From blame to gain: Leading with agility in a crisis

The COVID-19 crisis underscores the need for leaders at all kinds of organizations to avoid blame and lead with adaptability, resilience, learning, and foresight.

A crisis can bring out our best and worst instincts. On the positive side, we see many people, communities, businesses, and officials banding together to cope, problem solve, support their communities, and find innovative ways to respond to the current COVID-19 crisis. The US Congress overcame all their bickering and finger-pointing to pass desperately needed legislation, as have many other legislatures around the world. There are great stories about individual and collective heroics, such as the Seattle community turning soccer fields into space for hospital beds and 400,000 people in the United Kingdom signing up, in less than 24 hours, to volunteer. People are volunteering to make masks, crowdsourcing medical supplies, delivering food, and participating in clinical trials for a vaccine. The medical community is putting all hands on deck, including retirees and medical students. Governors and local leaders are scampering and being resourceful to secure or produce desperately needed medical equipment and supplies.

On the other hand, we see far too much evidence of the urge to blame. President Trump is blaming China and Obama, while Democrats are blaming the Trump administration and Senate Republicans. States blame the federal government and vice versa. Many in Spain and other European countries are blaming leaders for not moving faster. Even in Scandinavia, which is known for harmony, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway have responded differently and are playing the blame game. While Denmark and Norway quickly adopted tough measures, Sweden and Finland were accused of being too lenient or too late, causing acrimony within and across the Nordic states.[1] Unfortunately, the deep-seated blame instinct gets in the way of moving with the required speed and adaptability.

1 Alexandra Brzozowski, "Norway takes 'most far-reaching measures ever experienced in peacetime' over coronavirus," March 15, 2020, euractiv.com; and Pekka Vanttinen, "Sweden ready to be 'tougher' as it bans gatherings of more than 50 people; ski resorts will remain open and after-ski parties closed," March 13, 2020, euractiv.com.

Blaming versus agility

Much has been written in politics, business, and psychology about the seemingly inevitable blame game as well as the critical importance of taking personal responsibility rather than finger-pointing. In the current crisis, literally and figuratively, we can't *fight* an invisible enemy and there is no *flight* due to border and transportation shutdowns. Therefore, we are particularly prone to blame.

A blame culture leads to fear of mistakes, risk aversion, putting your head in the sand, and inaction. It undermines transparency, erodes empowerment, stalls innovation, and stifles learning. It slows the fast, focused, and flexible response we need.

Leaders responding to the current crisis cannot afford to be distracted or nonproductive—because of blaming others or for any other reason. Instead, they must be remarkably agile to break free of old mental models and politics or business as usual. They must be role models of accountability, collaboration, transparency, and urgency to learn and adapt fast.

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Agility in crisis management

Our research on organizations and leaders who accelerate their performance in a volatile and uncertain world indicates that agility separates the best from the rest.[2] Such leaders pivot faster, adapt smarter, and look forward rather than backward when in crisis mode, which serves as an antidote to paralyzing blame. We are seeing agile, responsive, fast, seamless, and purpose-driven leadership across our societies.

In business, note how quickly Jeff Bezos and Amazon shifted operations in its distribution centers to provide supplies needed in the crisis,[3] or how Amazon Care is now doing delivery and pickup of at-home COVID-19 test sample kits in hard-hit Seattle.[4] Zoom has offered its platform for free to primary and secondary schools.[5] Grocery stores around the world are offering early-morning openings limited to senior citizens and increased delivery options for those who are homebound. And Inditex, owner of the fast-fashion brand Zara, is deploying its factories and logistics teams to enable the Spanish government to provide critically needed masks for patients and medical workers alike. Inditex leaders promised to produce 300,000 surgical masks within a week of its announcement and said it "will make a delivery at least once a week."[6]

Agile leaders demonstrate four distinct skills in times of crisis: adaptability, resilience, learning, and foresight.

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2 For more on the research underlying this article, see Heidrick & Struggles, "Developing leaders for the 21st century: How leaders can mobilize, execute, and transform with agility," February 8, 2018, heidrick.com.

3 Eugene Kim, "Amazon to stop accepting all products other than medical supplies and household staples to its warehouses amid coronavirus crisis—read the memo it just sent to sellers," Business Insider, March 17, 2020, businessinsider.com.

4 Christina Farr, "Amazon will deliver and pick up at-home test kits provided by new coronavirus program in Seattle," CNBC, March 23, 2020, cnbc.com.

5 Alex Konrad, "Exclusive: Zoom CEO Eric Yuan is giving K–12 schools his videoconferencing tools for free," *Forbes*, March 13, 2020, forbes.com.

6 Brooke Bobb, "Zara owner Inditex will donate masks for coronavirus patients and health workers in Spain," *Vogue*, March 18, 2020, vogue.com.

Adaptability: Shifting priorities quickly due to rapidly changing external and internal dynamics

Adaptive leaders instantly shift their frame, plan, and priorities in the face of crisis. This means sizing up the situation quickly and accurately versus engaging in denial, blame, and distraction. We have all witnessed in real time the slow response from the Trump administration and many politicians in moving the United States from a political into a crisis mode, a pattern that has played out in many European countries as well. It has taken many large hospitals, businesses, cities, and states far too long to shift gears, stop business as usual, and move to a full-scale war footing. Telemedicine is finally taking hold, and resources are being converted. Consumer-facing businesses are shifting to home delivery. Despite these efforts, the lost time, tragically, will translate to lost lives.

Adaptive leaders step above the fray, recognize the scene has shifted in fundamental ways, and break out of old mindsets to launch new business models, ways of working, and just-in-time innovation.

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, Singapore's government, for example, speedily closed borders and deployed significant resources, in terms of people and technology, to tracing the contacts of people diagnosed with the virus early, which is widely thought to have slowed the spread of the virus there. And, like Inditex, companies around the world have shifted their focus to help fend off the viral disease. To help pump up the dwindling supply of hand sanitizer in France, LVMH has repurposed some of its perfume facilities to produce disinfectant.[7] British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was himself diagnosed with the virus at the end of March, is speaking to engineering firms to explore if and how they can shift production to making ventilators for the National Health Service with a wartime spirit and urgency. Uber and Grubhub are delivering food and supplies with cars and drivers that are safe, clean, and antiseptic. Pharmacies and liquor stores, essential services in a crisis, are making deliveries or offering curbside pickup.

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Critical steps for adaptability in a crisis

- **Shift the frame.** Brainstorm with others virtually to consider how to shift old mental models to new ones.
- Deliberately **challenge long-standing assumptions and conventional wisdom** in your team or organization by asking the team to list the operating assumptions that must change.
- **Deploy a devil's advocate** to quickly encourage contrarian, diverse alternatives and views and creative ideas.
- **Value speed over perfectionism.** Waiting to get all the software just right and dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's slowed large bureaucratic hospital systems from moving faster to telemedicine.
- **Adapt your leadership style** to fit the crisis. Listen, support, and be empathic while being bold, decisive, and action oriented. This is not a paradox; it is a necessary balancing act.

7 Leila Abboud, "Inside the factory: How LVMH met France's call for hand sanitizer in 72 hours," *Financial Times*, March 19, 2020, ft.com.

Resilience: Bouncing back from setbacks and failure

This crisis tests the character, values, determination, and larger purpose of leaders. Can you link your actions to a core mission related to your purpose? Current data from China, Singapore, South Korea, Italy, and now even some areas in the United States seem to show that if leaders are clear, consistent, resilient, determined, and persistent in their response to the virus, the spread and increase of cases will slow. But leaders in all kinds of organizations will inevitably fail in efforts to cope, lead, and make tough yet timely decisions. It's what happens next that matters: Do they blame others for what went wrong, or take accountability and focus everyone on bouncing back immediately? When Netflix founder Reed Hastings made the mistake of misjudging the readiness of customers to move exclusively to streaming some years ago, his business got pounded. Yet, when he realized the mistake, took personal accountability by apologizing, and then fixed the problem, he won back and expanded his loyal customer base. As a result, Netflix is well positioned today as people are increasingly relying on home entertainment—and is showing resilience and purpose again. Like Google, YouTube, and Amazon, Netflix is reducing the quality of its video streams across Europe to meet the surging demand and to keep the platform from crashing. In Australia, the supermarket and retail chain Woolworths is hiring laid-off Qantas employees and retail workers, many in short-term roles that will both help Woolworths meet surging demand and help workers stay afloat financially.[8]

Entertainers are also being resilient and resourceful. In an interview, Melissa Ethridge described how her home-recorded concerts on Facebook are keeping up spirits and maintaining connectivity with thousands of her fans. Children's book author Oliver Jeffers live-streamed himself reading books out loud to more than 250,000 followers on Instagram. DJs, comedians, and other performers are live-streaming performances to reach audiences, raise awareness, and promote resilience. We can do this personally and in our own organizations, such as a virtual wine tasting I did with fellow wine lovers and a virtual happy hour Heidrick & Struggles initiated last week. And all our hearts have been warmed to see citizens around the world applauding healthcare workers as they change shifts.

Chef José Andrés' nonprofit World Central Kitchen connects the chefs of the world with a higher purpose to feed the hungry. He declared that "an army of American cooks stands ready to serve vulnerable citizens, at a time when those very cooks are themselves in desperate need of support." These "food first responders," with the support of government, can be resilient in responding to restaurant closures by serving so many in need.[9]

Critical steps for resilience in a crisis

- [ ] **Mind your leadership shadow.** Everyone is taking cues from the leader, so stay positive but real. Be transparent, as your team will be hypersensitive to mixed messages.

- [ ] **Focus on what you can control and do,** not on what others are failing to do. Focus your conversations on topics that are the most important, not just the most urgent.

- [ ] Connect emergency actions to a **larger purpose** for your organization or community.

- [ ] **Prepare for setbacks.** Expect you can bounce back. Be persistent but open-minded with contingency plans. If plan A or B doesn't work, be prepared with plan C.

- [ ] **Take personal accountability.** Do not pass the buck; own the situation and your response.

- [ ] **Keep yourself healthy and safe,** so you can replenish the energy of your team.

Leaders in all kinds of organizations will inevitably fail in efforts to cope, lead, and make tough yet timely decisions. But it's what happens next that matters.

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8 Sharon Masige, "Woolworths is hiring 20,000 more workers, offering mostly casual, temporary positions to retail and airline staff who have lost their jobs," Business Insider Australia, March 27, 2020, businessinsider.com.au.

9 José Andrés, "We have a food crisis unfolding out of sight," *New York Times*, March 22, 2020, nytimes.com.

Learning: Testing assumptions, failing fast, and continuously iterating in real time

In a crisis, successful leaders acknowledge what they don't know, so they can learn faster. Instead of blaming others or circumstances, they try things quickly and test novel solutions to see if they have legs. In New York, hospitals in desperate need are testing if one ventilator can support two patients, something US doctors have learned from Italy.[10] Entrepreneurial leaders are creating nontraditional supply chains. In response to the overwhelming shortage of N95 respirators and surgical masks, Project N95, which calls itself a "medical equipment clearinghouse," has been launched by a team of professionals from diverse backgrounds to connect healthcare institutions urgently needing equipment with suppliers worldwide. One of its founders, Nadav Ullman, a tech entrepreneur, said the project is seeking to "get all the information into a single spot, to connect those who have the demand to those who have the supply." In less than a week, the project had matched more than 40 million masks and other supplies to provide a lifeline to thousands of healthcare systems in need of personal protective equipment (PPE).[11]

Coinbase, a San Francisco–based digital currency broker, published its coronavirus response as an open-source, real-time learning document for other businesses and communities to reference as they plan their own crisis-management strategies. Coinbase continually updates the document with its latest recommendations and policies based on rapid-cycle learning. The innovative idea to open-source a coronavirus response plan paves the way to enhanced collaboration and collective learning in real time.[12] And Singapore is now making the technology it uses to trace contacts of people who have been diagnosed with the virus available as an open-source tool for other governments.[13]

The key to this type of experimentation is high-quality, after-action review and learning in real time. One of the positives about this crisis is that we can observe and learn from those who were hit earlier in the disease cycle or in previous epidemics. Taiwan, for example, built its response to COVID-19 on lessons learned from what that country experienced during the SARS epidemic in 2003, when more than 70 people died there. In the following years, the country revamped its approach to managing infectious disease, such as real-time integration of national healthcare databases with travel and customs databases and restricting entry from people from China very early.[14] This time, Singapore and Hong Kong learned quickly from China. Italy and the rest of Europe have been slower, and too many leaders in the United States have been behind the curve in applying lessons from other countries, from prior pandemics, and from experiments. As a growing number of leaders see what works, they can double down. Again, pointing fingers and blaming others is a fool's game in a crisis. Learn from others!

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Critical steps for learning in a crisis

☐ **Be transparent and vulnerable** about what you do and do not know. You must discover the unvarnished truth, so make it possible for everyone to speak up by applauding people willing to raise difficult issues.

☐ **Model real-time learning.** Commit to a culture of rapid-cycle learning. Set up a virtual war room, as you would expect to see in a crisis center, emergency room, or active military combat.

☐ **Run small experiments** rather than big bets to rapidly test novel approaches. Practice, for real, the well-worn adage: "fail fast," with rapid-cycle metrics and innovation adoption.

☐ **Control the urge to blame** when things go wrong. Be curious about what happened. Learn more, blame less.

☐ **Conduct after-action debriefs.** Pull out lessons from successes and failures with a military-style, after-action review, and constantly ask the team, "What can we learn from this?" and "What more can we do?" Make this an egalitarian exercise—what the military calls a "stripes off" conversation, where anyone can speak truth to power.

☐ **Course-correct based on disconfirming evidence.** Even after a decision or announcement has been made, shift the plan transparently instead of pretending it did not happen.

10 Brian M. Rosenthal, Jennifer Pinkowski, and Joseph Goldstein, "'The other option is death': New York starts sharing of ventilators," *New York Times*, March 26, 2020, nytimes.com.

11 Talib Visram, "'COVID-19 clearinghouse': Project N95 is matching hospitals with PPE suppliers," *Fast Company*, March 26, 2020, fastcompany.com.

12 Coinbase, "Coinbase planning and response to COVID-19," The Coinbase blog, blog.coinbase.com.

13 Saheli Roy Choudhury, "Singapore says it will make its contact tracing tech freely available to developers," CNBC, March 25, 2020, cnbc.com.

14 Andrew Leonard, "Taiwan is beating the coronavirus. Can the US do the same?" *Wired*, March 18, 2020, wired.com.

Foresight: Anticipating and being prepared to pivot with market changes

"Anyone who was watching realized it right away," New York governor Andrew Cuomo said, adding, "It was inevitable that what happened in China was going to happen here."

A big challenge for leaders in business, government, or anywhere is to look forward rather than backward. Most leaders got to where they are because they were great at execution, not anticipation. In a fast-changing, dynamic world, both are required. Jong-Yoon Chun, the CEO of Seegene, a molecular biotech company in South Korea, is a good example. Even before the country's first confirmed coronavirus case, he made the bold, forward-thinking decision to channel efforts toward developing a test kit. "Even if nobody is asking us to, we are a molecular diagnosis company. We have to prepare in advance," thought Chun. A key to Seegene's expedited success developing and getting government approval for a test kit in less than 30 days was its big data system that runs with artificial intelligence. Seegene's foresight to have equipment that leverages emerging technologies and apply it to the crisis at hand has helped enable South Korea's effective testing efforts.[15]

It is worth reflecting on how we so badly missed this crisis to learn for the next time. Many would consider the COVID-19 pandemic a black swan, an unpredictable event beyond what could have been expected. But was it? Not really. Prior scenarios and studies predicted this type of outbreak and were ignored. In a 2015 TED talk, Bill Gates warned, "The next outbreak? We're not ready." *New York Times* reporter David Sanger highlighted "Crimson Contagion," a US government simulation from 2019 that predicted in great detail that a pandemic could occur with great devastation and loss of life. Furthermore, this and several other government exercises over the past five years clearly documented that the United States was not ready for a pandemic like the coronavirus. The exact weaknesses and issues we face in handling COVID-19 were made clear in startling detail, but, as we now know, little was done. The same held true for the 2008 financial crisis, 9/11, the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and far too many other prior disasters, where reports, warnings, data, and forecasts went unheeded. Even worse, the lessons painfully learned were not adequately internalized, and we, as societies, were destined to repeat the same mistakes.

In this case, epidemiologists have been remarkably apt at predicting the spread and rate of the virus. But the relatively near-term foresight to prepare faster has again been disappointingly uneven. Too many leaders know what is coming but, unlike Seegene's Chun, wait to act until it is here. Kinsa CEO Inder Singh, however, is actively trying to help others think ahead. He has been visible in sharing how the company's smart thermometer with a monitoring device might help track the coronavirus outbreak, just as, with about one million data points, the company has accurately indicated flu spread for the last four years. Its health weather map shows fever spikes in specific geographies, such as New York, New Jersey, and Florida. Although the company has no way of tracking the spread of COVID-19 specifically, thermometer data could provide easy-to-grasp early indicators on the effects of social-distancing measures in different communities.[16]

Even in a crisis, it is essential to balance and take time to go beyond immediate crisis management and project into the future, when conditions will change again. You want to make decisions that not only respond to the moment but also are future-proofed for tomorrow and beyond. In past crises, too many businesses cut essential resources that compromised future growth and were not prepared for "winning the long game."[17]

Critical steps for foresight in a crisis

Scenario-plan for 6, 18, and 36 months out. Project possible futures, implications, and winning strategies.

Balance short- with long-term planning. Check your crisis-mitigation actions against likely future scenarios to anticipate unintended consequences.

Do a pre-mortem before pulling the trigger on crisis decisions. Brainstorm to anticipate what could go wrong with the plan; think systemically.

Think options, *not* either/or. Under pressure, we default to binary thinking: go or no go, A or B. Foresight in a crisis requires A, B, and C thinking. Explore multiple options or make little bets at once rather than relying on one source of salvation.

Study innovators and entrepreneurs. How are innovators responding quickly but still looking forward to uncover new possibilities during or after this crisis?

Accelerate your digital strategy and future customer experience. As we conduct business more virtually and new digital tools become our way of life, how can your team reinvent services and solutions to be ahead of tomorrow's game?[18]

Most leaders got to where they are because they were great at execution, not anticipation. In a fast-changing, dynamic world, both are required.

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15 Ivan Watson, Sophie Jeong, Julia Hollingsworth, and Tom Booth, "How this South Korean company created coronavirus test kits in three weeks," CNN, March 12, 2020, cnn.com.

16 Ruth Reader, "This map uses smart thermometers to detect potential surges in COVID-19 cases," *Fast Company*, March 20, 2020, fastcompany.com.

17 For more on succeeding today while preparing for the future, see Steven Krupp and Paul J. H. Schoemaker, *Winning the Long Game: How Strategic Leaders Shape the Future*, New York: Public Affairs, 2014.

18 For more on becoming a digital leader, see Scott Snyder and Yuila Barnakova, "Being a digital leader has never been more urgent," Knowledge@Wharton, March 27, 2020, knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu.

Actions for today and tomorrow

This crisis requires a concerted effort across all sectors and regions to get through a once-in-a-generation catastrophe. We already see remarkable examples of leadership agility. We are also painfully aware when our leaders fall short of exemplifying those characteristics. By embracing adaptability, learning, resilience, and foresight, leaders can navigate this crisis more effectively and better prepare for the next one, whatever form it might take.

Advice for maintaining agility as a leader

- Leaders need to be more agile than they could ever have dreamed to navigate a health, economic, social, and emotional disaster of such pervasive scope.

- Agility is the antidote to blame, which is an instinctive response to threat and crisis. Avoid the blame game and put all your energy in agile leadership.

- When there is no model to follow, or when the current one fails, adapt on a dime, reinvent, learn faster, and keep trying. In this case, we need a war footing, not business or politics as usual.

- Seize the moment with bold, agile leadership, but also be honest, vulnerable, and resilient.

- Use the moment to build a culture of real-time learning with no blame.

- Win the long game by building a keener appreciation and sharper skills for foresight, so you can be ahead in anticipating the next black swan.

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