

Real Leaders Are Forged in Crisis

by [Nancy Koehn](#)

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We are living through a global health crisis with no modern-day precedent. What governments, corporations, hospitals, schools, and other organizations need now, more than ever, are what the writer David Foster Wallace called “real leaders” — people who “help us overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness and fear and get us to do better, harder things than we can get ourselves to do on our own.”

I have studied courageous crisis leaders for two decades, and through this work, I know that real leaders are not born; the ability to help others triumph over adversity is not written into their genetic code. They are, instead, made. They are forged *in* crisis. Leaders become “real” when they practice a few key behaviors that gird and inspire people through difficult times. As Covid-19 tears its way through country after country, town after town, neighborhood after neighborhood, here’s what we can learn from how some of history’s iconic leaders acted in the face of great uncertainty, real danger, and collective fear.

Acknowledge people's fears, then encourage resolve.

Most of us know the famous lines of U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural address in the midst of the Great Depression: "The only thing we have to fear is...fear itself." He followed that by pointing to the nation's strengths in meeting the crisis: "This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously. There are many ways in which it can be helped, but it can never be helped merely by talking about it. We must act and act quickly."

Less than a decade later, as the United Kingdom stared down the Nazi onslaught in the Second World War, Prime Minister Winston Churchill encouraged his people to keep the faith: "We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Neither the sudden shock of battle, nor the long-drawn trials of vigilance and exertion will wear us down. Give us the tools, and we will finish the job."

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In the business world, consider examples like Katharine Graham, leader of *The Washington Post* in 1971, who moved through her own fears by vowing that the free press would not cave to government demands to stop publication of the Pentagon Papers. She then helped her editors and journalists do the same, as the newspaper began printing a series of revelatory articles and excerpts about U.S. involvement

in Vietnam. Or think about Ed Stack, CEO of Dick's Sporting Goods, who, when confronted with the extraordinary increase in school shootings in the United States, persuaded his board and management team to risk the ire of gun rights' advocates and a significant decline in revenue by discontinuing the sale of firearms at its namesake stores.

Your job, as a leader today, is to provide both brutal honesty — a clear accounting of the challenges your locality, company, non-profit, or team faces — and credible hope that collectively you and your people have the resources needed to meet the threats you face each day: determination, solidarity, strength, shared purpose, humanity, kindness, and resilience. Recognize that most of your employees are anxious about their health, their finances, and, in many cases, their jobs. Explain that you understand how scary things feel, but that you can work together to weather this storm.

If you're looking for in-the-moment role models, turn to Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York or Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, both whom are offering de facto masterclasses in crisis leadership: explaining the gravity of the situations their states are facing, outlining the resources being deployed to battle the coronavirus, and calling their constituents to act from their stronger, more compassionate selves.

Inspire your followers with the words of the Reverend William Sloane Coffin: "Courage is a crucial virtue. Will we be scared to death, or scared to life?"

Give people a role and purpose.

Real leaders charge individuals to act in service of the broader community. They give people jobs to do.

During the U.S. Civil War, for example, President Abraham Lincoln exhorted and ordered men of Northern states to fight; as the civil rights movement gathered momentum in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr, asked his followers to sit in, march, and otherwise protest racial discrimination. In his first inaugural, FDR told his countrymen to keep their money in the banks as an important way of averting a banking crisis; later, his wife, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, encouraged American women to work in the nation's factories, while their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons went to battle in the Second World War.

On a smaller scale, we can look to Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton's leadership. When, in 1915, his expedition ship *The Endurance* became stuck in the ice and he realized that he and his crew would have to wait out the brutal winter on a floating iceberg, he insisted that each man maintain his ordinary duties: sailors swabbed decks; scientists collected specimens; others were assigned to hunt for meat. He knew that daily routines and tasks, including manual labor, would help establish order and thus ground his men in uncertain time that was filled with danger.

In the current crisis, leaders must act in a similar fashion — giving their followers direction and reminding them why their work matters. In organizations providing essential services, such as government agencies, hospitals, pharmacies, grocery stores, food and healthcare equipment manufacturing plants, news outlets, scientific labs, non-profits serving the poor and many others — this *raison d'etre* will be immediately apparent. But it's still vitally important to emphasize the key role that each person involved in the operation plays. And, in other businesses, the new mission can be as simple as helping all stakeholders navigate this crisis as effectively as possible. For us at HBS and HBR, that means teaching and publishing lessons like these. At a Nebraska truck stop, which Karen Gettert Shoemaker's family has run for years, she and others are focusing on keeping the truckers who provide essential goods moving across the country, offering them a welcoming pitstop on their journeys.

When in doubt about what you or your team can do during this pandemic, prioritize helping others — even in the smallest ways. When I was going through a particularly difficult period in my life, I heard a sermon by Peter Gomes, who was then minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, that reminded me of the transformative power of giving. “When in the midst of [outer] turmoil and calamity you seek the inner strength that helps you not only to endure but to overcome, do not look for what you can get,” he told his audience. “Look rather for what you have been given, and for what you can give.” When we help others, even in the smallest ways, our fear ebbs and our focus sharpens.

Emphasize experimentation and learning.

To successfully navigate crisis, strong leaders quickly get comfortable with widespread ambiguity and chaos, recognizing that they do not have a crisis playbook. Instead, they commit themselves and their followers to navigating point-to-point through the turbulence, adjusting, improvising, and re-directing as the situation changes and new information emerges. Courageous leaders also understand they will make mistakes along the way and they will have to pivot quickly as this happens, *learning as they go*.

During his long, dark winter on *The Endurance*, Shackleton constantly responded to changing circumstances. When his ship got stuck, he shifted his mission from exploration to survival. When the ship was no longer habitable, he instructed his men to build a camp on the ice. When he finally got his team to an uninhabited island, where he knew there was no chance of outside rescue, he and a small group of his men, sailed one of the three lifeboats 800 miles to another island, where he knew he could find help. Four months and three thwarted rescue attempts later, Shackleton finally arrived back to the original island to the rest of his team. They were all alive, and he brought them home.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis in late 1962, President John F. Kennedy, demonstrated the same agility; at each juncture of the standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union; he ordered his small team of advisers to work to expand his options rather than committing to and blindly following one course of action.

Emphasize to your followers that you expect everyone — individually and as a group — to learn their way forward, to experiment with new ways of operating, to expect the occasional failure and then quickly pivot to a new tack, to figure out the future together. In fact, this crisis — including the social distancing measures it has required and the widespread economic downturn following closely in its wake — presents a powerful opportunity for organizations and teams of all kinds to better understand their strengths and weaknesses, what really engages and motivates their people, and their own reason for being.

Tend to energy and emotion — yours and theirs.

Crises take a toll on all of us. They are exhausting and can lead to burnout. For many, who lose loved ones, they are devastating. Thus, one critical function of leadership during intense turbulence is to keep your finger on the pulse of your people's energy and emotions and respond as needed.

When tending to energy and emotion, you must begin with yourself. As a high-ranking executive commented before the pandemic, "If you as the leader flag, everything flags. Everything else, including your organization's mission, becomes vulnerable." So, in these trying times, take good care of yourself, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Know when you are capable of being focused and productive, and when you need a break. Eat well, get enough sleep, exercise regularly, spend time outdoors (six feet away from strangers), connect in person with your partner, kids, or animals and virtually with friends and extended family, plan for at least two device-free periods per day (of a minimum of 30 minutes each), and rely on other practices that help you get grounded.

Next, model the behavior you want to see. This means using your body language, words, and actions to signal we are moving forward with conviction and courage. It means regularly taking the (figurative) temperature of your team — How are they doing? How are they feeling? What do they need? — so that its members begin to do the same for each other. Indicate that you are taking the time to rest and recharge and encourage your employees to do the same. As New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has told the citizens of New York, "Take a walk" and "Call Mom." Another quick way to boost morale is by cultivating gratitude. Ask your people to list three things each day for which they feel grateful. And circle back regularly to the three points above: demonstrate resolve, emphasize role and mission, and focus on the opportunity for learning.

Last week, one of my dearest friends died from Covid-19. For more than eleven years, he and his wife, who is now hospitalized for the disease, have been my guardian angels. Moving into my home to nurse me when I had chemotherapy infusions for cancer in 2009, checking in on me when things went wrong, and spending holidays with me. They have both been bright, shining lights in my life, encouraging me to push through the hard times and raising my spirits. The grief I feel in the wake of Steven's passing is searing. Yet even as I weep for him and all he meant to the world and me, I still hear him saying, "You are stronger than you know, Nancy. You can do this." That is what all leaders must be communicating to their followers right now.

We — all of us — will be remembered for how we manage ourselves and others through this crisis. How will you, your team, your organization, our society connect, persevere, and progress? How will we emerge from this experience collectively stronger?



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