



Cadmus Compass Series: Leading your organization in times of change

Authentic leadership in rapidly changing times

By Laurie Chidlow, Senior Associate, Cadmus

My career spans three decades during which the world faced crises that were previously unimaginable. I led a technology project during the year 2000 (Y2K) calendar change scare, was on travel with the Department of Interior during the 9/11 and anthrax attacks, lived and worked in the D.C. area during the 2002 sniper attacks, and ran an IT help desk that was in start-up mode during the COVID pandemic. As a young team lead experiencing these challenges, I felt angry that work had disrupted important parts of my life or had potentially put my life or unborn child at risk.

Later as a program director, I experienced the disruption and fear, but also recognized the need to take care of a team while meeting our obligations to the customer. The lines between work and home life blurred, and I lost a lot of sleep. Among the many lessons I learned during these experiences was the importance of relationships among team members during a crisis, and how a boss, with just a few words, could either make a terrible situation tolerable or make it feel even worse.

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When a crisis or a major unexpected change occurs, our reactions are magnified as leaders of an organization. And, in those moments, we're in the spotlight. Do you want to be someone who made people feel safe during bad times—or someone who either wasn't there or made things worse? This article provides guidance for leaders who find themselves in charge when the future and direction of the organization is extremely unpredictable. I offer strategies to manage the challenge while staying true to your core values as a leader.

“You’re not made in a crisis — you’re revealed. When you squeeze an orange — you get orange juice. When you squeeze a lemon — you get lemon juice. When a human being gets squeezed — you get what is inside — positive or negative.”

– Jack Kinder, Jr.

Leading in challenging times – tips for leaders



Be candid and transparent

Acknowledge the crisis and show your own vulnerability – share how you feel about the situation without making it all about you. Be clear about what you know and what you don't know; it's okay not to have all the answers, but it's not okay to mislead, lie, or withhold crucial information. Make clear what you need from employees and what they can expect in the coming weeks.



Be true to you

While many people revert to their alter-egos in times of stress, it's important to stay true to your existing leadership style. Honor who you are, and what your organization is about, while also giving employees what they need during a difficult and unpredictable time. Avoid pitfalls like sugar coating, making promises you can't keep, or dodging difficult conversations.



Communicate often

Stay connected with your people and increase your communications during uncertain times. Use multiple communications channels like email, chat, team check-ins, town halls, etc., especially the channels in which employees are accustomed to hearing from you. Share what is being done behind the scenes to address the crisis and thank employees for the extra efforts they are making. Open the floor to questions and take time to answer all of them. Ask your own questions to better understand how people are feeling.

If there's a lack of information being shared, employees will fill in the gap assuming the worst, causing misinformation to spread and fears to snowball.



Get on the balcony

In situations of crisis or unexpected, unplanned change, it's tempting to put your head in the sand until the dust storm passes; however, this would be a missed opportunity for you and would make recovery for your organization a lot more difficult. One trick is to stop for a moment to observe, i.e., get on the balcony. Imagine yourself looking down at the change, gain some perspective of the dynamics at play and the decisions that must be made, and then revisit your approach.



Maintain your values

Don't let the things that are important to you and your organization slide. If your organization's motto is all about providing excellent customer service – find a way to keep it up. If it's employee health, keep that at the top of your priority list. To the greatest extent possible, be predictable, keep your commitments, be yourself, but amp it up a little.



Be other-centered

Compounding the situation is when leaders themselves are also impacted and/or not driving the change. As a leader, you must manage the personal impact while being present for your staff. Employees will be looking for ways to come together as an organization and looking to their leadership for vision and direction. Focus there—and find a way to support your own personal challenges with a trusted group of peers or with your leadership.



Communicate your priorities

The strategic plan, vision, and goals of your organization may need to change given the current environment. While you may not have a new plan (yet), you do need to identify and share your priorities. You are guiding the team with your compass, even if there is no roadmap by which to follow.

Use the art of storytelling to talk about your organization's history and how it survived other difficult times.

Be decisive, but not inflexible. During unstable times, leaders still need to make decisions and do so more quickly than in the past. Your organization needs a strong leader but not necessarily a superhero. More importantly, employees need a leader who continues to provide direction and maintain operations but does so with flexibility in response to the continuously changing conditions.

Model empathy and don't outsource it. Be visible and available. Support your people. This isn't something human resources should do *for* you but do *with* you. Be sure not to ask employees to do things you aren't willing to do. For example, if you're asking people to postpone a vacation or work a holiday, make sure you are doing the same. But what does empathy really look like? It's intense, reflective listening. You may not be able to take action to solve everyone's problems, but you can listen. Offer to take a walk or have coffee with someone who looks down or may be impacted more so than other employees. Ask if there's something you can do to help.

Keep hope alive, but avoid toxic positivity. Leaders need to maintain some optimism without running around saying everything is fine and dandy. One of the worst things you can do is make promises you cannot keep like, "No one is losing their job," or "This will be over soon." It is important to think towards the future and remind yourself (and others) that opportunities are created out of even the most dire situations. The [Stockdale Paradox](#) is about having faith that you will prevail, while also confronting the reality and harshness of the current situation.



Ask for help

In a crisis you can't do it all yourself. Delegate and empower your team to take on some of the burden. Helping can be cathartic while also stimulating innovation – engage others to be part of the solution, part of the roadmap for the future. Working together through a crisis often results in stronger team bonds and is a pivotal point in relationship building.



Fail forward

When under pressure, we all make mistakes. What's important is to try, ask for feedback, and admit your mistake if a tactic doesn't work. People will understand if you are sincere and authentic.



Take care of yourself

Do the things you know you need to do. Exercise, eat protein, get enough sleep, and limit the alcohol. Socialize. Don't overwork and allow yourself to get to the point where you can barely function – this is when you're at risk for saying exactly the wrong thing, i.e., a "big yikes." What brings you joy? Do it.

**In rapidly changing times,
don't be afraid to lead.
Your people need you!**

By applying these simple tenets to your already successful leadership style, you may not rescue your team from a crisis, but you will be remembered as the one who stood alongside them through the fog and into the next chapter of your history together. And you will be revealed. My wish is that you will be known as a leader who can be trusted especially when times are tough.

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Laurie Chidlow is a senior associate at Cadmus, with 25 years of experience in federal IT management consulting. She is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and Scrum Master, demonstrating her expertise in leading complex projects and agile transformations. Her career includes significant roles at HumanTouch LLC, eGlobalTech, Hewlett-Packard Enterprise Services, Booz Allen Hamilton, and Electronic Data Systems, where she contributed to

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