

Leading in the times of Covid-19

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You must have very often heard that leading during VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) times is challenging. Whatever was termed as VUCA even four months ago seems like child's play in the current context. Today, organizations are not faced with issues like absenteeism or lack of engagement but issues like people just cannot come in to work or have to be super engaged with multiple things, are stressed because they have been confined for too long. When the pandemic diminishes, we will need to live with the new normal and we will still be left with the gap that was caused by the sudden disruption. I have been thinking of leadership and engaging with leaders for over a decade. By leader, here I mean a person who has formally been designated as a leader and is responsible for getting work done with the support of others. Whether you are a leader of five or ten people at the junior level or a leader of a large corporation, you may find some of these ideas useful.

Create psychological safety. In times of distress and disruption, leaders' first task is to create a sense of psychological safety: The pandemic, outbreak of disease leads people feel fear and anger and in some cases, disgust. This fear leads to lack of safety. Anger brings to fore our helplessness and disgust make us prejudiced. Unsafe, pessimistic, prejudiced mindsets are likely to make people distrustful of each other. Leaders need to help people feel safe and trusted. Safety can be created by being transparent and encouraging the same in others. Being transparent would help quell rumours and build trust. As a leader, when you share what is happening, you also shape the narrative people build about the current and the future. **Be emotionally intelligent.** As a leader you cannot be a walking billboard of your feelings, neither can you be stoic and not show any of your feelings. You need to show that you feel and possess agility. This means you are able to feel fully and not be led by your feelings, you can unhook and choose an action that serves the situation in the best possible way. Undoubtedly we are wired to feel because it is at the heart of survival. We feel threatened at this time so our feelings are tipped to take over. However, we also know that humans have the hardware to use feelings as "first information" and then use the cause of the feeling to choose the response. Research has shown that the hardware (only gets into action when we allow ourselves the time to pause and then respond. Thus this is the time for leaders to model greater emotional intelligence. Feel fully and then let the feeling help you choose options to respond from. **Recognise you have power.** Despite negative connotations of power and the ill-effects of unsafe wielding of power, leaders need to be comfortable with the concept of power. Power emerges from the fact that you impact others feelings. Power is relational, it is not possible to be powerful if you are alone. Power can be a resource used to protect others. To be powerful is to impact others feelings in such a way that they feel safe and taken care of. At times of crisis, as a leader, you need to show that you are taking responsibility and are not going to leave the boat in the middle of the river. Being powerful/responsible does not mean knowing it all. It also means being responsible and saying "I do not know, I am at a loss but I am here with you to make sure we get to the other side". As a leader you have positional power and you can use your position and your network to identify resources to find solutions. **Resist the projection of being the superhero or saviour.** Leaders are not supermen or women, they are not people with special endowments, they are human. Others feel safe when they believe that a superman/woman will somehow take care of them and thus will project (a psychological process of displacing feelings onto a different person) the same on to the leader. Leaders egos feel bloated and they take on much much more than they can handle (this is the complimentary psychological process of introjection in action. In this the person who is projected on, tends to swallows it and believes that the projection belongs to them and not to the person who projected it on to them) and in the process burn themselves out and also create dependencies and feeling of inadequacies in the team. A better solution is to be transparent, listen deeply and share truthfully. Empower others and get everyone involved in finding the path through the maze the crisis has created for us. **Deeply empathise.** Recognise that people are multitasking-they are tripling as home managers (cleaning,

provisioning, cooking), running the school for kids, and the infirmary for the old. In addition, some of them are fearful that maybe their job may not exist in the future, the customer will withdraw the contract, or a loved one could get infected. Such overworked and fearful teammates are likely to make more mistakes, fall ill (just plain old illness), experience burnout, depression, and may just be wanting to parachute out. As a leader are you asking about their well-being? You could share your own sense of being overwhelmed without seeming like you are losing it? You could model self-care, taking time out, being unhooked for specified times, being transparent about what else you are doing on the home front to keep things afloat. You could structure work in such a way that you show that you understand that all of us are going through unprecedented experiences. For example, you could have at least two or three members in charge of something that is critical. **Different strokes for different folks:** Some people remain calm under pressure others are more excitable. Some like to process their thoughts internally and some like to do it externally. Some like lot of details and others like a high level picture. Some are likely to be open to these experiences and others are going to want to be like ostriches. Some will get into a mental frame where they want to somehow avoid the worst that is likely to come while others will get into a mental frame where they want to see what can be done to get the best of the situation. Individual differences are even more important for us to attend to at times like now because any of our strategies to calm people, motivate them and engage them will need to be suited to address individual differences. For example, you need to give details and also the overall picture. You need to recognize the fear that some people are likely to feel and others who feel excited to be in the middle of the history. As a leader you need to honour both feelings. Recognise that some of them will respond like you and others will be the opposite of you. As a leader it helps recognise that we tend to like people who are like us and believe that is the best and right way to deal with the situation. As leaders, subconsciously we may get drawn to people who are like us and listen to them more, and thus leave out the others. This is the time to remember that there are many ways in which we are wired and all of those ways are likely to have similar outcomes while the routes might be different. Times of crisis are when leaders really need to be mindful of individual differences and be more and accepting of them. **Recognise work also meets our social needs:** People come to work also because it helps them relate to other people without the enmeshedness that often comes with relationships in a family. Thus as leaders you could think of using the same technology you use for work to connect each other in light hearted ways. Maybe have a virtual meeting room where people can chat while they sip the beverage of their choice. Maybe there can be a meeting room to share jokes, poems written out of frustration, doodles drawn while listening to someone, work of children, personal insights and feelings. There can be no best ways to structure such interactions. This is one place that you as the leader do not have to structure. It may be best to involve your team to come up with ideas. You could have different teammates lead these initiatives by rotation. When I think about all of that I have said, maybe it is more of the same what I would say to any leader. However, in times like this I think leaders need to be more mindful, empathetic, and caring. As a leader you need to listen deeply. Your ears need to substitute for your eyes.

What your eyes could have picked up because your team was in front of you now your ears need to pick up. Leaders need to be sensitive to cues for the unsaid conveyed in the virtual and written world. *“The problem in public life is learning to overcome terror; the problem in married life is learning to overcome boredom.”*

— *Gabriel García Márquez, Love in the Time of Cholera* The problem in the time of pandemic is learning to overcome terror and boredom and recognizing that your struggle is human and universal. *The author Prof. Neharika Vohra is professor of organizational behaviour area at IIM Ahmedabad*