

During A Time Of Uncertainty, Are You An Accessible Leader?

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If there ever was an obvious leadership opportunity, it's the current pandemic. Nearly two months ago, as COVID-19 started to spread more rapidly in the U.S., we started being flooded with emails from our employers and business partners. They initially told us what they had done to adapt in light of the coronavirus. These messages were great and important. They comforted us in a time of fear by informing us of plans in place to address the current situation: We were assured things were "under control."

Now, we have a new challenge ahead. Many states are starting to reopen. While some people may be ready to re-engage with the world, others may be still be terrified or anxious for new reasons.

In times of uncertainty, the led look to their leaders as pillars of strength. They hold leaders to an almost inhuman standard and expect that they are capable of navigating any challenge well – especially when that challenge is outside the normal course of business. As a result, leaders are afraid to stumble or fail. They need to control the message and decide what to tell employees that will be useful but also comforting. Which means they are playing defense: They are acting in fear themselves, which can undermine the message of stability they aim to provide.

The message is not personal enough; it's not tactical. How can it be?



Are you listening to your employees before telling them what you are going to do?

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Listen to inform, using tactical transparency

What differentiates the leaders we revere is how well they speak to us. That's an opportunity that many leaders might not be taking advantage of: listening to associates, being accessible, and engaging in dialogues that can provide a level of comfort through tactical transparency. What's tactical transparency mean? It means being very clear, directive and supportive. That way, as many questions and concerns as possible are raised and addressed at both a macro level and a very personal, tangible one.

Engage face-to-face

We have the communications infrastructure to support this approach: Video has become the norm these days. Consider having small "classroom" sessions over videoconference. Getting 20-30 people together to discuss questions and concerns is a great approach – as long as you have a culture where people are comfortable asking those questions. If the culture doesn't support it, this is a time to change that. Seed questions that people are afraid to ask as the starting point. Or start with some brief statements that show the audience that this isn't business as usual, so we aren't going to treat it that way.

In times of uncertainty, like these, trust becomes an even more crucial component of leadership. Finding ways, like small meetings, to connect with employees facilitates trust through honesty and authenticity. Believe it or not, the led get much more comfort from feeling seen and heard than spoken to.

There are also neurochemical benefits: When we facilitate these sessions and build trust through tactical transparency, we're boosting levels of oxytocin, the neurochemical associated with emotional bonding, among everyone involved. Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist and professor at Claremont Graduate University, has shown oxytocin also helps to reduce cortisol, the stress hormone that keeps us going after an initial spike of energy from adrenaline.

Connecting on a more personal level allows us to be seen and gives us the chance to be heard. In the end, isn't that what we want?



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As CEO of Magpie Insights, I help organizations develop strategies that are rooted in the capabilities of their people, improving the likelihood of successful change and execution. The results: higher profits, improved organizational efficiency, and greater employee engagement and retention. As a coach, I help executives become more empathetic managers and improve their adaptability and resilience as leaders. Prior to developing the Magpie approach to empathetic management, I spent nearly 20 years as a management and

strategy consultant, entrepreneur, and financial services executive, while studying motivation through the lenses of psychology, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, behavioral economics, leadership and negotiations.