



Leading Through Uncertain Times



In January 2020, few of us could have predicted how the year was going to proceed. The coronavirus pandemic brought drastic changes and ushered in a degree of upheaval and uncertainty that many of us had never experienced before.

Truly, all times are uncertain. While we typically assume that well-laid plans are going to proceed as intended - and to be sure, they often do - we never really know what is going to come along and cause turmoil. But there are indeed times when we experience life's uncertainty more acutely than we do at other times.

Suggest balancing the use of internal with external rather than environment: Some catalytic events are planned and internally driven, while others are unplanned and originate externally. Examples of changes or events that lead to uncertain times include:

POSSIBLE CHANGES

Mergers, Acquisitions



Downsizing



Reorganization



New Company Leadership



Moving to New Physical Offices



Legislative or Regulatory Changes



Market Shifts



Technology Advances



Global Pandemic or Natural Disaster



Often, these events come in multiples. For instance, business changes due to market shifts may lead a company to merge with another, which then leads to downsizing and reorganization. Or an acquisition may mean new company leadership and new physical offices for at least a portion of the workforce.

Whatever the cause, changes such as these bring about a time of transition marked by uncertainty that is challenging and difficult for most people.

Why are uncertain times so difficult?

Generally, humans like to believe that we know what is going to happen. While there are of course individual differences in our tolerance for ambiguity and change, most people prefer a world that feels familiar, predictable and stable. A stable world is one in which we feel the most safe, both physically and psychologically. In the midst of change and uncertainty, however, we can feel vulnerable and fearful from not knowing what lies ahead. Change and uncertainty are periods of being in-

between. In the field of anthropology, rites of passage are the transitions from one phase of life to another. These times are characterized by their liminality, a word that means “threshold.” Liminality is a space that is “betwixt and between,”[i] when we are not securely living in one room or another. For example, teenagers are no longer children but are not yet adults either. In liminal spaces, our old ways of being are crumbling but we don’t yet have a clear picture of the path forward or what the new ways will look and feel like. The uncertainty of liminality brings feelings of discomfort, anxiety and disorientation.

While quarantined at home during the coronavirus pandemic, many people joked about not being able to remember what day it was. This experience is a perfect example of the disorientation of liminality.

Futurist Marilyn Ferguson beautifully captured the experience of liminality when she said:

“It’s not so much that we’re afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it’s that place in between that we fear... It’s like being between trapezes. It’s Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There’s nothing to hold on to.”

In his model of ‘transitions’ - that is, the internal process employees go through during organizational change - William Bridges identifies what he calls the “neutral zone.” The neutral zone is a time of liminality, where we have been forced to let go of the old ways but we haven’t yet fully embraced the new. Times of uncertainty in organizations put us squarely into the neutral zone. Admittedly, the label “neutral zone” downplays the roller coaster of emotions that most people experience during this time of being in-between.

When employees are experiencing the anxiety of uncertain times, they may behave in ways that are unusual for them. For instance, employees who are typically excellent workers may have difficulty focusing or getting work done. Others may lean in the opposite direction and become excessively busy with work that may be

valuable or not, to avoid the discomfort inherent in uncertainty. Still other employee behaviors that signal they are within the neutral zone may include increased tensions arising between individuals or groups - more conflict. More people may miss work or seem generally disengaged in the company or their jobs. There is likely to be a lot more gossiping as employees try to process and make sense of what's happening around them. When you observe these behaviors, recognize that they are the outward expressions of the normal internal process of moving through uncertain times.

It is important to know, too, that although times of uncertainty can be very challenging and difficult, there is a tremendous positive side as well. Ambiguous space is the realm of pure possibility, when we can tap into resources we may not have tapped into before. It can be a time of tremendous innovation and creativity, realignment and reorientation.

We have seen and hear many stories of

innovation and creativity as a result of the upheaval from the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, roads in many cities closed to make space for pedestrians and outdoor dining. A Denver company that makes mobile bars and food carts for stadiums and large venues - Gallery Carts, Kiosks and Portables - saw their business suddenly come to a halt as these venues closed to prevent spread of the virus. In response, the company came up with three core products that use UV lights to increase sanitation and is now providing retrofit kits to their clients. Gallery is hoping these new products will help stadiums eventually reopen and make people feel more comfortable coming to large-crowd events.

Most companies have also utilized ways to connect and work virtually, and many have discovered that these new ways work quite well. We are likely to continue with the adoption of at least some of the innovations and new ways of operating long after the coronavirus pandemic has passed.

Similarly, the aftermath of a company

merger can be a time of opportunity to start with a blank slate to design what works best for the new organization. That could mean new operating processes or organization structure or leadership practices that are more effective than the old ways of doing things.

So what can you do as a leader to bring your people successfully through a time of uncertainty so that you reap the benefits rather than suffer the downsides?

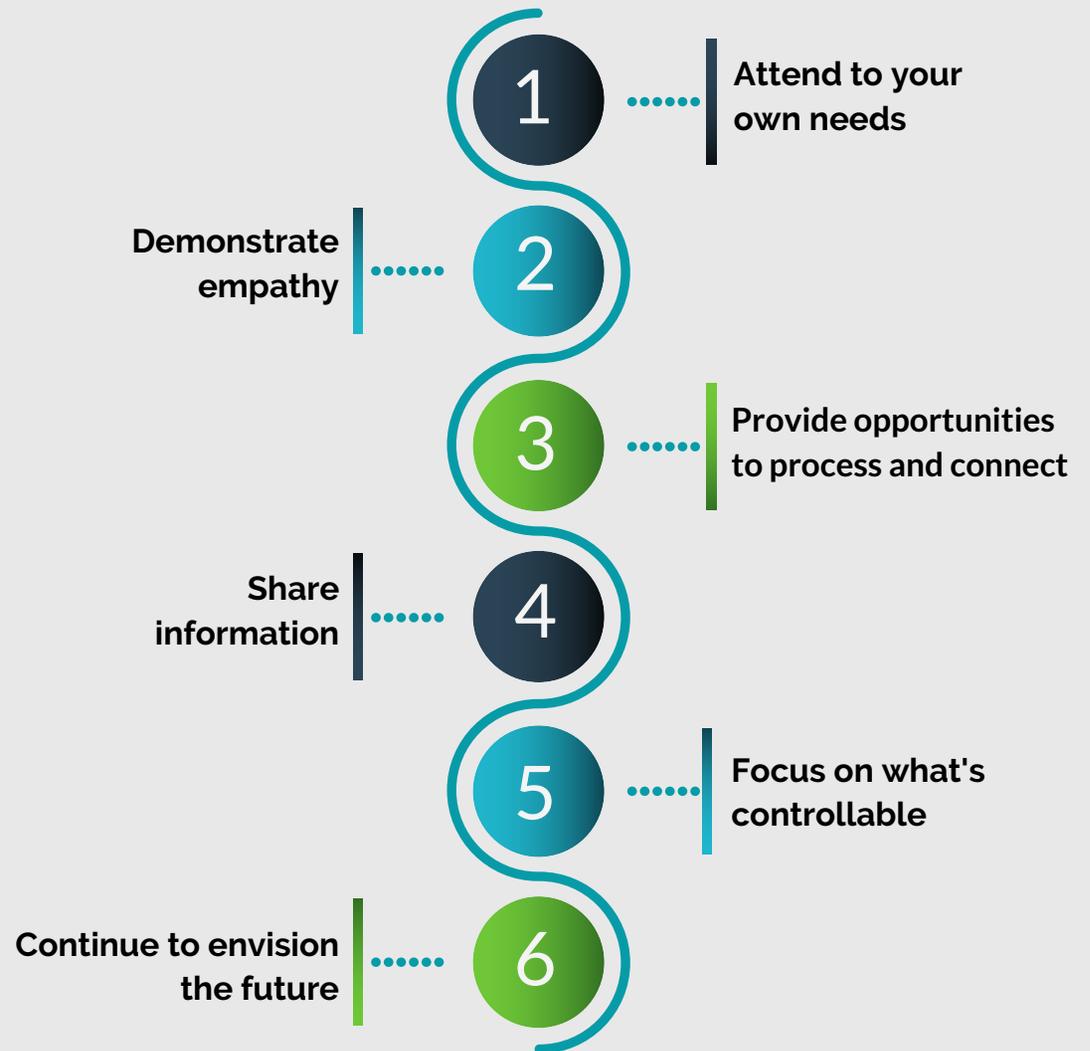


"Amidst these massive disruptions a combination of short- and long-term innovation responses can provide a ray of hope for businesses."



6 LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Six leadership practices that are critical during times of uncertainty.



1 ATTEND TO YOUR OWN NEEDS.

Just as you are instructed to secure your own oxygen mask on an airplane before doing so for anyone else, it is important to take care of yourself so that you can effectively guide and support the people who rely on your leadership.

In attending to your own needs, first acknowledge to yourself that the situation is difficult. By definition, uncertain times are not business as usual and you may not know exactly how to proceed. But know that you will make it through and will learn a great deal along the way.

Attending to your needs means investing in your own well-being. Do that which brings you strength and energy, whether it is hanging out with family or friends, exercising, practicing yoga or meditation, spending time in nature or in a hobby you love, or something else. Taking care of yourself might also mean talking with a coach or mentor for guidance and support.

By taking care of yourself, you will be able to stay grounded so that you can effectively lead with authenticity and optimism.

2 DEMONSTRATE EMPATHY.

Employees need your understanding during uncertain times more than ever.

Sometimes leaders think that it is enough for employees to simply have a job and receive a paycheck, but it isn't. They are human beings going through a difficult process, so recognize that each is probably experiencing the challenges of the neutral zone when the company is in the midst of change and uncertainty. While receiving a paycheck is important, times of uncertainty touch on our deep instinctual needs for safety and security by putting those at risk (or seeming to do so).

During a crisis, in particular, leaders need to attend to human needs first. When the coronavirus pandemic hit, employees who are also parents likely struggled when school was canceled and their kids were at home all the time, often needing help with

online school. Some employees may have underlying health conditions that put them in a high-risk category, or they may have relatives who were at high-risk and needed help such as grocery shopping. Whatever the needs of the crisis, first provide the support your employees need to simply get through.

One thing that researchers who study rites of passage and liminal spaces have found is that the first thing people want to do when they enter that in-between place is to rest. Of course, in the workplace, employees still need to work. But perhaps you can carefully consider what work must be done and focus just on that. Don't overload employees or push any harder than you absolutely have to. Perhaps initiatives you had planned can be put off for three months or six months without negative consequences.

3 PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO PROCESS AND CONNECT.

With empathy as a basis, give employees the time and space to process their losses

and voice their concerns, whether together as a group or in one-on-one discussions. Research suggests that companies rebound more quickly when they directly address grief, loss, uncertainty and anxiety.[ii]

While it may be uncomfortable to have these conversations, ask employees how they are doing and help them to name what they have lost, their fears and worries. And of course, listen respectfully to what they have to say. They may not be experiencing what you are experiencing or what you might think is appropriate, but they deserve recognition and understanding.

Turbulent times also remind us of the importance of community. People need community and connection with one another to foster the resilience needed to get through uncertainty. Create opportunities for people to connect through work and non-work activities. Partner people to work on projects together. Find ways to connect outside of work, whether that connection is virtual, over the phone or in-person.

SHARE INFORMATION. | 4

During times of uncertainty, employees are hungry for information as they try to make sense of what is happening - and indeed, information helps, even if the news it isn't exactly what they want to hear. Many leaders shy away from communicating anything at all until they are 100% sure about the path forward. But waiting that long is a disservice to employees, who are going to speculate and talk about the situation anyway. Communicate early and often, far more often than you think you need to.

Of course, communications must be genuine and transparent. While you don't want to necessarily want to let it all hang out by saying "I have no idea what I'm doing or where we are going," it is okay to say something like "This is a tough time for all of us. It's challenging for me too." By showing some degree of vulnerability, you build trust with employees.

Also, don't pretend to know more than you

do in your communications. It is okay to say "We aren't yet sure what the new organization structure is going to look like, but we are working on it right now and plan to have an answer for you by the end of this month." Employees can tell when their leaders are not being honest and forthright.

5 | FOCUS ON WHAT'S CONTROLLABLE.

A defining characteristic of uncertain times is the experience of a loss of control. Talk with your employees about what they can control and what they cannot control. It will help both you and your people to articulate what falls into each category.

For example, Gallery Carts, Kiosks and Portables could not control that the outlet for their products - large stadiums and venues - had been closed because of the coronavirus pandemic and that their customers' businesses had come to a standstill. But they could control the development of new products that would better serve the new environment with increased focus on preventing spread of the

virus. Similarly, after a layoff, employees cannot control the fact that their former colleagues are gone, but they can control their efforts to build new working relationships and identify new ways of doing things that will help them to handle potential increases in workload.

**CONTINUE TO
ENVISION THE FUTURE.** | 

You may not yet know exactly where you are going and how you are going to get there, but don't lose sight of the fact that you will go somewhere.

Of course, in the midst of a crisis, you need to attend to immediate needs first. Once you have addressed those immediate needs, consider what a new future could look like based on what you know now. How might your organization or your department look when you get through the turbulence? What will you be doing differently? Just as Gallery Carts, Kiosks

and Portables reformulated their products, ambiguity and uncertainty are fertile ground to reimagine and reconsider what you do and how you do it. And as you proceed through the uncertainty, your vision can continue to evolve as you continue to learn more.

Employees will be looking to you shine a light on the path forward. It is an important part of your role as a leader. Share your vision with employees so that they too can begin to embrace a picture of where you are headed.

Uncertain times are inevitable in life and in organizations. Business as usual eventually becomes obsolete as we enter into business as unusual. Such transitions are inherently challenging for most people, but with the right leadership practices and guidance, your people and your organization will eventually end up in a place that is stronger and more fitting to whatever new realities you face.

[i]

Turner, Victor, 1967, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

[ii]

Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, 2004, "Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence," *Psychological Inquiry*, Volume 15, Number 1, pp. 1-18.

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