

Authentic Leadership in a Time of Crisis

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Abstract:

The pandemic impacted life as we knew it and continues to be an international humanitarian crisis as various strains of the disease emerge. While national disasters, emergencies and other catastrophies often bring out the best in some, for others these situations magnify existing character flaws. For every tale of bravery and heroism, there were also stories of selfishness, callousness, and ruthlessness. Among leaders, the pandemic exposed what we have always known - it is easy to be principled and righteous when things are going well. Authentic leadership involves caring about the people you lead, being humble, ethical, honest and open.

Authentic Leadership in a Time of Crisis

The pandemic impacted life as we knew it and continues to be an international humanitarian crisis as various strains of the disease emerge. Covid-19 brought uncertainty, fear, and instability with quarantines and shelter-in-place orders that continue to impact lives worldwide. At the height of the pandemic, the media shared stories of heroism among healthcare workers abound in the face of shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) and limited medical supplies and equipment. However, for every tale of bravery and heroism, there were also stories of selfishness, callousness, and ruthlessness. Stories of people hoarding medical equipment and supplies, up-charging desperately needed PPE, and so on and so forth. Simply stated, times of duress often bring out both the best and worst that people have to offer. While some people saw an opportunity to help others for the greater good, others saw the situation as an opportunity for personal gain, often at others' expense.

The phenomenon described above is not exclusive to the general population; there were also examples of compromised principles at an organizational level. Consider the number of mission statements, mottos, and monologues given by senior administrators across various domains and disciplines espousing the importance of being high-character, high-moral individuals, and strong, ethical leaders and organizations. Yet, when situations become challenging, these words are just that – words; vacant and hollow. The popular news was filled with examples of Chief executive officers, Presidents of Companies and Colleges/Universities, and other senior leader-type positions refusing to take pay cuts (and in many cases giving themselves raises) while laying off dozens, if not hundreds of staff and workers. Moreover, there are examples of companies that applied for government assistance to retain employees during difficult economic times, yet did not use the money as intended and still let workers go. Rahm Emanuel, a politician who served as advisor to President Clinton, Chief of Staff to President Obama, member of the House of Representatives, and Mayor of Chicago, has a well-worn quote, trotted out during times of national disaster; "Never allow a good crisis go to waste. It's an opportunity to do the things you once thought were impossible." Emanuel was referring to allowing the crisis at hand to propel preparations to avoid similar ones in the future. For example, referring to the COVID-19 crisis, Emanuel wrote an opinion piece in the Washington Post about building better infrastructures to handle the pandemics of the future.

While Emanuel's goals seem laudable, not all leaders interpreted his quote to mean using the fact of a crisis to grow stronger and pull together for future benefit. They saw it as an opportunity to do things within their company that they couldn't ethically do during more normal circumstances.



Companies conducted layoffs and “voluntary” early retirements to eliminate higher salaried, older employees that contributed to the company’s growth for decades. They slashed retirement contributions and COLA raises while keeping country club memberships, company jets and a full complement of perks and privileges. When asked about layoffs, restructurings and salary cuts, they pointed to the Global Pandemic as proof that their actions were necessary, justified, and the only way forward. Simply stated, it was an easy way to circumvent the system to do things that under ordinary circumstances would not be allowed because of existing agreements and contracts.

While it would be naïve to not recognize the severe financial challenges posed by the pandemic, true leadership comes in your team believing that you are ‘all in this together’, avoiding a top-down style of leadership, empowering others, and creating an environment of open communication (Forster & Patlas, 2020). One of the hardest hit industries was travel, and layoffs, cuts, and changes were a necessity for most companies. However, it is not the “what,” but the “how” that separates a true leader in crisis. Hilton CEO, Christopher Nassetta, agreed to forego his salary for the remainder of 2020, and cut the executive team salary by 50% before announcing the furloughs for his staff, and who would retain their medical benefits during furlough. Nassetta was certainly not alone; there were multiple news outlets tracking which company executives took pay cuts during the pandemic. Post-pandemic, companies are looking to recruit and retain talent to grow, the companies not on this list, who cut employees, are finding themselves at a disadvantage in recruiting new talent.

In some ways, the pandemic exposed what we have always known - it is easy to be principled and righteous when things are going well. However, the true character of an individual is often revealed under times of stress or crisis. The stress of the pandemic, in some ways, revealed, how thinly tethered we are to our values, character, and personal ethics, especially among our leaders. Many individuals, who under ordinary circumstances, consider themselves ethical and high-character persons, when faced with an unprecedented scenario, compromise their dignity and character out of fear, panic, and self-preservation. Others, may seek to capitalize on the situation for personal gain.

True leadership is more than sayings, statements, and feigned collaboration. Consider the following questions from Admiral William McRaven:

When you're up against a deadline or facing a tough challenge, do the people you work with know instinctively that they'll find you in the thick of the fight--pitching in, working long hours, and doing whatever is necessary to succeed? Or have you suggested somehow that "rank has its privileges," and that you're exempted from the least-enjoyable but essential tasks?

These questions were especially relevant during the climate of the pandemic as many senior administrators, executives who considered themselves “leaders,” spared themselves the discomfort of salary decreases, layoffs or other related perks because of their lofty titles and instead passed them on to front line workers. Holding a position of power may be good for the ego, but it's important that employees know that the leader is not above shortcomings. So, when it comes to working for a leader that can't admit when he's wrong and may even lie to cover up a

mistake, people are less motivated to see them as credible leaders to follow. Research suggests that when we refuse to take ownership of problems or apologize when we know we are wrong, we increase our self-esteem and confidence. Perhaps this doubling down on something even when we know it's wrong somehow makes us feel better. It takes wisdom and some courage to understand that communicating with transparency is a vital antidote to this risk of demoralizing employees or staff. Communicating with transparency means providing honest and accurate descriptions of reality — being as clear as humanly possible about what you know, what you anticipate, and what it means for people in a consistent and adaptive manner. Leaders must constantly update their understanding of prior probabilities, even daily, deliberately using strategies to elicit new information and learn rapidly as events unfold and new information comes to light.

Authentic leadership involves caring about the people you lead, being humble, ethical, honest and open. Authentic leaders have followers who believe in them and feel they can trust their words and actions. Leaders build authenticity with years of transparent communication and positive interactions with their followers. When a crisis comes, the relationship allows the company to weather it. When leaders are inauthentic, a crisis magnifies the distrust, fear, and bad-will that already have existed within the organization. Make no mistake, in a crisis, the authentic leader has to make high impact quick decisions and take difficult actions. However, their followers trust them because of their built-up stock of positive past interactions. A leader using the crisis as an opportunity to pursue their own agenda, misses the opportunity to pull the team together in pursuit of a higher purpose. When followers know you don't care about them as individuals during difficult and challenging times, they may do what you want in the short term, but you won't have their hearts and souls for the long run.

Leadership in an uncertain and complex, fast-moving crisis means making oneself available to feel what it is like to be in another's shoes — to lead with empathy. While what a leader has to do during a crisis may be unpopular and difficult, it is HOW they do it that will reveal whether they are authentic leaders.

References

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