
Leading Teams Through A Crisis

by Ben Rawal

The global impact of Covid-19 has caused extraordinary change to how we all behave, interact and maintain a sense of normality.

As Ben Rawal explains, outstanding leaders balance the dichotomy of their own vulnerability with a positive outlook and strength for others. As leaders, our resolve and response to strategic issues is regularly tested during the ordinary course of running a business and leading others.

As Covid-19 continues to create a largely unpredictable future, our behaviours as leaders of others are likely to influence how the world recovers and thrives again. However, demonstrating strong leadership during such times has become more challenging as the risks to life take precedence over business survival.



Leading Change

Dealing with and leading organisational change is a key leadership responsibility that many of us have experienced in our role as a finance professional. Achieving wholesale acceptance of change is often met with resistance by some, and as leaders, having clarity around the organisation's vision and how the change will support its delivery, are key.

When dealing with change (personal, professional or otherwise), individuals progress through a series of psychological 'stages', ultimately resulting in acceptance and the willingness to integrate change into one's future - this journey is illustrated through the Change Curve (Kubler-Ross). As leaders, understanding how individual emotions and responses to undesirable change vary over time, can provide a valuable guide to how you can adapt your own behaviours to ensure your change efforts are accepted and sustained.

Furthermore, when driving a change initiative as a leader, we are often already in a state of acceptance and integration, enabling us to promote the benefits and rationale for completing the change journey.

But how does this differ when the change is being driven by powerful external forces and the vision now appears less clear or even unachievable?

Instead of accepting the change, we may also experience resistance, denial and anger, just like others in our teams.

Facing the Fear

When a significant, life-changing event is beyond our direct control, our emotions tend to have a stronger influence over how we think and behave. These feelings are frequently initiated by fear and can develop into anger and sadness for some individuals.

The emotion of fear is often exacerbated when our perception of the future involves greater uncertainty. The key aspects here are our inability to visualise how plans will come to fruition and the sudden increase in level of complexity that our futures now hold. In reality, elements of the future will always remain unknown, but when fear is heightened, our attention is drawn towards such uncertainties.

As leaders, we face the conundrum of managing and accepting our emotions, while leading others that are struggling to come to terms with their own feelings. Demonstrating integrity as a leader will always remain essential in building trust, most individuals are usually adept at noticing incongruence between a leader's words and actions, the 'sixth sense' that someone isn't being fully truthful about how they feel.

Showing others that you are vulnerable often takes courage and can feel uncomfortable to admit, particularly when you are in a leadership position. However, in reality demonstrating such frailty strengthens others' perceptions of your integrity, in turn building trust and loyalty.

With this in mind, how do / should effective leaders' approach such a dilemma with their teams?

The Bigger Picture

Understanding and retaining a 'bigger picture' perspective is arguably one of the most critical aspects of being a leader. In practice, this means acknowledging the details of a crisis but having the mindset to rise above the minutiae and consider a more long-term view.

When individuals are impacted by their emotions (particularly fear), the ability to achieve a bigger picture perspective becomes more difficult, even impossible. Our brains divert our actions towards dealing with the immediate 'threat', often leading to irrational decision making and behaviour. As leaders, we need to recognise that we are all prone to irrational and illogical thoughts, driven by our feelings (more commonly known as the 'Emotional Hijack'). Such thoughts will affect you and your team members from time to time, and a significant event such as

Covid-19 is a prime example of where one's decision making is likely to be affected by their emotions, rather than logic.

Effective leaders do not mask their fear. It is important to recognise and accept how you feel, rather than suppress your emotions. This ultimately means that you need to come to terms with current events if you are to be successful in leading others through a crisis.

Achieving a level of acceptance with your emotions will ultimately enable you to think more clearly and strategically, deal with significant levels of ambiguity, and display enhanced credibility, behaviours that are aligned to 'bigger picture' thinking and strong leadership.

Furthermore, until you have achieved emotional acceptance, it is extremely difficult to reach complete acceptance relating to the changes that lie ahead. In turn, this links back to how you will be perceived by your teams and others that you lead.

Dealing with Others' Emotions

Once you have come to terms with how feeling can impact your behaviours as a leader, it is important to recognise that those you are leading may not have achieved a similar level of emotional progress. In effect, this means that your role as a leader is more heavily weighted towards coaching and encouraging others on the journey towards acceptance.

It is important to note that forcing others towards a state of acceptance can have dangerous consequences. Imagine a past event when you have been reluctant to change your behaviour, mindset or emotions. Prior to achieving a minimum level of psychological acceptance, your response was likely to reflect one of resistance, frustration and even dismissiveness. Those you are leading are likely to respond in similar ways, until they are ready to accept and deal with the problem(s) at hand.

Developing your awareness of how others are feeling is a key leadership trait.

Master this aspect of your leadership armoury, and you will have a substantial advantage in gaining 'followers' and those that will remain loyal.

Being an empathic leader means putting yourself in another individual's 'shoes'. Although you may have accepted the situation far sooner than those you are leading, your willingness to adapt your leadership style, rather than criticise others' stubbornness to acceptance, are important when leading your team through a crisis.

Conclusion

Being a successful leader is a difficult enough task without the unpredictability and significant impact of external events such as Covid-19. By recognising the likely impact on your emotions and those of others, you will be better placed to make strategic decisions that are driven by logic, rather than feeling.

As a leader, your teams are looking for a role model who demonstrates integrity, consistency, strength and vulnerability. Are you ready for the challenge ahead?

Top Tips:

Be realistic

Successfully leading others through change is a key leadership activity. It is important to remember that the impact of a significant external event (such as Covid-19) can affect your ability to accept an uncertain future, just as much as those in your team.

Accepting change takes time

We all deal with and accept change in our own time. Being a leader doesn't mean that you are invincible to the pressures and emotions of difficult situations, or the need to put on a 'brave face'.

Recognise the importance and power of fear

Don't underestimate the impact of fear. This is arguably the most important emotion we feel, and until we have accepted our own level of vulnerability, it is less likely that we will successfully lead others with a positive outlook.

Think strategically

Remember that your emotions (and those of others) can lead to illogical and irrational thought patterns. If we allow them to, our behaviours will reflect our thinking and we will appear less credible as a leader. Rise above the details of the crisis and adopt a more strategic focus.

Offer support to others

Forcing others to deal with the future before they have achieved psychological acceptance is likely to result in resistance, denial and frustration. As a leader, recognise that some of your team members may not have achieved acceptance and may benefit from your support and coaching.



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