

insight:

Resilient leadership for crisis recovery

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Resilient leadership for crisis recovery

Cast your mind back to the start of the year, when a new respiratory disease emerged from China. Reports began to raise concerns, but we had no idea that within three months our world would be turned upside down.

The first death from Covid-19 in the UK was confirmed on 5 March. People began panic buying hand sanitiser, jumping out of the way if someone coughed and singing Happy Birthday while washing their hands. Just three short weeks later the nation was in lockdown and we were staying at home, protecting the NHS and saving lives.

As a business leader, I watched events unfold with an initial sense of disbelief. Alongside the social changes precipitated by the arrival of Covid-19, the economic impact was clear from the outset. Loan guarantees and the furlough scheme were announced before lockdown began, with the governor of the Bank of England declaring 'It's going to be a very big downturn'. We were confronting a potentially exceptional set of circumstances.

THE CALL FOR RESILIENCE

Buzzwords quickly emerged as we all adjusted to the 'new norm' – the times were 'unprecedented', 'uncertain' and 'testing'. Right up there from the business perspective was a call for 'resilience':

Resilience

noun

[ri-zil-yuh ns]

The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.

The ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape; elasticity.

Oxford English Dictionary

As business leaders, we deal with ups and downs every day. But this was clearly going to be a monumental down. How could organisations bounce back from a crisis of this magnitude? What would resilient leadership look like in this context?

Four months on, we've come a long way as individuals and businesses. At Harmonic, after the initial scenario planning and response, we've accelerated our own and our clients' transformation programmes and seen some great examples of creativity and leadership emerging.

As the business world moves from response to recovery, now seems a good time to reflect on what we have learned about crisis leadership and resilience that can help shape our response to future challenges.

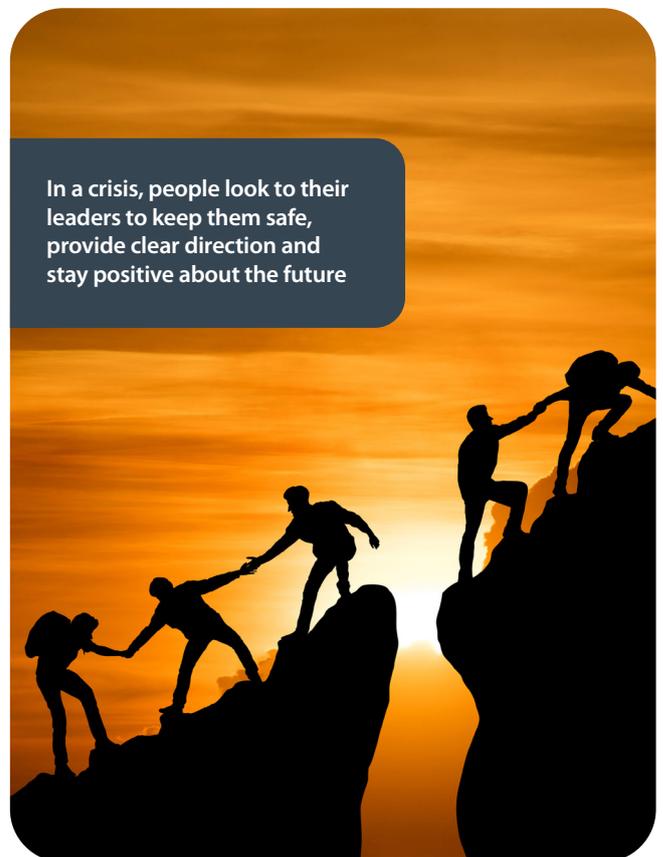
BE AUTHENTIC AND OPEN

Whatever your leadership style, a crisis is not the time to change it! Authenticity and consistency of purpose are essential. If you try to be someone that you're not, people will quickly see through you and lose faith in your leadership. Relate your decisions and plans to the organisation's values and aims. Make it clear that you're trying to do the right thing, be honest when you make mistakes - which I think are inevitable - and build trust through transparency.

The (welcome) shift to flatter, less hierarchical organisations has been noticeable in my 20 years as a business leader. Leaders are challenged in a way that would have been unthinkable in the past: Are you telling the truth? Are you making reasonable decisions? This demand for accountability and openness becomes even greater in times of crisis – flatter structures are not an excuse to avoid leading.

People expect more information now than ever before. We held our first all-company Zoom meeting very early in the Covid-19 crisis and were completely upfront with colleagues about the situation and our plan. We certainly tried to empower everyone to follow the same approach – take stock, embrace change, do the right thing by customers and look for opportunities. We answered questions, supported remote working and encouraged everyone to remain agile and adaptable.

In a crisis, people look to their leaders to keep them safe, provide clear direction and stay positive about the future



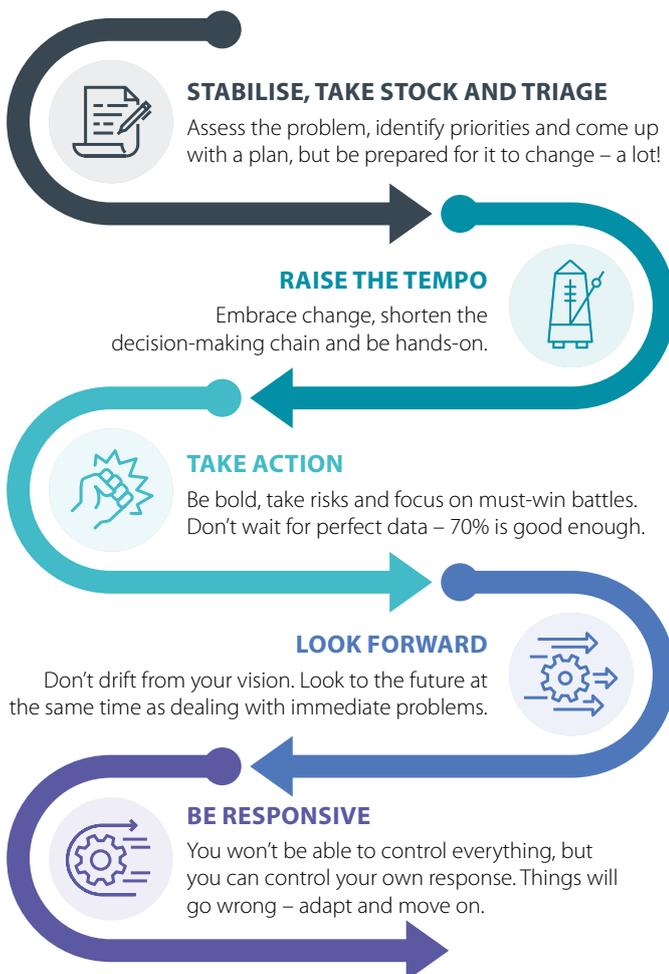
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DECIDE AND ACT

'The most natural human response in the face of danger is to simply do nothing,' wrote science journalist Zaria Gorvett in an article for the BBC about what not to do in a disaster. Her analysis focused on surviving plane crashes, tsunamis and earthquakes, but the parallels with the current pandemic are striking. She noted that mass hysteria tends to be reserved for films; in reality, we're more likely to freeze, paralysed by fear at a time when we need quick thinking more than ever. We develop tunnel vision, revert to old ways of behaving and often ignore the danger entirely.

As leaders, standing still in the face of a challenge is the worst possible response. Not far behind is a frenzy of unhelpful activity, or 'flapping about' as we like to call it! The key is to at least strive for a state of calm, productive urgency.

Productive urgency in a crisis



At Harmonic, we assessed work, identified what was mission critical and reduced the number of initiatives to focus on must-win battles. We tried hard to separate what's urgent from what's important.



We prioritised staying engaged with customers and helping them accelerate transformation so they could thrive post-Covid.

BE FORWARD THINKING AND POSITIVE

Although acting quickly is key, it's vital not to get absorbed by short-term priorities at the expense of long-term plans and vision.

A Harvard Business Review analysis of corporate performance during the global recessions of 1980, 1990 and 2000 found that companies that managed to balance cost-cutting for survival with investment for growth did best after a recession. They reduced costs selectively by focusing on operational efficiency, then invested in the future by spending on marketing, R&D and new assets. This, according to the Harvard Business Review, 'is the best antidote to a recession'.

At Harmonic, we made a conscious effort not to become so caught up in pandemonium panic that we lost sight of the bigger picture. We collected as much information as we could, talked through best- and worst-case scenarios as a team, focused on where we wanted to be in a year's time and adjusted our plans accordingly. We invested in acceleration for ourselves and our clients, moving ahead, for example in our case, with the digitisation of bid winning.

However extreme and challenging a situation seems, there are always opportunities to learn, grow and thrive. In my experience, a blend of positivity, optimism and humility goes a long way.

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EMPOWER OTHERS

Creating an environment and framework in which other people can do things is a key part of crisis leadership. Without your team pulling together, you won't be able to respond and recover.



As a leader, watching the Harmonic team develop and grow in confidence throughout the Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the most uplifting parts of the whole experience. Leadership has flourished across the organisation, with colleagues at all levels showing creativity, initiative and decision-making in the new working environment. What we have achieved since lockdown has been a testament to the whole team.

Having said that, I still believe that the loneliness of command is real. Empower your team, delegate with trust, be open and communicative, but never forget that ultimately the buck stops with you.

PRACTISE WHAT YOU PREACH

We spend a lot of time supporting clients in difficult situations that require change and hard decisions. Like most businesses, we don't always apply our capabilities as well to ourselves.

One of the positive things to have come out of the Covid-19 period for many organisations – certainly Harmonic – is that the urgency of the situation forces you to take your own medicine! In our case, this has meant doing internally what we normally do externally; focusing on what really matters (our must-win battles), what needed to change and what benefits we would expect to see in the short and longer term (we used the methods and ValueSeek tools which we use with clients). We've then been more disciplined about applying them to ourselves than we normally would be and, as a result, we have seen significant time saving, better utilisation of our resources and the accompanying improvements in our financial KPIs.

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Which leads me neatly to the final factor that I believe is crucial for resilient leadership in a crisis. Looking after yourself.



When the going gets tough, it's easy to feel that you need to work harder than ever. There's definitely a certain comfort in being busy and demonstrating to the world that you're trying your best. However, long hours and sleepless nights rapidly become counterproductive.

As a leader, it's essential to retain perspective. If you're tired and low, you can't lead effectively. Be kind to yourself. Exercise (well, cycle in my biased view!), spend time with family, get enough rest, learn relaxation techniques, eat well, laugh with friends, whatever works for you. Recognise the warning signs that you're exhausted or not coping and take steps to get your work-life balance back on track.

Looking after yourself might seem selfish, but it's actually the opposite. What makes us resilient is unique to us and is in our hands.

HOW HARMONIC CAN HELP

Harmonic is leading the way in helping organisations across the UK to manage the change, build resilience and take timely action to gain a competitive edge in our new world.

If you would like to find out more about our work or share your thoughts on resilient leadership, please get in touch by dropping me an **email**.

TOM SAMUEL
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