

Leading Through Uncertain Times

We are facing times of true uncertainty, and that means leaders, their organizations, and the people within them are faced with enormous challenges. Most people have a hard time dealing with unknowns, and this can be exacerbated by a relative lack of information, or, as is the case in the current situation, an abundance of information that causes fear and concern. People have questions, and leaders find they don't have all the answers. As more information becomes available, leaders must realize that their decisions are now much more than just business decisions. What leaders say and do next can ultimately have significant implications for their people and affect individual lives and careers.

We know that during uncertain times, people primarily worry for their own health and safety, and the health and safety of their loved ones. They also worry about their job security and ability to support their family. On top of that, people are bombarded with media reports of an impending economic downturn, and all the potential ripple effects this might have in the long run. Add on the many questions people have about what the current situation means for new ways of working in the organization going forward, and implications for teams, customers, and products and services, and it becomes clear that uncertainty can cause major disruptions to your business.

The Leadership Dilemma

Leaders care about their people and want to do what's right—for their people and the company. Unfortunately, sometimes what is best for employees doesn't align with what's strategically best for the company and customers, and this conflict can create a real, recurring dilemma. Leaders usually understand the business rationale for many tough decisions, but they can have a hard time justifying those decisions and answering resulting questions.

There's no easy way to handle this situation. Leaders need to act with compassion and integrity, first and foremost. Our tips below can help provide a compass for leading during uncertain times:

Leadership Strategies

1

Recognize You'll Have to Make Tough Decisions.

There's nothing easy about delivering bad news. It's also very difficult to withhold information from employees when you have information you can't share. As a leader, you genuinely care about your people, and you know their lives will be affected by what you do or do not say.

This is an enormous responsibility. Try to prepare yourself psychologically, physically, and emotionally to face tough decisions. Use strategies that work for you, whether it's talking to your spouse, making sure you get enough sleep, exercising on a regular basis, mediating, etc.

2

Be Prepared.

Anticipate the tough questions employees are likely to ask. If you know what employees are probably thinking, it's less likely you'll be caught off guard by their questions. List out the questions and try to think of how you can respond to them with integrity and compassion in each situation.

3

Communicate with purpose.

There are going to be answers that you don't have, and people will watch you even more closely than usual to try and find out if you have additional information you are not sharing with the team. Always be clear about what information you can and cannot share. If announcements about important decisions are already scheduled, be sure to keep to those dates, and make a point to not speak about the topics beforehand. If you share information before those dates, you are being unfair to everyone who's not hearing what you say, and you may also create opportunities for unhelpful gossip.

4

Ensure Up-to-Date Information.

In times of uncertainty, what is OK to talk about may change day-to-day, or even hour-to-hour. Make sure you stay on top of developments and reconfirm your understanding of what can and should be shared with your teams. Make sure your team or organization is set up to communicate information quickly and reliably.

5

Identify 'What-ifs'.

When your team members ask questions, you might not be able to give them the specific information they want. However, that doesn't mean you shouldn't say anything. Think through all of the different possible scenarios that could happen and identify their implications. Then, when someone asks you a question, you'll be able to share the possibilities for how that situation will be handled, and as a team discuss the implications for each of those possibilities.

6

Show Compassion.

It's OK to let the person know that you care about them and their concerns. You need to demonstrate your understanding of their worry and show how you'd like to support them. While you're talking with them, you need to focus more on their needs than your own.

7

Get the Support You Need.

It is difficult to keep people engaged and motivated during these times of uncertainty. You may sometimes find it difficult to be a good role-model because of your own emotions, concerns, and personal situation. Find a person who can act as a confidant and motivator, so that you can truly be present with and supportive of your people.

The overall long-term impact of the ongoing changes isn't clear, and the feelings of uncertainty and fear are not likely to disappear soon. Using the leadership strategies above will make it easier to navigate through these times in a caring, compassionate, and focused way.

About ALULA®

ALULA® is a management consultancy founded in 1993 as Continuous Learning Group, Inc. (CLG) to assist Fortune 500 companies with improving strategy execution. Today, ALULA exists to inspire and accelerate the extraordinary growth of individuals and exceptional performance of business. ALULA employs proven principles of behavioral science to help organizations more efficiently and effectively implement change, enhance leadership capability, and improve performance.

