

4 Behaviors That Help Leaders Manage a Crisis

By Chris Nichols, Shoma Chatterjee Hayden and Chris Trendler, Harvard Business Review

The roles and responsibilities of business leaders have dramatically changed in the past few weeks. Before COVID-19, CEOs and other executives in high-growth companies were focused on fostering innovation, driving revenue, and gaining market share. Today, many of those same leaders must make rapid decisions about controlling costs and maintaining liquidity. They may encounter unforeseen roadblocks — supply chain issues, team shortages, and operational challenges — that drastically alter the scope of their roles and priorities. All the while, they and their teams are navigating health and safety concerns, working remotely, and supporting their families through the pandemic.

This is not an easy transition. Those in charge will be tested in areas where they have not fully developed their leadership muscles, and the learning curve will be steep. They will need coaching from their own bosses and others.

Having conducted more than 21,000 leadership assessments among C-suite executives, our research team at ghSMART has learned that to move forward in a crisis, leaders need to cultivate four behaviors in themselves and their teams. They must decide with speed over precision, adapt boldly, reliably deliver, and engage for impact. The tactics below can guide you as you coach your leaders in these key behaviors.

Behavior 1: Decide with speed over precision.

The situation is changing by the day — even by the hour. The best leaders quickly process available information, rapidly determine what matters most, and make decisions with conviction. During a crisis, cognitive overload looms; information is incomplete, interests and priorities may clash, and emotions and

anxieties run high. Analysis paralysis can easily result, exacerbated by the natural tendency of matrixed organizations to build consensus. Leaders must break through the inertia to keep the organization trained on business continuity today while increasing the odds of mid- to long-term success by focusing on the few things that matter most. A simple, scalable framework for rapid decision-making is critical.

You and your leaders should:

Define priorities. Identify and communicate the three to five most important ones. Early in the crisis, those might include employee safety and care, financial liquidity, customer care, and operational continuity. Document the issues identified, ensure that leadership is fully aligned with them, and make course corrections as events unfold.

Make smart trade-offs. What conflicts might arise among the priorities you have outlined? Between the urgent and the important? Between survival today and success tomorrow? Instead of thinking about all possibilities, the best leaders use their priorities as a scoring mechanism to force trade-offs.

Name the decision makers. In your central command “war room,” establish who owns what. Empower the front line to make decisions where possible, and clearly state what needs to be escalated, by when, and to whom. Your default should be to push decisions downward, not up.

Embrace action, and don’t punish mistakes. Missteps will happen, but our research indicates that failing to act is much worse.

Behavior 2: Adapt boldly.

Strong leaders get ahead of changing circumstances. They seek input and information from diverse sources, are not afraid to admit what they don’t

know, and bring in outside expertise when needed.

You and your leaders should:

Decide what not to do. Put a hold on large initiatives and expenses, and ruthlessly prioritize. Publicize your “what not to do” choices.

Throw out yesterday’s playbook. The actions that previously drove results may no longer be relevant. The best leaders adjust quickly and develop new plans of attack.

Strengthen (or build) direct connections to the front line. In triage situations, it’s crucial to have an accurate, current picture of what is happening on the ground. Whether running a supply chain, leading a waste management company, or overseeing a pharmaceutical company, leaders must get situational assessments early and often. One way is to create a network of local leaders and influencers who can speak with deep knowledge about the impact of the crisis and the sentiments of customers, suppliers, employees, and other stakeholders. Technology can bring the parties together; think internal wikis that capture issues, solutions, innovations, and best practices. Effective leaders extend their antennae across all the ecosystems in which they operate.

Behavior 3: Reliably deliver.

The best leaders take personal ownership in a crisis, even though many challenges and factors lie outside their control. They align team focus, establish new metrics to monitor performance, and create a culture of accountability.

You and your leaders should:

Stay alert to and aligned on a daily dashboard of priorities. Leaders should succinctly document their top five priorities (on half a page or less) and ensure that those above them are in accord. Review performance against those items frequently — if not daily, perhaps weekly — and make sure that leaders share this information with direct reports. Review and up-

date your “hit list” at the end of each day or week.

Set KPIs and other metrics to measure performance. Choose three to five metrics that matter most for the week, and have leaders regularly report back on each.

Keep mind and body in fighting shape. To reliably deliver, leaders must maintain their equanimity even when others are losing their heads. Establish a routine of self-care: a healthy diet, exercise, meditation, or whatever works best for you. Stock up on energy, emotional reserves, and coping mechanisms.

Behavior 4: Engage for impact.

In times of crisis, no job is more important than taking care of your team. Effective leaders are understanding of their team’s circumstances and distractions, but they find ways to engage and motivate, clearly and thoroughly communicating important new goals and information. This point deserves extra attention, because although the COVID-19 pandemic is, of course, a health crisis, it has sparked a financial crisis as well. Your leaders need to reiterate new priorities frequently to ensure continued alignment in this time of constant and stressful change.

You and your leaders should:

Connect with individual team members. Reach out daily for a “pulse check” with least five; block out time on the calendar to do this. Relate on a personal level first, and then focus on work. One leader we know conducts 30-minute “wind down” sessions with direct reports each Friday afternoon via Zoom. People share their states of mind along with the week’s highlights and low points.

Dig deep to engage your teams. When communication breaks down and leaders act without team input, as can more easily happen when work is remote, they get subpar results.

Ask for help as needed. The best leaders know they can’t do everything themselves. Identify team

structures and assign individuals to support key efforts.

Ensure a focus on both customers and employees. To support customers: Reach out, but first do no harm. Track and document intel across your customer base. To strengthen relationships and build trust, keep the focus off yourself and explore how you *can* truly help your customers — for example, by proposing payment schedules to ease their liquidity crunch or offering pro bono or in-kind provision of services. To support employees: Lead with empathy and a focus on safety and health. Compassion goes a long way during turbulent times. Find ways to lend material aid to frontline employees who cannot work remotely, such as first responders, couriers, and trash collectors.

Collect and amplify positive messages —successes, acts of kindness, obstacles that have been overcome. Many companies are tied to a noble purpose, such as saving lives, manufacturing medical equipment, helping markets function more efficiently, or providing joy. Whatever your purpose, celebrate your daily (often unsung) heroes. Simply staying productive in these times is heroic.

Training your team for crisis leadership.

As a leader of leaders, you are navigating new and ever-changing priorities with limited time to react. Some small investments in support and coaching can go a long way toward boosting your leaders' effectiveness.

Moments of crisis reveal a great deal about the leaders below you. Once the immediate fire is under control and you have a moment to catch your breath, think about who rose to the occasion, who struggled, and why. Consider how roles will change in the post crisis world and whether your key executives are positioned for success. Last and most important, ask yourself whom you want at the table both in the current crisis and in the longed-for tomorrow when we emerge to a new normal.