

Crisis Navigation for Leaders

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During the COVID-19 crisis, leaders are faced with many organizational issues as well as personal challenges. How can they make the best decisions, stay healthy, and lead when dealing with so many uncontrollable factors? Here are six steps that can help leaders navigate during these stressful times.

GET CENTERED—We are wired to react to psychological or physical danger in self-protective ways. When a crisis triggers our most primitive brain (the amygdala), we usually are reactive rather than thoughtful.

Suggestion: Use techniques such as slow breathing, exercise, meditation, or journaling to ensure that your decisions are initiated by your brain's thinking part (neocortex) rather than the fear-driven amygdala. Avoid decision-making if anxious, tired, or angry.

GET RESOURCES—A crisis, by definition, is a situation where our typical skills, bandwidth, and/or experiences are insufficient. Consequently, we need help getting things done, access to knowledge or expertise we don't have, and support—mental and emotional.

Suggestion: Complement your resources with those who bring needed expertise. Identify and utilize employees who can reliably accomplish critical tasks. Reach out to your personal community of support or your EAP to maintain leadership resilience.

GET INTENTIONAL—Despite COVID-19's uncertainty, you can control your attitude and how you show up as a leader. You decide the values that will guide you and the leadership you will demonstrate. Recognize that you will sometimes get off course, but with a clear path, you can course-correct.

Suggestion: Ask yourself three questions: 1) A year from now, when I look back, what will make me proud? 2) What traits do I want to demonstrate? 3) What leadership values do I want to embody? Then find an accountability partner and regularly ask for feedback.

GET STRATEGIC—All of us have various strengths that can be effectively utilized or over-used. We also have weaknesses that can appear when we feel anxious. Self-knowledge can go a long way in avoiding these classic leadership mistakes.

Suggestion: Ask yourself and a trusted advisor/partner, what personal strengths can I count on? What strength am I likely to over-use? What am I not as good at when stressed? Who can help me fill that gap?

GET INFORMATION—A crisis highlights our brains' desire for certainty—making the drive for information strong. Unfortunately, while information during a crisis can be spotty or inaccurate, an organization's need for information can be at an all-time high.

Suggestion: Look for facts when gathering data, rather than relying on data that confirms your opinions or fears. Be intentional about your organizational communication plan; without information, people will fill in the gaps with their own fears. Be strategic about what information is shared and with whom.

GET SELF-CARE: With many people depending on you, it is normal to deprioritize self-care. It can feel unproductive, even selfish. Realize that maintaining your health, resilience, and endurance is critical to effective leadership.

Suggestion: Make eating healthy foods, exercising, watching alcohol intake, and getting quality sleep a leadership priority. Take quick breaks to breathe slowly and deeply, meditate or listen to music, go for a walk or run, or watch a funny video.