

Importance of Decisive Leadership and Clear Direction During the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers the importance of strong leadership during critical incidents and crisis, including a decisive approach that seeks to understand problems through exploring data and stakeholder feedback, but ultimately leadership's willingness to take ownership, and finally action. This work also sets forth organizational benefits of establishing clear direction, as well as the downfall of failing to provide support.

Keywords: crisis, leadership, decision-making, problem-solving, communication, planning.

Assessing and providing organizational direction amid a broad-based crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic requires strong leadership, proactive thinking, collaboration, and courage. Disaster demands of leaders an inclusive yet decisive approach, one that seeks to understand the problems through exploring data and stakeholder concerns. Leadership also is ultimately about a willingness to take ownership, responsibility, and action. Particularly in times of trouble, people need and expect a clear direction from their leaders.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Critical incidents demand, firstly, an assessment of the current state, including identification and comprehension of the most pressing problems,

as well as those issues anticipated shortly. In such cases, leaders must focus teams, groups, and individuals, on determining the organization's immediate gaps while simultaneously considering what's potentially going to happen next? In the absence of doing all that, people and organizations drift. However, effective leadership does not stop there; it continues to press for relevant data, including the opinions of key stakeholders, all while keeping an eye on the health, safety, and welfare of their people. Importantly, effective leadership also provides clear objectives that are understood and actionable.

Along with clear goals, one should strive for simplicity in general. Something to notice about leaders that execute, they speak simply and directly. They talk plainly and forthrightly. They know how to simplify things so others can understand them, evaluate them, and act on them (Bossidy & Charan, 2002).

Anticipation and clear communication reflect a real-world approach to problem-solving, which aids leaders in wading through information to communicate specific actions that must be taken immediately or in the near term, thus instilling a feeling of empowerment among the people working to solve the problems. After all, an organization is nothing more than a structured group of individuals, each ideally working toward a shared vision or a problem held in common. Conversely, the unknown and the ambiguous are frightening for most, with such uncertainty breeding a variety of unproductive human emotions and reactions, including anxiety, fear, and confusion. Economic markets and people from all walks of life—and perhaps especially employees, typically do not respond favorably to work environments lacking well-defined parameters, absolutes, and objectives. Vagueness, therefore, is an enemy to organizational effectiveness and emotional stability, overcome only by strong leadership behaviors, including, but not limited to, providing clarity of direction and establishing expectations— both of which are critically important, particularly during times of stress. Not knowing what will happen, combined with indecisive leadership, is a recipe for stakeholder doubt, insecurity, and panic. Therefore, effective leadership, especially in times of crisis, requires clear and consistent communication, confidence, anticipation, and proactive, data-driven decision-making, all without losing touch with people, including one's superiors. Mike Armstrong, the former CEO of AT&T, said it best:

In the end, [leaders] have to have the guts to make a decision. You will never have all of the data you need. You will never be able to sort through all of the alternatives and threats and risks that are in front of you. You get the right information and couple it with the right instincts...to make a decision (Neff & Citrin, 2001).

Sadly, in some ways, leadership at most levels has failed during the COVID-19 crisis to provide definitive guidance, probably owing to political forces, and the desire not to make any big mistakes. However, the result has created conflicting advice, finger pointing, and an unwillingness to decisively recommend next steps. Instead, in many instances, national leaders continue to defer to the states, and the states, are "passing the buck" to local governments, forcing them to make essential determinations for their local schools and communities. For example, within the context of the COVID-19 issue, much is yet unknown about the disease. And, what guidance that has been provided by governmental agencies at the national and state level is inconsistent or, at best unenforceable.

Further, much of the direction offered to schools, churches, and businesses, as well as other organizations, is entirely impractical, if not altogether impossible, to implement. Thus, school leaders and Governing School Boards are left to interpret for themselves what steps must be taken to get their operations up and running in advance of the new academic year. Unavoidably, any return to customary school activity requires a thorough assessment of anticipated problems, some of which are quantifiable, with others more challenging to measure, layered against risk tolerance. All of the above must be successfully considered and managed, notwithstanding the influences of local, state, and national politics.

CONCLUSIONS

If there is anything leaders should remember from the current global pandemic is that the world does not pause or provide a pass for those found ill-prepared, including schools. In truth, if schools are unprepared to meet the demands caused by COVID-19, they and their students will be left behind. After all, life moves on, with the pace usually quickening during periods of crisis. The current calamity, if nothing else, has reinforced this fact. In short, influential and effective leaders move the work and people forward, past pressing problems, and beyond all the worry, uncertainty, and fears. Especially in times of trouble, leaders must demonstrate decisiveness, determination, and confidence within whatever direction or decisions they choose. That's leading.

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