

Leadership during a crisis

By retired AFP Commander, Grant Edwards



Leaders have an important role to play during a crisis. Only by focusing on the human elements of leadership can you build trust and co-operation.

There is little doubt that we are presently in uncertain times. Across our country – across the world – the COVID-19 pandemic is bringing unprecedented challenges for everyone. The unknown, fluctuating and challenging environment we are operating in can make it very difficult for leaders to undertake their role appropriately.

In times of crisis, many leaders take on a role of invincibility, becoming task oriented and highly focused, often expecting the same of their teams. In this climate, leaders must be ultra-flexible, rapidly adapt and make decisions based on little certainty. The challenge for leaders is being able to combine the many facets of achieving objectives as well as managing staff and managing themselves.

Intuitively, we may want to take control and stay focused on 'getting the job done' yet effective leadership during a crisis is all about the people. Now is the time to lead with transparency and consistency, take action to create stability and continue as best we can to deliver quality services, despite the level of global disruption. Self-confidence also plays a significant role in leadership during difficult times. You can lessen the impact of chaos on those you lead by paying attention to communication, providing clarity of vision, and maintaining caring relationships. Here are some key steps that can be taken to provide effective leadership during a crisis:

Clearly communicate the facts

First tier leaders need to be proactive in finding out what the facts are, particularly in relation to policies about things like self-isolation and how this is practiced in reality. If you're confused so is everyone else. Leaders need to know what advice to give their people and if your organisation isn't giving you this clarity, jump up and down until you get it. Make sure that you are clear, consistent and to the point. Trying to sugar coat the message is only doing your people a disservice and will

likely further deteriorate trust - once they see that the situation is worse than you made it out to be. Have the courage to be frank about the challenges you are facing but be equally clear and confident about the measures you are putting in place to support your staff. Ensure that you are communicating frequently, since the situation is changing daily your frequency of communication must match this.

Understand your staffs' stressors

Of paramount significance is to appeal to the hearts and minds of your people, emphasising that their health and wellbeing is of utmost importance. Make sure you understand what your staff are struggling with – are their families ok? Do they have elderly parents? Are they themselves healthy? As you navigate this unique and ever-evolving period, it's imperative to take the time to process your own as well as your team's thoughts and emotions. Let your people know who they can reach out to if they are struggling. For example, many employers have Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) where they can access psychologists remotely. If you haven't heard from your EAP provider during the outbreak, reach out to them directly and ask what services they are offering during this crisis.

Say less, listen more

If we accept the principle that most organisations struggle to listen and respond to their people's concerns, then a pandemic will only amplify this challenge. The best advice I was ever given when transitioning into leadership was, you have two ears and one mouth – so "shut up and listen".

Take this time to strengthen interpersonal relationships with your teams and listen to the concerns, suggestions and recommendations of your people, and most important of all, don't be dismissive! Become a listening learner and create a different type of operating system to interact and communicate within and external to your organisation.

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Practice self-care

You and your team may feel compelled to fight the fear of the coronavirus by pushing yourself harder, taking on additional work whilst trying to keep up with your regular responsibilities at home. This reaction is normal and admirable – and to some extent, everyone needs to step up. It's equally important, however, to invest in and encourage self-care. Only then can we be ready for what the next phase brings.

Leadership is not easy at the best of times. In challenging times it's even more important to focus on the human element of leadership. Accept that worries and concerns are normal in a crisis, then choose to focus on how you are going to manage your own resilience and mental health. Be bold about lifestyle changes and be proud of yourself for being sensible. Feel good about contributing to keeping yourself, your colleagues, your family and your community as healthy and safe as possible.

About the author:

Grant Edwards is a retired high-ranking AFP Commander with over 34 years of service protecting vulnerable people around the world. Formerly, an elite athlete and strongman competitor and entrant to the World's Strongest Man competition, Grant is now a sought-after public speaker, author, and passionate mental health advocate helping to reshape the police force's approach to mental health. He's recently joined Aspect Group as the head of Aspect Frontline, a program specifically created to support the mental health of Police and First Responders.

Supporting frontline staff

There is no denying that frontline staff will be some of the hardest hit. In addition to providing care and support, they also confront the same stresses as the general public – concern for loved ones, loss of income as family members are laid off from service jobs, and trying to care for children who are scared and bored and suddenly home all the time. Leaders must remember that frontline staff are not only dealing with their own emotions and the emotions of friends and family members they are also confronted with a wide range of public emotional responses to this pandemic. That is a lot of emotion! Given that the advice concerning the COVID-19 crisis is that it's likely to be long-term the propensity for physical and psychological burnout of our frontline staff including, Medical staff, Paramedics, Police, Fire and Rescue is high. In the coming months as the cases of corona virus decline we will have to shift our focus to supporting the health and wellbeing of our frontline staff who are currently bearing the brunt of this crisis.

In the meantime, let your staff know that you appreciate them and acknowledge that they are facing a sustained period of additional work and personal stress. People want their leader to project compassion and an understanding of how the situation is for those on the frontline. It's also helpful to appeal to collective values and a collective history, emphasising the community at large rather than individual self-interest. To boost morale appeal to your team's collective sense of pride in their work and caring nature, for example, letting them know that their hard work and exceptional skills are making a positive difference to the lives of vulnerable Australians every day.

Find out more

 [Tip sheet 14 – Staying Mentally Healthy While Working From Home](#)

 [Tip sheet 15 – Supporting Your Team Remotely](#)