



How True Leaders Communicate in a Crisis



By Rachael Noyes , INSEAD Knowledge

Reflect while taking action.

With nearly [a fifth of the globe's population](#) on lockdown, many of us have replaced our morning routine of getting ready for the day and then taking public transportation or the car to the office with rolling out of bed and onto the sofa to start work. Those routines and rituals that take us from home to work have changed, as has the content of many executives' jobs. Operations professionals, for example, normally ensure products move through the line smoothly, but they may now be faced with the prospect of closing several factories while trying to keep another one open. The shape of work itself has been disrupted. And uncertainty about what the future holds is unprecedented.

“Of course people are really uncertain about the future,” INSEAD Senior Affiliated Professor of Organisational Behaviour [Declan Fitzsimons](#) recently explained. “These three things together, disruption of routines, disruption of

the shape of the job and a disruption in terms of ‘will I have a job’ or ‘what will that look like’ is causing an enormous amount of unease in organisations.”

Addressing leaders in a time of crisis, Fitzsimons recently presented his expertise at [an INSEAD webinar](#), part of the [Navigating the Turbulence of COVID-19](#) series. He spoke about his practice and vision as to how leaders can communicate with their teams through this period of utter disruption.

Before reaching out to others, leaders must first understand themselves. Managers need to remember their training and check in with themselves about how they are doing before launching into action.

An important aspect of this, according to Fitzsimons, is how, in our overwhelming desire to communicate in a broadcast fashion – blasting out emails to a community or a lone voice from on high speaking to a firm – true leaders will establish a receiving style of communication. Creating a (now mostly virtual) space for others to share their feelings and anxieties about the current situation doesn’t mean that the team must be mired in gloom, but uncomfortable emotions need to be addressed so they don’t [fester or come out sideways](#).

Three questions

When it comes to leading during a crisis, our first question should be “How am I responding to this?” Fitzsimons explained that although this sounds like an easy question, for many it is an unfamiliar one.

What's happening at the moment, to us and to others?

For Fitzsimons, this question is intrinsic to the discipline of leadership in a crisis “to continually update our sense of what’s going on with me, what’s happening to me and what’s happening to the people around me”. The bigger, external questions are still there but the immediate, closer to home questions are essential for leaders now.

One leadership practice that he espouses is a morning diagnostic to find out what is going on in the self. Within the first half-hour of the day, ask yourself: “Am I more edgy than usual? Am I withdrawing from the people I love and care about?” Withdrawing for a bit may be a kind of self-care, but do keep in

mind that it could turn into something not at all helpful.

“Leadership in a crisis is noticing at what point we are busy for the sake of being busy,” he explained. Some managers respond to the anxieties and the emotions evoked by disruption by taking on more work. We don’t want to feel the anxiety about the coronavirus crisis or insecurity around our work, so it’s not uncommon to avoid it. Working more may be an acceptable response because work has to continue, but leaders need some awareness of their motivation – is it for work or for avoidance? Fine judgement is required in a crisis.

The critical idea behind leading in a crisis is to develop an awareness that what we are doing – like overwork – may not be about the work, but about something else entirely, like that anxiety or other uncomfortable emotions.

How do I need to show up differently?

Communication in this disrupted time has changed utterly. And many questions that executives have concern exactly that. “How do I communicate? How do I talk to people?” But for Fitzsimons, the question is “How do I show up?”

Attention is a precious resource and should be used wisely at this moment. Leaders, in general, don’t have the luxury to take time to reflect. “We have to reflect while we take action,” he explained. “So it's **not an either/or** situation, it's both.” Leaders have to self-monitor at the same time they check on others. “If I block out my own feelings and emotions, I'm not going to be able to see them in other people.”

What should I actually do?

Once you know how you are and how you can lend your attention, what’s next? Create a space in which the people on your team feel that they can share their uncomfortable feelings or anxieties. This shouldn’t overwhelm you or the group, but it needs to be aired. For this, video conferencing is indispensable at this point.

Allow time for a check-in with the team with proper attention: “If you're going to have a meeting for an hour, maybe it should be longer because you might need to give the first 20 minutes for space. As a leader, you can go last,” Fitzsimons recommended.

Also, take into account what you know about your team members' situations in this unusual period. Some may live with an infant, others with their parents or others on their own. With this information, directing your attention towards those who may need it is easier. Consider the manager of a recently divorced man, whom Fitzsimons used as an example of someone who tends to overwork: "If I'm not aware of my own emotional life, I have less chance of being able to see and notice the weak signals that tell me that my colleague is in trouble."

If your meeting includes a fair bit of catastrophizing – which may be tempting for some – ask people to notice it and move on. "Give it some oxygen but not too much. If you give it too much oxygen, you're in trouble. If you don't give it any oxygen, then it will come out in other ways."

Vulnerability

Webinar participants were concerned about showing vulnerability to their bosses or direct reports. "This theme often comes up and I'm really fascinated by it," Fitzsimons said. "For me, I think of a metaphor which may not be helpful for everybody: Stay on the horse." When you are horseback riding, a sense of control is mandatory; you can remain vulnerable as long as you are clear that you are definitely in charge.

"You do need to be the best learner in the room," he said. "Vulnerability should be connected to an ethos of learning. How that links to leadership is, I'm the lead learner in the room. I don't know [more] than everyone in the room, I'm surrounded by experts who know what they're doing in their areas. I can't possibly know what they do. If we think that leadership is knowing everything and knowing more than other people do, we're really in trouble."

The concept of leaders as the lead learners "creates a culture in which vulnerability is the currency of leadership. If you're not vulnerable, it means you're not learning and if you're not learning, what are you doing in the room? Because in complexity and in crises, being the fastest learner is going to help you recover fastest from the crisis," he explained.

Fitzsimons reminded the webinar participants that leading in this disruptive time is not a race to be won, nor a KPI to be achieved. "Be gentle on yourself. You're not going to get this right all the time."

INSEAD's webinar series "Navigating the Turbulence of COVID-19" features expert inputs on key issues surrounding pandemic control and current countermeasures around the world. Join [here](#).

During the webinar, Fitzsimons referred to Jennifer Petriglieri's [Survival Series for Couples That Work at Home](#) for those who are confined at home with their partners.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/how-true-leaders-communicate-crisis>

About the author(s)

Rachael Noyes is a Senior Editor at INSEAD Knowledge.

About the series

Covid-19

The consequences of Covid-19 for public health, the global economy and the future of work cannot be overestimated. No one knows where exactly we will go from here, but INSEAD's thought leaders — both faculty and their close collaborators in the practitioner and entrepreneurship communities — possess informed perspectives that will help us not just weather the crisis, but hopefully emerge from it stronger than ever.

Download the free Knowledge App

