘when the tide goes out, you see who’s been swimming naked’ appears to be true from a leadership perspective during this pandemic. In times of crisis, leaders are severely tested. What is evident is that not everyone coping,” observes Dr Terblanche.



Leaders: How to stop panicking... and carry on

Maiyo Febi 20 Apr 2020



Exposure

He says a common theme emerged of a notable increase in weak leaders being exposed by this pandemic.

“Some senior leaders who were able to ‘hide’ before, have already been demoted or pushed aside because they are not up to the job. This of course places enormous pressure on the people who have to take over their roles.”

Dr Terblanche said he was surprised to learn that a number of middle managers in large South African organisations were not receiving the expected guidance, communication and support from their superiors – with management coaches filling the gap instead.

“Their leaders were ‘missing in action’, leaving it up to managers to figure things out. Many coaches in the USA found themselves fulfilling the role of a manager in having to assist their clients in thinking through and finding answers to operational problems due to leaders’ inability to think through options and alternatives available.”



Directors' responsibilities and risk taking

Stephen Kennedy-Good and Akhona Boloko 29 Apr 2020



Power of communication

Dr Terblanche found a ‘war-time’ leadership stance during this catastrophic time seems to be effective.

“By communicating frequently and clearly, leaders are able to be directive and provide focus to the team. In a crisis, followers want a reassuring leader who can point the way. However, war-like directiveness must not be confused with control. A war commander cannot control all aspects of a war, but instead, after communicating uniform direction, setting clear values and expectation of how we’re going to function, leaders must know when to step aside and trust that their followers will execute.

“This is certainly not a comfortable space for those who have a micro-management style. With remote working, anxiety can build up if leaders are used to relying on ‘looking over their staff’s shoulders’ in order to stay in control.”



Survey reveals the new face of work

22 Apr 2020



Express your humanity

Dr Terblanche uncovered that a war-like directive leadership should not come at the price of showing a humane, compassionate side.

“People may forget what you said, but they will remember how it made them feel. If the leader has always showed compassion for staff long before the pandemic, their caring stance should pay off during this uncertain time and reduce levels of anxiety.”

“Leaders who show their vulnerable side in confessing that even though they don’t have all the answers, yet are working collectively with the entire team on solutions and coping strategies, will instil a sense of focus and reassurance amongst

staff.

“In such instances it is important though for leaders to be mindful of not sub-consciously projecting their fear onto the situation. Make sure you understand your own fear and anxieties before you communicate with your team,” says Dr Terblanche.

The research uncovered that by being authentic and honest, and putting oneself in the shoes of employees, leaders can help staff to, in some ways, normalise the situation.

“Each person’s reality at home is different and as a leader you are now invited into your employees’ home through virtual meetings. Put your staff at ease about working from home by acknowledging for example the additional stressors of having to care for children whilst attending to deadlines, or that disruptions of family members or pets walking in during a meeting is a given.”



Keep workers' mental well-being in mind during lockdown

22 Apr 2020



Find the balance

Dr Terblanche says the research clearly warns against information overload versus radio silence.

“Good leaders in this time are the ones who can sift through the piles of information and use holistic and systems thinking to try and see the bigger picture. This is not the time to be overwhelmed, become insular as a result whilst trying to frantically plan without communicating to the team, leaving staff in a state of limbo.”

During this time of crises coaches are observing the levels at which leaders are struggling with their own identity. In some instances, leaders are confronted to act in a way that may violate their own value system. Dr Terblanche says one USA coach’s client was questioning herself after having to fire 200 staff over Zoom, asking herself “Who am I? Is this what I signed up for?”

“On a very pragmatic level, leaders are struggling with their identity due to the physical change in their work environment. Some identify strongly with their corner office or the respect shown by staff when they enter the building, but now they are at home, in cases having to share domestic duties and schooling children from home. No more jetting off, business class, all over the world. It’s about moving off one’s pedestal towards ‘we are all in the same boat – or at least, trying to weather the same storm’.

“The coaches interviewed observed that leaders who know themselves, have a sense of centeredness and calm and are able to take a step back and look at the bigger picture are coping far better than those who are traditionally mostly task focused.”



Keep it fun! Ideas for team motivation during lockdown

24 Apr 2020



Resilience

The study showed that resilience is most probably the deciding factor in whether leaders will be able to weather the storm or not.

“Resilient leaders are those able to consider the bigger picture, are able to look beyond the doom and gloom and seek opportunities. Leaders who have studied and understand systems thinking and complexity theory seem to manage better and are able to see opportunities. Also, those who draw on their experience from challenges faced such as civil wars or the 2008 financial crisis, are far better placed. ‘Never waste a good crisis’ is how one USA coach’s client is relating to the pandemic, actively looking for new opportunities for his organisation.”

Dr Terblanche says part of maintaining resilience is looking after one self.

“Coaches from all four countries shared how the leaders they are coaching and who are coping well with this pandemic, are making a concrete effort to maintain their personal well-being. Strategies include exercise, eating healthy, and finding the right balance between working from home and family responsibilities.”

Perspective

The major benefit of coaching in this time has been the ability to assist leaders to stop and reflect, in a way ‘moving from the dance floor to the balcony’ as one of the interviewed coaches aptly described.

“Coaches guide leaders to not only think and make plans but first to make as much sense as possible of what is happening on multiple levels. Coaching has always been a powerful space to reflect – guided by a professional who can use theories and frameworks from psychology and adult learning – to sift through information, offer different perspectives and challenge assumptions. By assisting leaders to be self-aware, coaching can help to identify stressors, shape responses and leadership styles. Only once a situation is properly understood can effective plans be made.”

The following recommendations, in summary, from the research, provide practical advice to leaders:

- Communicate often with your team and personally with each individual that reports to you.
- Provide direction and reassurance based on what you know and be candid about what is unknown, without projecting your own personal anxieties.
- Harness the collective wisdom and knowledge of your team.
- Acknowledge what is in and out of your control, and trust your team to execute the vision and direction you have set.
- Show compassion and understanding on an individual level towards your team
- Re-evaluate who you are as a leader. What is your identity now and what is expected of you?
- Take a holistic view on this pandemic. Use Systems Thinking and Complexity Theory tools.
- Actively seek opportunities.
- Draw on previous experience in similar crisis situations.
- Look after your own emotional well-being and health.
- Employ the services of a professional coach to help you with the above and more.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>