



Leadership from the kitchen table – more art, less science

Much of the ‘science’ that leaders have relied on since the industrial revolution has been turned on its head, creating a moment to explore the ‘art’ by asking questions of yourself about the leader you want to be

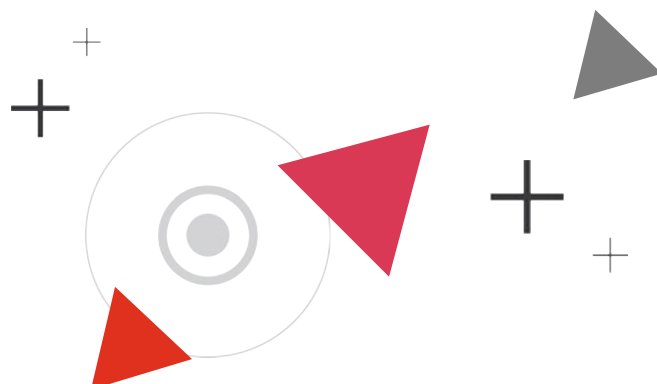
In her best-selling 2015 book, *Rising Strong*, researcher Brené Brown writes that “vulnerability is not winning or losing – it’s having the courage to show up and be seen”. Traditional images of leaders showcased the views from the corner office and perceptions of having reached the top. The message? Leaders were not visible or accessible.

The rise of COVID-19 has upended well-intentioned plans for business. Your teams are relocating to home and various worksites, and navigating the implications of physical distancing. Kitchen tables are being put to the test with families sharing spaces to work, learn and play together. Your customers are front of mind as you rethink how to engage and serve them. In amongst this new normal, a question is emerging - how will you lead today as we react, and importantly, as we rebound?

Even if you’ve had ‘good science’ in place with robust business foundations – numbers crunched with your board and the crisis response framed and communicated, chances are you feel more vulnerable than you ever have before. Are your workers diligently working from home, given the multitude of distractions in their midst? Can your business be ‘virtual’?

In ‘this’ moment, the tension for leaders between ‘how I do’ and ‘how I be’ is more in the spotlight than ever. And so we offer some thought provokers; a moment to pause in the midst of “reactions” and ask some questions, not only about today, but also how to prepare for the near and mid-term future: What impact am I having on my people? Am I visible to them in the way that is important to them? Am I being honest about what I know and don’t know, and telling them that? Am I asking their view and (most importantly) hearing what they say?

The themes of legacy, authenticity and trust emerge as useful reference points. Defined differently by many, the key is to make our own meaning from these themes and explore how to translate them to how we ‘be’ as leaders - that is the art. Importantly, this is not a ‘to do list’, it is a series of ideas to guide your reflection of how you lead yourself. By doing that you can, in turn, successfully and powerfully lead others and your organisation in this new normal we are experiencing. More than ever, employees are looking to leaders not for what they’re saying, but how they’re behaving.



Be your Legacy

Although the day-to-day demands of steering an organisation through unprecedented adversity feel challenging, this moment offers up a potent opportunity – to work out what exactly you stand for and the legacy you want to create as a result of your leadership today. If you fast forward a year, what do you want your operations managers to say about the impact your leadership style had on them? When your employees think back to the early weeks of life in isolation, what will they remember of how their boss made them feel?

This is a good time to become clearer about your own values, to put empathy and care front and centre and think about the kind of leader you want to be. To visibly 'live' and 'activate' your organisation's purpose and values - translate the rhetoric to something concrete and of meaning. Ultimately, how you lead now will serve as a blueprint for your leadership in the future – and inform the way your business chooses to rally around its people from now on. Rebecca Houghtan, Bold HR, put it perfectly when she said - this is a chance for leaders to be:

**“Honest to say what you know and don't know
Humble enough to ask your team's advice
Wise enough to listen.”**

Be Authentic

As far back as the industrial revolution, generations of leaders who energetically built hierarchies, committed to the school of leadership that said leaders are formal, remain detached from their people and have control over all their teams.

We are in the midst of the fourth industrial revolution and it's time to challenge these constructs. The weeks and months ahead will open up the opportunity to be honest with yourself - what strengths do you bring to the situation, what are your limitations and what can you do about those? How do others see you?

The key to authenticity is self-awareness. Intention needs to match the desired impact and when there is misalignment, particularly in these uncertain times, unintended consequences lead to erosion of trust in the leader. With the continual influx of new information, the goal posts are shifting daily. Rather than under-reacting or knee-jerk responses, the leader who commits to authenticity will be thoughtful in how to create transparency, show their emotions in an open and honest way, all the while reflecting the values and purpose of the organisation.

During troubled times, it's tempting to pretend we have all the answers. Now is the time to be as honest and humble as possible. Don't be afraid to say that you don't know. Ultimately, authenticity is about living your hopes – and making peace with doubt and ambiguity. When you show up as your whole self, the connections that you've built in your business become deeper. They 'safeguard' you from the need to be perfect, allow you to be vulnerable and recognised for doing your best (rather than being pulled up on your mistakes).



Be Trustworthy

Trust is vital when it's business as usual. But when so many of our ordinary routines are being rewritten, the concept of trust has taken on many different meanings. Some aspects of trust remain though - trust is earned not given, can be easily lost and hard to win back. That means showing that you are worthy of the trust of your people and customers has taken on a significance unlike any period we've lived through before. It also means you need to work out how to practically show your people that you trust them.

To be trustworthy, it's useful to understand the actions you take every day that earn, or possibly threaten, that trust. This can look like many things in practice. It's about reassuring your employees that you have a clear plan in place, and are taking the time to truly understand the dilemmas that your customers are facing. Or it could mean being honest about the decisions you can and can't make and also committing to do what you say.

When it comes to cultivating resilience and paving the way for a brighter future, trust – in yourself and other people – is an essential ingredient. It's one that can bridge the gap between today's business worries and the opportunities you could be reaping tomorrow.



Conclusion

The pace at which the world is moving means what you thought last week has now evolved into the next version of the 'new normal'. Then it was all about response, now it's about looking to the future - how do we rebuild? Whatever phase you and your business are in, you can write your own story about who you want to be as a leader. Do this by using the challenges ahead to become the leader you want to be, adopt the attributes of those you've admired and, most importantly, realise your own potential by taking a stand for what you truly believe. Leading in uncertainty isn't about relying on a tired playbook. It's about reframing problems as opportunities and using the strengths you have to define the future you want for you, your team, your customers and your organisation.

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