

CRISIS LEADERSHIP 101

By Alan J. Kaplan, Kaplan Partners



entitled to a little downtime, but with a burgeoning crisis — whether COVID-19 or any other — leaders need to be on the front lines, carrying the flag, reassuring employees and making critical decisions. When times are tough, people want their leader to exude confidence and be visible out front.

2. Leaders communicate

In good times, I believe that a leader cannot over communicate to the troops. There's an old saying that "people don't want to be managed; they want to be led." As all good leaders know, communication is a vital part of the role. In times when things are less than ideal, communicating with your team takes on even greater importance. Knowing what is happening, that there is a plan and a path forward, has a powerful effect on people. In the absence of information, you get speculation. So, give the news to your people straight up, good or bad, and as quickly and as often as you can.

3. Leaders must be adaptable

Even the best-developed plans may go off the rails in good times. Market forces, competitive dynamics, insufficient execution, managerial shortcomings and more may make a seemingly good strategy look flawed in the rear-view mirror. Leaders recognize when something is not working, and can adjust on the fly, then craft a new approach. This is not always easy, but highly effective leaders are flexible and resilient.

In the current crisis, things are changing so quickly — literally day by day and sometimes more often — that even the most seasoned leaders may struggle to adjust to new realities. While your teams will look to you as the leader for guidance and "what's next," in the absence of a new plan, the communication and candor of the leader become paramount.

I don't claim to be an expert in crisis management. However, since founding our firm 26 years ago, I've met thousands of C-Suite leaders and recruited over 100 Presidents/CEOs. So, I have observed a few things along the way. Here are three critical elements of leadership that I view as particularly relevant in these challenging times.

1. Leaders lead from the front

I've observed many leaders who revel in their title as President or CEO or general manager. They aspire to such lofty roles and then sit in an oversized office waiting for staff to come to them. Some of these "leaders" assume that because of their title, by definition, they have all the answers. No one actually does.

As the latest crisis was unfolding, I was made aware of a handful of CEOs still planning to attend a conference which — while providing genuinely useful content — also involved a large amount of free time at a posh resort. Now, we're all

The authenticity of a leader sets the tone of an organization, and being out front and honest with your people will go a long way toward keeping them in the fold and moving forward. These are indeed trying times for everyone at every level, and surely for leaders of enterprises large and small. We will get through this — not without impacts in still unknown ways — and the fundamentals of crisis leadership will be critical for leading your teams into the future. 



ALAN J. KAPLAN IS THE FOUNDER AND CEO OF KAPLAN PARTNERS. HE CAN BE REACHED AT 610.642.5644 OR ALAN@KAPLANPARTNERS.COM.

KAPLAN PARTNERS IS AN ASSOCIATE MEMBER OF PACB.