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True leadership: how to shine in dark times



The enormous human and economic impact of the Coronavirus pandemic is already being felt worldwide.

To fight the contagion, a growing number of countries are taking strong measures that would have seemed unimaginable a short while ago. Severe restrictions to freedom of movement, prohibition of public gatherings and forced closings of public-facing businesses have suddenly created a harsh new reality and uncertain future.

As a business leader, how can you navigate this scary and uncharted territory?
The stakes are high.

- **For many companies in the hardest-hit sectors, the decisions they make in the following days and weeks could determine whether they survive at all.**

And yet, much of the conversation taking place right now in boardrooms everywhere is focused externally, on keeping up with what's going on "out there": the number of infections and fatalities, the latest government measures, supply chain disruptions, etc.

However, we recommend taking a different perspective: Coronavirus is an opportunity calling for leadership. True corporate, institutional and personal leadership. The key question is "how do I choose to respond to this situation?".

No matter how long this crisis will last, it is undeniable that, from now on, our society will be very different in the way we as human beings relate to each other and the world around us (our way of communicating, moving/travelling, collaborating...), which will have a tremendous impact on the shape of entire business sectors and society at large.



A true leader does not react

We tell our clients, “Leadership is about context and choices”. A good leader seeks to understand the context and chooses how to respond.

**⋮ A good leader does not react, a good leader responds
⋮ from a place of perspective and calmness.**

Even under the most adverse set of circumstances, a true leader analyses the situation thoroughly and derives his/her own conclusions to respond with courage, fairness and balance.

Under any given circumstances, we can respond from a place of fear or from a place of love. Fear allows us to effectively defend ourselves from threats (perceived or real), and in many situations is a great ally of ours, that throughout human history has kept us and our ancestors safe and alive. However, the fear mechanism, as effective as it is, has its defaults. When fear kicks in, the creative part of our brain shuts down. The release of adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormone) limits our ability to see the broader picture and we end up responding only to a fragment of the challenge, with no clear sense of long-term consequences or wider interdependencies. Many leaders around the world are unconsciously responding from a place of fear towards their stakeholders and teams, often as an auto-response mechanism.

Great leaders, in contrast, are able to respond to any stimulus with love and with an aspiration to contribute to the common good, seeing in each situation a way of making things better. Love is a word that typically generates unease or even cynicism in the business world. However, leading and living from a place of love, in its broadest sense, is what allows us to become the best version of ourselves and also bring out the best in others. Responding from and with love is what creates great and extraordinary leadership.



A true leader has a protagonist mindset

The natural reaction in difficult situations is to blame the environment: “how unfair”, “why is this happening to me?”, “the government is not handling the situation well”, “how come the healthcare system is not prepared”, and the list goes on. Though we often cannot avoid thoughts such as these popping into our head, dwelling on them just brings the darkness in. They deal with things that we generally have little or no influence on. Focusing on them feeds a feeling of victimhood, and the perception that “there is nothing I can do”.

In contrast, a protagonist mindset allows a true leader to address difficult situations as opportunities. Extreme situations, such as the one we are living right now, has the power to reinforce the sense of alignment in teams and organizations.

⋮ **It is an opportunity for teams to align and connect around a common purpose and create commitment to act with a focus on what can be done.**

A true leader fosters innovation

The risk, particularly in large corporations, is that a crisis like this can become an excellent excuse for postponement. And truth be said, there are many things that cannot be done in the same way as before the crisis. Nonetheless there are several things and activities that can still be done. Some of these may be new initiatives designed to take advantage of opportunities created by the crisis (yes, these do exist!). Some may be projects that had been planned for a later date, which can now be brought forward. There may even be an opportunity to do what you are already doing, but in new and different ways.

Challenging situations provide a good opportunity to tap into our creativity. Most of the top management we work with is too immersed in urgent and operational activities and does not find enough time to reflect. This pattern is incredibly risky as today's changing context requires the capacity to innovate continuously in order to challenge existing solutions and develop new ones.

⋮ **Creative thinking is needed more than ever before.**

A true leader is naturally agile

The Coronavirus is challenging us to embrace a completely new leadership paradigm where traditional, large organizations have to reinvent themselves as agile corporations, anticipating change by rethinking the way they work, in service of the company's ability to achieve business results.

⋮ **Beyond digitalization, the biggest challenge for organizations is the change of mindset.**

Leaders must be able to make a value-adding reading of the context, they need to understand their people's fears and motivations, and then try to engage them by building awareness and alignment across the organization to respond to the context in new and courageous ways.

The best way of doing so, is by walking the talk, role-modelling the desired mindset and behaviors, creating an environment that leverages the collective intelligence where people can work towards a shared goal. Keeping the big picture in mind and encouraging constructive challenge, and becoming a living organism rather than a mechanical structure; this is what truly agile leadership brings to the table.



Conclusion

Leaders' response to the Coronavirus has an immense impact on what becomes possible to best face this situation. It's all about context and choices. As Henry David Thoreau so wisely put it: "It is not what you look at that matters, it's what you see".

Specifically, there are four attitudes and their associated behaviors that unfold the characteristics of true leadership:

- Choose your response with perspective and calmness
- Become a protagonist, not a victim
- Foster innovation, promote creative thinking
- Embrace agility, create bold leaders

Authors

Right before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, we got together at one of our company's weekly town hall meetings. The purpose was to reflect on the situation created by the expansion of COVID-19 and align as a team on how to best respond to it. It was amazing to see how our conversation naturally developed in a completely different direction than the ongoing narrative in the media, and focused directly and entirely on our purpose as a company, and the opportunity we saw in living our values. What is it that ultimately moves us individually and as a team at WALK? What is it that we really stand for? How can we exercise the "true leadership" that we help our clients develop? This article reflects the highlights of our conversation. It has been written with the contribution of all of our team members.

About WALK

WALK is a global consultancy focused on producing meaningful business transformation through leadership development and cultural change. Combining a team of strategy consultants, organizational psychologists, and leadership facilitators, WALK works with large organizations to ensure effective execution of their business initiatives. We do so by aligning people with strategy and empowering them to embrace a new leadership paradigm for the digital age. WALK's solutions include Leadership Development Programs, Alignment of Executive Teams, Organizational Engagement at Scale, Design and Deployment of a Digital Culture, and Implementation of New Ways of Working.

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