

Crisis Reveals Real Leaders

Prepare To Be One

The difference between a solid performer and someone with real leadership ability often shows itself in how people cope in unexpected and challenging circumstances. While some freeze or only see obstacles, others get creative and explore every avenue to drive more positive outcomes. As the global pandemic tests all of us, how you perform will highlight your leadership potential and position you for the future.

This is a test...an actual test of leadership

Just a couple months ago, rapid change and business challenge meant things like increased competition, more meal delivery and fickle dietary trends. Today, dramatic change is an hourly affair and the challenge is literally survival for both people and businesses.

"This is certainly one of the most VUCA times we have ever seen," explains Jerry Magar, change management expert and faculty with

Southern Methodist University's Executive Education. He's referring to the business model that looks at Volatile, Unpredictable, Chaotic and Ambiguous (VUCA) change and how it impacts people and organizations.

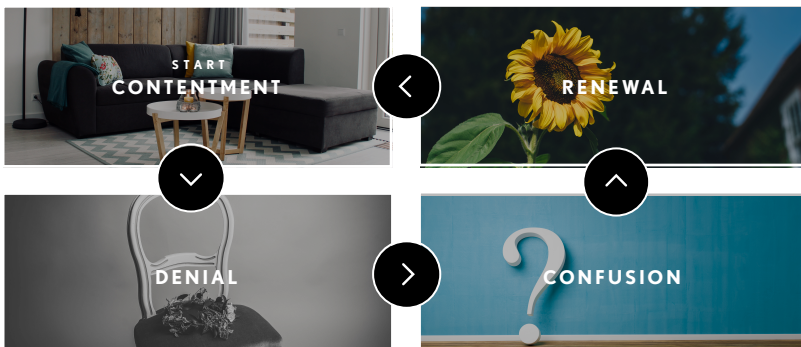
"We need to think of leadership from the inside-out and help individuals understand their personal response to the crisis before they can lead others," he says.

Human reaction to crisis

Overwhelming personal, organizational and societal change can lead to unproductive mindsets and behaviors. Magar points to recent research where more people reported high levels of concern about COVID-19 in February than mid-March in the midst of the crisis. "The closer a threat gets, the bigger the fear and the more likely we are to activate denial as a self-preservation tool," he

explains.

That's important to know on a personal level because sitting in denial stops you from stepping up to lead. Denying the scope of a problem can lead to low trust and blaming others, neither of which are hallmarks of a leader.



The need for self-diagnosis

To move past denial, candidly assess if you are actively accepting the new reality confronting you and your organization. Having feelings of denial is not wrong, but acknowledging them will help you see a bigger, clearer picture. "We need to bring consciousness to what is likely going on unconsciously right now," Magar adds. "Then we can choose more constructive and effective behaviors."

Step into the chaos

The next part of the journey is to step into the ambiguity and confusion to develop a more realistic, on-the-ground perspective. Neither false hope that everything will quickly return to normal or

hopelessness about any ability to direct the course of events accurately reflect reality. Both can lead to over-reaction and under-reaction.

"When you are willing to see with eyes wide open, you gain a more realistic understanding of any challenge," Magar adds. "The pandemic is bigger than most challenges, but there is still room to focus on those things that are unchanged like foundational values you hold as a person, team and organization."

"When others put their heads in the sand or panic, you can stand firm with both feet on the ground and look at what's possible right now for your colleagues, customers and yourself through the lens of your values," Magar advises. "With that sense of stability and purpose, you will stand out in the crowd and provide real value to your organization."

Avoid platitudes

In a crisis, many well-intentioned leaders inadvertently choose the destructive behavior of soothing staff with unrealistic reassurances. "As good-hearted as that behavior is, it's the wrong move," Magar advises. "When hollow promises don't come to pass, it destroys trust."



He explains that research with POWs from the Vietnam War found that individuals with unrealistic hopes for a release next week or next month experienced serial disappointments that led to despair. Those who confronted the brutal reality of their situation yet maintained faith that they would ultimately prevail were psychologically better equipped to endure.

As a leader, promise team members continued change and that you will rely on foundational values to inform decision making. Push those values into tangible, daily behaviors.

Look for opportunity

Breakthroughs often emerge from breakdowns that force new problem-solving approaches. "An early change management

concept was the metaphor of burning the ship so you can't go back," Magar says. "Where has your ship been burned and where can you invest new energy in new thinking?"

Look inside as well to challenge assumptions that limit creativity. Share personal examples of moving past limited thinking so others feel safe to express similar shortcomings.



Ace the test

As an individual, the choices you make right now are likely to have magnified impact on your career and even your organization. Choose to embrace this extraordinary challenge with clear-headed realism, increased and highly specific communication up, down and across the organization, and creative problem solving. You will be more likely to emerge with new skills, greater confidence and perhaps a higher profile in your organization.

This article originally appeared on the Women's Food Service Forum's website. It was written by Jean McAuley