

Leadership in a time of Crises.

A challenge for the middle.

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I have just watched the impressive speech by our president Cyril Ramaphosa. He has given hope and direction to a nation, now we know the direction. I'm sure that in boardrooms across the country leaders are quickly making emergency plans. During a crisis like this we are momentarily distracted from the challenge of meeting daily targets and achieving KPI's. The reality is that no matter what our targets were, they are **changing, and changing quickly**. Unless we are in the hand sanitiser or medical supplies markets, or in some countries, toilet paper, it is unlikely that the targets we planned will still be relevant or look the same by the time we get to the end of this year.

At this time, however, it is not only the executive leadership that need to stand, it's the entire leadership component of the organisation. While a senior executive may be called upon to roll-out reactive strategies and manage shareholder expectations, this is not enough. To a large extent, the leadership in the middle will keep organisations together. The senior executive may give a vision-inspiring speech, but the mid-level line leader will be dealing with the people on a day-to-day basis. Their job is to connect their workforce to the direction. **How they respond on the ground to the challenge and the direction the organisation will take at this time, will be critical if we are going to survive in this crisis and emerge intact.**

The leaders I'm talking about are the production managers, team leaders, the cleaning supervisors, shop managers, the clinic sisters, the accountant, the HR managers or the multitude of leaders who keep the heart of our organisation functioning and who will be at the front of companies response to the Lock down. Using times like these to build great companies is a competitive issue. To turn the current crisis into an opportunity to shift culture is possible, but to do so will require more than just nice words from the top. As comforting as those nice words will be, it is what happens on a day-to-day basis in the workplace that will determine legacy.

These are some fundamental leadership Ideas worth thinking through:

1. Talk to them - Keep middle level informed.



If you want mid-management to be part of the process, make sure that they are well informed of the emerging strategy. If they are informed properly, then it stands to reason that the organisation will be as well. Meet them in small groups, take them into your confidence, really invest in their understanding of even the simplest things.



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2. Listen to them – gain insight from middle leaders



When more senior leadership take time to listen to their subordinate leaders, we build an experience of being entrusted. In most cases they are dealing with real issues on the ground and their insights can be exceptionally important. In a crisis time, we know that our brains become very focused and as leaders we feel pressure to stand up and “leadership” strongly. However, by just slowing down for a moment and taking onboard wider views, we are more likely to make the best possible long-term decision.

By doing so, to a large degree, we also close down the armchair critics amongst leadership, as everyone will know that they did not speak up when they had a chance to.

3. Involve them - Make middle leaders' part of the communication line.



We need our second-tier leaders to be seen to lead. If the only leadership voice our junior staff hear is the voice of our executive, then it begins to sound like there is only one voice in the room. Only one person who is driving a strategy. The rest of us are blindly following.

We can, however, get the rest of the leadership team involved, requesting that they do frequent status updates and communicate developments. Most importantly they need to communicate how new directions from above, need to be implemented in practice on the ground.

There are great benefits to the organisation culture when all leaders are communicating the same message.

Think about it. In practice, when on the way home, employees reflect to each other about what is going on in the company. “We were told by our manager that.,” “We were also told the same thing by our (different) manager.” “Our manager told us the same.”

Such supported messages build a level of psychological safety in the message shared. People will be less inclined to waste time and energy speculating about things they can't control and spend more time doing the things they can.

4. Coach them - Hold discussions with your leaders about how they are leading.



One of the most powerful tools the “leader of leaders” has is coaching. Sitting down with subordinate leaders and having discussions with them about how they lead. Checking in with them about how it is going with their people. Helping mid-management to think through team moral and who is onboard and coping and who is not. How effective their messages are and what their people are thinking about. It is common for people in management to assume that they are leading well, **but real leadership is a conscious act**. When senior leaders initiate these types of discussions, they also set the tone in the organisation about how important conscious or deliberate leadership is. Questions such as:

1. How are your people doing?
2. Are there any people working for you who you are worried about?
3. Tell me about the stars?
4. When you shared the “corporate message” with them, how did they respond?
5. Are you still having one-on-one chats / phone calls with your people “beyond KPI issues”



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5. Support them - Really Support them.



We must not lose sight of the stress everyone is experiencing. All employees, including leadership, fear for their families and especially their compromised loved ones. On top of that the burden of leadership is an additional stress. The mid-level leaders experience a special version of this. They are responsible for their people but are often distant from the decision making process.

Check in with your leadership team. Ask them about their fears. How it is going at home, how can I help, build the “soft” relationship – your people, especially those leading in the middle, need to know that they matter.

Great leaders are defined not by what they do when times are easy, but by how they respond when the going is tough.

6. Invest in them.



It is our honest contention, that if we want our leadership across the board to remain focused on their responsibility as leaders, as opposed to being messengers, then this is not the time to take the focus off leadership, but rather the time to find new and unique ways is to invest in them. **In a time of social distancing and limited contact, new opportunities for learning are emerging.**

It is clear, that future development will have an increasing component of blended learning in the solutions. Traditionally, online solutions were more appropriate for hard skills, but there are unique ways of communicating with leaders using online or remote platforms. This would mean that learners or leaders could access our programs without having to attend “high risk - large group, training experiences”

While we of course prefer the face-to-face experience of a classroom, in the current environment we do not have the luxury to do so. Small, sticky, impactful and intense learning experiences are however very possible. Material which leaders can access, either in their workplace or from a place of isolation.

Our solutions include video, experiential learning questions, deep reflective exercises, online feedback, and online Skype / Zoom interface with the facilitator and of course coaching, either in socially distant settings or on Skype / FaceTime.

The objective is to create learning experiences remotely, which are really engaging, which create the same experience as any well-structured learning experience. Importantly, these experiences must be able to limit the typical distractions associated with online learning, such as “the facilitator can’t see me, so I am multi-tasking or on my cell phone.”



In crazy times like 2020, mid Corona, we will need more than great visions and planning, we will need passionate and fearless implementation. It seems obvious, but in the heat of the moment it is possible that we get so caught up in the strategy that we lose sight of those we will need to turn strategy into action. However, if we look after our mid-level management through this crisis, they will look after our organisations and society.



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