

Leadership, Credibility and Communication During the COVID-19 Crisis

by Frank L. Williams

Over the past 45 days our world has been turned upside down by COVID-19 (aka the novel coronavirus). Much of America is under stay-at-home orders. Schools are closed, and parents are suddenly realizing what their kids' teachers had to put up with all day. Many businesses are closed, and others are operating virtually for the first time ever. What was by all accounts a strong, growing economy has been brought to a screeching halt.

Communication Minefield

COVID-19 has created an unexpected and unprecedented environment for those in leadership roles. People tend to fear the unknown and resist change while craving predictability and consistency. Thanks in large part to the news media, people are worried and afraid. They're afraid of catching or spreading the virus or are wondering how they will pay their bills. Many business owners are fearful that they will be forced to close the business they spent a lifetime building and lay off employees who have become part of the family. Because people are worried, they tend to react with emotion and not respond with logic.

If you've spent any time on Facebook or Nextdoor or have read the comments on virtually any news site, you know that misinformation and rumors spread like wildfire during a crisis. In the absence of facts, people believe and share misinformation. They attack the messenger. Others blow COVID-19 off entirely and ridicule those who are taking it seriously.

A Time for Leaders to Lead

People are afraid, and they are looking for leaders to lead. Whether you are a business owner, an association director, an elected official or Rotary president, those under your leadership are looking to you for direction and hope. People are craving security and stability during a crisis that threatens to undermine both. They want to know that their leaders understand their situation and care about them. Those you lead are looking to you for a path through this crisis. To offer that, you must lead with clarity and purpose.

Credibility & Communication

Author and leadership expert John C. Maxwell said that "People buy into the leader before they buy into the vision." Your credibility is the foundation of your leadership. If you don't have credibility, you won't be able to lead. Credibility is rooted in trust. If people don't trust you and your motives, they won't buy into what you have to say. As Zig Ziglar said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

One of your over-arching communication goals should be to build and maintain the personal credibility required to lead your organization through this crisis. In this case, your actions will speak far louder than your words.

There are a number of ways you can strengthen your credibility as a leader:

Listen. In Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the fifth habit is "Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood." Be pro-active about understanding how this crisis is affecting those under your leadership. What keeps them awake at night? What information do they need? What questions do they need answered? Be intentional about listening -- and do it out of genuine concern.

Be Visible. Set the tone by taking an active role in leading the people in your organization. In this age of physical distancing that may require extensive use of video conferences or other alternative means of communication. Being visible and engaged helps reduce the uncertainty that can arise when those under your leadership rarely see or hear from you.

Be a Resource. Pro-actively provide those under your leadership with accurate, credible information to help them navigate these uncharted waters. Listening to those under your leadership will help you identify the information and resources they need. Taking the time to identify and share those resources demonstrates your desire to help them through this process.

Share Only Reliable Information. One of the fastest ways to sabotage your own credibility is to disseminate information that turns out to be incorrect. Don't share that Facebook post without verifying the information. If you're thinking about sharing an article, read the article, not just the headline. Don't forward that email your friend sent unless you have confirmed that it is accurate. Don't post speculation or rumors on social media. Avoid engaging in dialogue that exacerbates the existing social media outrage. As a leader, you should set a higher standard of accuracy and reliability.

Be Forthcoming and Transparent. During a crisis, people tend to think everyone has something to hide. If you need to have a difficult conversation with those under your leadership, don't put it off. Be direct, honest, and transparent within the scope of any applicable laws. Transparency and honesty build credibility.

Keep Your Cool. As a leader, you should be the level head in the room. People are looking for stability and security in a turbulent world. If you freak out, how do you think those under your leadership will respond?

Beware of Unintended Consequences. An off-the-cuff social media post or public remark that contradicts your message can erode the foundation of your credibility. Be conscious of how actions, decisions, words, or posts could undermine your message.

Model the Way. If you want those under your leadership to believe your message of hope, your actions, words and demeanor must show them that you believe it yourself.

Leaders must chart a course through the storm known as COVID-19. This requires a clear vision for the future, confidence in that vision, and a trust-based connection with those under their leadership.

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