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CRISIS LEADERSHIP IN REAL TIME:

8 Pandemic Best Practices

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So, it's here. We now have a pandemic crisis in front of us that is disrupting global markets, businesses, and every sector of our lives, and will, we are promised, do much more damage over an indeterminate amount of time. Life, as we have known it, is changing.

So much is not in our control, it is mind-boggling to try to figure out what is and what is not open to our agency. Yet a fundamental rule of crisis management is to exercise as much control as possible over events that unfold — using every tool available to us to bring about a positive outcome.

In fact, how we respond to the COVID-19 crisis says more about who we are, and how we lead, than it does about the crisis itself.

So, it's probably a good time to begin recasting [more generic crisis management rules](#) into a specific set of rules for our current challenge. Now that the current Coronavirus crisis is officially a pandemic, we surely need to develop ever more advanced thinking on how to deal with it.

Following is a new set of 8 pandemic 'best practices,' for your consideration.

1. **Short circuiting denial** always has to come first in any list of mine on crisis management. As humans, when faced with an unpleasant or unbearable circumstance, our first instinct is almost always to go into denial. "This can not be happening. Or if it is happening, it's not going to happen to me. Or if it does happen to me, it won't be that bad. Or if it is that bad, no one will notice. Or if they do notice, the damage won't be permanent..." Etc. etc. etc. And while we are busy ducking and denying, any potential crisis can unfold unchecked, because it's only when we admit the circumstances that we can start to address and fix them.

We can clearly see how this has happened, around the world, and here in the United States.

Withholding testing is classic denial behavior — it surely does not help us address the crisis faster or better, and in fact dooms us to not doing everything we can to address it early.

So, world, this — to quote the CDC — could be bad. Relying on hope to get you through just might work, but

you abdicate any agency or power you may have to fight it. Don't. Face the probabilities, and start to try to turn them to your favor through actions you can take.

- 2. But, don't lose your head.** The effective leader in war or peace knows how to stay calm and focused, quell obsessive rumination or panic, and turn toward positive action. Luckily in the current pandemic there are lots of precautions to take, and communications to make. Whether you run a company, college or university, nonprofit, a family, or another unit, others will look to you for how to behave. Calm rationality, tireless action, and crystal clear communications are the keys.

My philosophy is that in an incipient crisis, do everything you humanly can to guard against bad effects, and then once you've done that, stop worrying. You will know that you have done all you can – and when there is something else to do, do that immediately, too.

So, for example, a month ago, you might have predicted some issues that might occur as the crisis worsened, and ordered lots of hand sanitizer, disposable gloves, zinc lozenges, vitamins, probiotics, NIOSH N95 and above face masks, as well as flashlights, whistles, extra

water, and storable food (we like dried pasta and jars of sauce.)

Today, some of those things might no longer be available...but keep checking, they may come in and out of availability.

Today you can do what you can do today — you can make sure your car is filled with gas, continually. You can take precautions about how you will handle illness, and make sure your loved ones, or the older person in your apartment building, are as well-prepared as possible. Think and plan ahead as best you can, and then... stop worrying. Know that you have done all you can do, keep on doing it, and then, well, as they say in AA, give it to God.

One real test of a leader is how they prepare for possible crisis, and handle it when it comes, without losing perspective or their cool.

- 3. Stay flexible and innovate.** Just as viruses morph and adapt, so can you. Grit, resilience, adaptability, out-of-the-box thinking are all buzzwords of the decade, so take this opportunity to live them. Given that most of us will be far closer to home for far longer than ever before, we will all be using our ingenuity to work better remotely, fight social isolation, and engage with one another in novel but satisfying ways. And we will

need all of our grit to take care of ourselves and one another.

4. **Create your virtual war room now.**

Almost every crisis of a certain magnitude calls for a war room – where your chosen crisis teams can congregate, plan, and meticulously organize crisis response. And now is the time to create your infrastructure, if you have not already. In this case, it should be virtual, cyber-protected, and accessible from a number of different platforms and locations.

It is time to dust off your generic crisis plans, tailor them to the situation today as you know it, and plan for every kind of contingency you can. Some organizations actually brought in science fiction writers after 9-11, to help them envision scenarios they could not envision themselves. I'm not suggesting that, but I am suggesting a fulsome list of scenarios that addresses almost every probability.

5. **Communicate clearly, and kindly.**

Already almost every institution has distributed early communications on how they plan to handle the crisis, with many more to come. Colleges and universities are sending students home, with plans to conduct classes remotely, the NCAA Basketball tournament will be played to no live audiences, only to the cameras, borders are being closed, and

travel suspended. My team has been working nonstop with clients engaged in setting strategy and then communicating it wisely to their constituencies.

But kindness must rule. Dorms are being kept open for students from abroad or who cannot afford to go home. Airlines are waiving change fees. The number of sick days is being expanded by some forward-thinking employers.

And we must all be so vigilant against racism and other ugliness that can crop up in such times. This is not reality TV where it is cool to act out abhorrently. This is real, and the onus on each of us is to insist upon integrity.

6. **Become the trusted source of information in the crisis.**

False, fake and misinformation are already spreading like wildfire over the internet in normal times... so it should be no surprise that the most outlandish, flat-earth theories about the pandemic are also out there already. And they are bound to multiply. My favorite least-favorite is that the virus is being carried on the wings of 5g telecommunications networks. Really? Next, we'll be saying that the zombies are propagating the virus. But in a world where television feels real, and any story shown on huge screens in our

living rooms can seem closer than a far away reality, truth is bound to be muddled. If organizations can become the trusted voices in their fields, the go-to resources for solid information, they will be doing a service to themselves, as well as to the commonweal. And my prediction is that they will recover in a far stronger reputational position than those who stay silent.

7. Don't limit your humanity: think of others, not only yourself.

The plague years were not necessarily characterized by selflessness or compassion. When individuals' very existence is threatened, they tend to turn more inward, more tribal, more xenophobic, and less compassionate than ever. If you can, perhaps it's time to break the "MeFirst" reflex this time. Just envision a combination of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis standing over you, urging you on to more humanitarian action, even when it may disadvantage you. Now, I'm not suggesting that you not take care of yourselves and your family, rather that you expand – radically expand – your definition of family to the person down the hall, across town, or around the world. As we in New York found out during 9-11, even acts of evil can bring normal people together to help and support one another. At this most divisive time in the world, perhaps this kind of pandemic crisis just possibly

could help bring us closer together — at least virtually.

8. Science can save us. The real truth is that science can save us. In the face of a pandemic, who stands between us and possible mass illness? The scientists who create vaccines, antivirals, other treatments, protective covering, and strategies to limit transmissibility. And the same is true with global warming, cancer, and so many other potential extinction-level events. It is real science and scientists, physicians, biotech, and pharmaceutical companies who become the heroes of this crisis journey. I believe we each have the obligation to know the difference between fake and real science, and to support the serious scientific organizations in this country and world that can save us. We do need to protect them from fables of dubious origin, so that, in the end, their work can protect us.

Be safe out there.

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