

Psychology skills for leaders navigating through the waves of the corona crisis

By Merete Wedell-Wedellsborg

COVID-19 is forcing world leaders to practice crisis management in its purest form. Initially, crisis responses tend to be constructive and characterized by decisiveness, effectiveness and maturity. People tend to switch into emergency mode and become laser-focused on the immediate situation.

Yet as the initial acute phase of the crisis wanes, leaders will have to tackle a different set of problems. The practical side of crisis management will give way to psychological warfare.

Its triggers -- unpredictability, frustration and insecurity -- can cause irrational and inappropriate reactions as diverse in nature as in-fighting, panic and apathy. People become tired, passive and disillusioned. With the rush of adrenaline waning, there will be more pressure on both financial and mental resources.

Psychologists call this phase "regression". If you're unsure how deep you are into it, if at all, you might look for evidence in meetings: energy will drop, decisions will take longer or not be made at all, and confusion and conflict may arise about the small stuff. Blabbering is a sign as much as silence or unavailability.

You can also look to yourself for indicators. As a leader, has your sense of conviction faded? Are you tired, mentally or physically; do you have urges to withdraw, even temper flares? Beware of a lack of a desire to delegate and a sudden "I'll fix this myself" attitude.

To succeed and inspire as a leader you must anticipate and skillfully manage these dimensions to a crisis by using psychological tools. If you are absolutely 100% tied-up in the present, delegate the task of planning ahead to someone you trust.

Here are three pieces of advice to help direct your, or their, energies:

1. Remain at a distance physically, but move closer emotionally

Currently, teams are interacting almost exclusively through video conferencing and phone calls. However, isolation from the outside world and from social contact is stressful. Scheduling several daily updates will ensure everyone stays in touch and knows their tasks.

Reach out and connect so everyone feels part of the group even though they are in different locations.

Connect emotionally on every call by listening with the third ear; a concept from therapy that describes the art of listening to the melody behind others' words. Listen to how people are saying things, not just what they are saying. For instance, who in your team is using humor in a mature way and keeping morale up? Conversely, who needs more support?

Listen, too, to what people are not saying and ask probing questions. This is important since people might be afraid to bring you more bad news.

Crises bring out immature and primitive responses such as denial, repression and splitting. As a leader, you must be aware of these defense mechanisms and try to bring nuances and perspective to discussions where people deny the seriousness of the situation or defend themselves by blaming or finger pointing.

2. Balance presence with absence

As a leader, you may feel that you have to take the helm at all times and be omnipresent. Of course you never can, but right now even less so. To compensate, show your feelings through your gaze and with your words, conveying that you care about your employees and are concerned about the situation.

In these difficult times, you will almost certainly make decisions that in hindsight, you would like to undo. So take that as a given and relax about it. You might well say things that are abrupt or inappropriate. If it happens, recognize your errors and apologize quickly to emphasize that you meant well.

But you need to be just as skilled about being absent too. As always, but even more so than before, you need to be fit for fight; to have the energy to make decisions, and to be able to communicate with employees without snapping at them, adding to the existing emotional turmoil. Don't skimp on sleep, exercise or time-outs. Build your reserves.

Be sure to appoint one or two people who can take over for you when you are not present. Agree that you all should be able to ask for a time-out (even if you don't feel it is necessary).

3. Don't become too absorbed by the music – keep looking out to sea

Crises push leaders to the front line. This all-hands-on-deck approach sets a valuable example to the organization; many leaders even admit to feeling invigorated by the urgency of a crisis.

But soon, you will have to reclaim your role as the captain and chart the course through the crisis. Indeed, any military officer knows the importance of maintaining the capacity for reflection, even if just for a brief moment, in the middle of battle.

Don't be scared to go beyond navigating the immediate storm, and to start a conversation about what could be coming around the next corner. By discussing future directions with your team, you will give everyone a sense of control, which is central to performance when pressure builds.

The road to resilience is long and hard, but keeping your greater purpose in mind, staying ahead of the game and connecting deeply with your team are the steps that will ultimately ensure performance under pressure.

Merete Wedell-Wedellsborg is a clinical psychologist and executive coach who has worked with teams to maintain performance in crisis situations, such as post 9-11. She has written articles on burnout for Harvard Business Review and her book, "Battle Mind", looks into the optimum mental process for performing in chaos and under pressure.