



# Strengthening your Leadership as Fear and Exhilaration Collide

2020

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We are in the early stages of emerging from the alternative universe of the COVID-19 Crisis. It began just a few months ago, with an emotional and intellectual shock: the reality that this pandemic was shutting down, or at least, radically changing our world.

COVID-19 has been a global emergency—one that no one would like to repeat. Still, it's actually understandable that some leaders may secretly be longing for more of the crisis inspired workplace norms. Norms that, just a few months ago, seemed impossible to acquire so quickly.

## **Evolving to Endure**

Organizations large and small found themselves in survival mode. The forged relationships across business silos. A new, more comprehensive, holistic perspective of business operations emerged as leaders grasped strategies outside of their respective functions or business units.

This included an abundance of communication and mega transparency which became an on-the-job crash course in crisis management, interpersonal connectivity and honing of problem-solving skills.

It has been draining *and* exhausting. Yet, in a way, it has been an unexpected gift.

## **Persistence and Gratitude**

Through conversations with dozens of executives who shared their experiences through the pandemic, I've learned what an intense period of growth and development the past few months have been! We zoomed in on COVID-19 leadership survival techniques – from sharing the numbers and business projections to getting a 360-degree perspective into our colleagues' lives, and often, into their hearts. We conversed like never before with our teams, our peers and our customers.

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We often heard our colleagues on the other end of the conversation shushing a child, moving an object from their working space, speaking over birds chirping outdoors or ambient noise as a family member or neighbor made an appearance in the background. On the other end of the line, we patiently waited for calm in their personal environment and listened for the pause when we could re-engage with them in conversation. We embraced patience, surprising even ourselves.

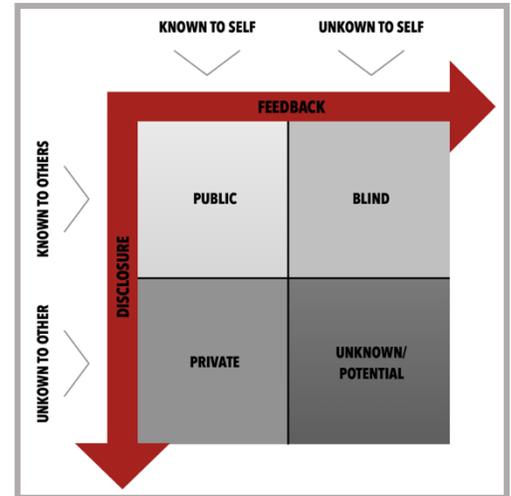
Working through the uncertainty of COVID-19 has cultivated new levels of listening, expressing vulnerability and compassion, and experiencing camaraderie like never before. And we did this, quite successfully, even though we were communicating primarily through speakers and screens.

We also built a new level of business acumen as we joined business survival or crisis task forces formally and informally. We connected with new and existing colleagues more intimately, building new levels of trust.

Even more importantly, we have been given the opportunity to know ourselves like never before if we choose to invest the time to reflect, recount and contrast the old and the new. We may discover something about ourselves as we emerge from the infrequently visited fourth quadrant of the Johari Window of self-awareness: “the unknown.”

It is universal and human to wonder how we will react to situations that we have never faced before in our lives.

Now we know.



## The Postpartum of Crisis

Some leaders have told us that there were few surprises in how their teams presented themselves during this crisis. Direct reports behaved, primarily, true to form, with strengths—and weaknesses—amplified. Bosses, once distrusting and micromanaging, showed up as stronger, more empathic leaders. Maybe, it was because these bosses couldn't be as hands-on day to day, so as they moved away from micromanagement, they were able to recognize the true strengths and capabilities of their teams for the first time.

For many, a new level of exhilaration has emerged. Whether you're leading at Amazon, Disney, Expedia or Norton Lilly, or your business has thrived through the pandemic or required immediate focus on cash preservation and transformative survival strategies, the energy adrenaline at work has rarely been higher.

Yet, what is emerging today for many leaders seems to be an energy deflation, as they anticipate reorienting themselves to their responsibilities in a post COVID-19 landscape.

This deflation may show up as a sense of sadness, grieving for the unique environment and a reluctance to let go of the intellectual stimulation, or creating interpersonal connections with other working warriors. The fear of losing what has been felt and experienced seems, at times, to be putting us on the verge of paralysis. And we recognize that this heightened state of working is not sustainable in the long run.

## The Opportunity to Re-Orient

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On the other hand, this period of processing and reorientation can be viewed as the time to raise our awareness of the changes triggered by the crisis, and review our own identities as leaders. It's a time to assess our assumptions and beliefs of what constitutes a healthy, thriving team and corporate culture in the context of a healthy and functioning world.

As we begin to think beyond this moment in time, what are the things (new insights, connections and behaviors) that we as leaders want to take with us and what are those things (old ideas, habits, assumptions and behaviors, etc.) that we need to leave behind?

More specifically, as you transit into a post-pandemic world and an entirely new business landscape, how are *you* intentionally bringing your learning to this time of reorientation? How will you be asking team members and colleagues to put positive crisis-cultivated beliefs and practices on display as we move back into the jobs for which we were initially hired?

In today's world we need much more than just a plan A and B. We're quickly learning this as we consider the logistics of working together again. The old paradigm of 15 people sitting around a conference table for a meeting doesn't fit our current environment. What's the ideal physical setting – fewer people in the same space on any given day and possibly in parallel, a larger alternative space that allows teams to collaborate together while six feet apart? And will it make business sense to go back to the pre COVID-19 office structure?

During the past several months we have all experienced an abundance of communication. A new sense of mission and purpose. We found a true north, a common antagonist in COVID-19, even if it was purely focused on survival and getting our people to the light at the end of the tunnel. Across families, across industries, across companies and countries, the rallying cry, expressed or implied, was "We're in this together." Our victory, in some ways, was learning to use crisis as a continuum through which we could bring our teams together for a common purpose. And now, having done that, it can become our legacy: something to leave for those who follow, directly linking the impact we make on the world through what and how we do business.

But does that impact serve a greater purpose? Does it help create a better world? Has that rallying cry ever been so resonant across your organization? And will it be again, after we settle into our functions, business units—the roles on the business cards that few of us have touched for weeks or months?

## **The Hurdle of Reunion**

Have you been burdened with feelings of sadness or pain at the thought that you were one of the "fortunate" ones who have been able to carry on, uninterrupted and unfurloughed at your company? Or, are you a leader who was sidelined by necessity and, even though you fully grasped the fiduciary responsibility behind that reality, feel secretly disappointed that your talents and your loyalty were deemed temporarily expendable?

Overtly, we are overjoyed at the prospect of having a choice to reunite, rather than having solitude continued to be imposed on us. Yet, the fact remains, whether our roles were active or suspended throughout the pandemic, none of us are coming back exactly as we were before it began.

If this touches any truth in you, ask yourself:

Will you long for the intimate human connection – the one in which trust is quickly cultivated? Will you miss the real time transparency on the state of the business, impacting short and long term strategy; as well as the amplified rallying cry linked to an unflinching sense of personal and organizational purpose?

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Will there be a void where there was once clarity of mission, drive and super expressed common objectives? Will you seek those things that got you out of bed over the past weeks, and brought you to your work table?

If so, what can you do today and tomorrow to retain and even increase those connections and sense of mission?

Over the past few months—and now more than ever—we are reminded of two quotes that we often share with clients.

Dr. Maya Angelou's words, “We are more alike my friend, than unlike.”

And Victor Frankl’s reference to Nietzsche when reflecting on his own survival: “He who has a ‘why’ to live for can bear with almost any ‘how.’”

COVID-19 will one day be a moment in time, in the past and forever stamped as a health and economic crisis. In order to move forward, it’s imperative that we pause to truly understand the lessons learned. What are the beliefs, and behaviors that you will leave behind; the ones that no longer serve you and others in our evolving work environments?

And more importantly, what are the COVID-19 beliefs, values, behaviors and leadership practices that you want and need to bring to your organization today and tomorrow?

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