Leading in a New Reality

By Steve Schad, President, Optima Advisory, LLC

Let's pause and reflect for a moment on just how much harder your job as a leader has become. Leading people is never easy, even if you have natural leadership qualities, but now add in the context of a pandemic, economic upheaval, and changes being forced on us in how we get work done, and it became exponentially more difficult. And, the reason it is exponentially harder is your team is going through tremendous stress. Real, happening-now stress and the kind of creeping stress caused by worry and anxiety over a myriad of uncertainties.

Leaders face challenges on two fronts. The first is internal and largely psychological. The role of a leader is heightened during times of crisis and so is the sensitivity of followers to signs and signals that get sent. Leaders are "always on" and so you must be aware of how you show up. The second challenge is what you do as a leader. The pandemic isn't a "bang" crisis event where the situation is short and urgent and leadership can come from anywhere, whether an individual is in a formal leadership role or not. It's a creeping crisis, more akin to a flood, extended over time when formal leaders must play the role to the best of their abilities in a context of a relentless stream of bad and sometimes incorrect news and a non-existent playbook that gets written and re-written each day.

Let's tackle each side of the challenge.

1. Everyday Focus: <u>How</u> You Approach Your Role as Leader

Your role right now is to get your team to a stable place, quickly, and then enter each day in the ready position as a leader. Ready to adapt and move to keep your team focused, supported, and productive. To help other teams and their leaders be successful. To help the broader organization be successful. What kind of mindset will help a leader successfully approach such a task?

Be Vigilant
Your organization should have contingency plans for likely disruptions, but you also should start your day prepared to pivot, and this can be helped by taking some time to think through the day and possible "what if" developments, especially involving team members. Many leaders can operate in a crisis, but you can give yourself a head start if you let your imagination bring forward different scenarios. Don't dwell on them or create an unnecessary list of worries, but develop a few ideas on what you would do in various situations. And, if an urgent matter erupts, take a moment to pause before taking action. As counterintuitive as it seems, doing nothing will give you the time and space to come up with the right course of action, not just any course of action. Here's an article from the sports world about being mentally prepared.

Be a Servant

Your role now more than ever is that of a servant. You are there to serve your team, and by this you will serve the organization, as well. If you adopt this mindset at the start of each day, you will be more likely to show up as the trustworthy, caring, accountable, purposeful leader that people will follow and that other leaders will respect. Your team members will experience many personal and work-related disruptions and frustrations in the coming weeks, so if you adopt the role of problem-solver, coach, guide, informed seer, connector, you'll be able to help them get through them more successfully. One practical thing you can do is to broaden your knowledge of where help or resources can be found in order to solve work-related problems as well as to support personal ones. There's no well-stocked storeroom or server drive that will have everything you need in circumstances like these, so knowing as much as you can will give you more tools when the team or an individual needs help.

Be Well

You may have your own worries and anxieties. You're human. This can be hard. Others might seem like they have it figured out, so you may question yourself. Maybe your personal situation is tenuous, or you have worries about the health and wellness of your family and friends. Whatever it is that you put on your shoulders and carry around with you every day might feel a little heavier in this new environment, so pay attention to your own needs so you can play your leadership role to the best of your abilities. Talk to your manager. Find a coach or a confidant. Carve out some time to address what needs to get addressed personally so you can stay focused on your role as a leader. Here is an article from Mercer on self-care for leaders.

2. Actions for New Teamwork: <u>What</u> You Do to Tackle Your Role as Leader

Your normal "mode of operation" is out. There are specific things leaders do to create high performing teams during normal times, but in conditions where there is risk of physical harm and large portions of the workforce are now working remotely and social distancing impacts office and shop floor interactions, leading an effective team is trickier. You need to rethink everything you do.

Reduce Anxiety

People are worried. They're worried about their health and that of their friends and family. They may have relatives who are sick or at risk. They're worried about their jobs and keeping their homes and their savings and their futures. They're worried about lasting effects of the pandemic and the future of the country. When people could go to the office freely, work could be an escape. You could forget the outside world a little bit with a change of scenery for nine or ten hours. You could connect with your friends at work and talk through worries and concerns. In today's world, people are on their own at home, sometimes in situations that might be unhappy or unstable, surrounded by bad news and left to deal with it with whatever tools they have.

Acknowledge the worries, give them merit, then move quickly into "here's what we're going to do" mode. Remember that people will worry first about themselves and their immediate family circle. Think about what

you can do to allay job concerns without making promises you may not be able to keep. For example, be transparent with them about the state of the business. Be realistic, and focus on the moment – we're here, we have jobs, we have work to do, let's get to work. If they can't shake the worries about "what ifs", help them know where to go for financial and other support resources and tools, including the company's employee assistance program (EAP). Remind them of the steps the company has taken to protect everyone's safety. Visibly remind members of the team to follow cleanliness protocols. Create new routines and rituals. These are the anchors that have been disrupted, and for some people, the patterns of routines are comforting, so in a time when everything is new, creating a sense of stability can help reduce the anxiety caused by disruptions. And, if things become too much for someone, here is an article on how to manage employees who are going through a personal crisis.

Reorganize for Performance

How much do you rely on direct observation to manage productivity and employee performance. More than you might think. If you're in a meeting together – check. They're present, and even if they don't say anything, it's "acceptable". Or, you see them across the cubes, focused on their computer screen, writing intently – check, that looks productive. I can't tell what they're doing on their screen, but hey, I'm a trusting manager! Whoops – they're on their cell phone. What's going on over there…

Now, take away half of the meetings and all of your ability to regularly and randomly observe what people are doing. How do you know enough is getting done? Are the right things getting done? Are quality and accuracy going into the work?

In general, managers struggle to apply practice and discipline in managing individual and team performance. We forget what it takes to set clear expectations that are understood by the individual and to give timely, specific feedback on how well expectations are being met. We sometimes forget or underestimate the resources needed to meet expectations. And, we forget about consistently using consequences and rewards to reinforce desired behaviors and outputs. How will you do these things with remote workers?

Managing people who work on projects is different than managing people who run operating processes. With projects, you have a built-in structure to be able to monitor progress and make adjustments. With process work, there are natural ebbs and flows to the workload for each individual. Get better at predicting time needed for work completion. Keep a list of improvement work that can be done during slow periods. Have backup work that can be done for other departments.

Use a regular, disciplined check in to determine status and shift work as needed. If you don't have regular reporting, ask for a daily summary or do a daily "stand up" meeting in the morning or "stand down" meeting at the end of the day. If you're not satisfied, start by asking questions and gathering information, then explain clearly and specifically what needs to change to meet your expectations. Refrain from jumping to conclusions

Contact us at: SSchad@OptimaAdvisoryllc.com

about whether they are slacking. There are many other possibilities, so start by assuming positive intent.

Account for Virtual

You can't chat in the hallway, dining area, or over coffee anymore. Those micro interactions are critically important in organizations because that's how questions get answered, how signals get sent, how moods are checked, and trust is reinforced. What will fill in the void left these kinds of interactions that happen countless times over the course of a day?

There are the usual obvious tools that everyone is delving into as remote work has been forced onto organizations – teleconferencing, Zoom, chat. Less obvious solutions may be time management apps – helps a team member keep tabs on where they spend their time as they adjust to a new operating mode. Group collaboration platforms can provide a way to integrate team communications, project work, and document archives.

Orchestrate Team Meetings

The only thing worse than a poorly run meeting is a poorly run virtual meeting. Most organizations struggle with basic meeting management – invite only who is needed; work from an agenda with specific objectives; take notes; manage time; facilitate discussion to solve issues that block the desired outcome; recap decisions, tasks, and deadlines; report back for accountability.

If you're running your team meetings virtually, you need to take charge and control the dynamic. On typical conference calls, people talk over each other. They start and stop talking because they're trying to be polite. Or, you have an individual or two who use the opportunity to put themselves at the center of the conversation.

Effective online meetings require active facilitation. Take roll call, don't ask participants to popcorn who's on. For each topic, declare how much time is to be allowed and get quickly into it by concisely framing the issue or question under consideration, what is known, what is not known, and what needs to be resolved or decided. This can be enhanced by sending materials in advance. When you get to discussion, input, or Q&A, use a round robin technique to work around to each team member, making it clear that individuals are free to pass. These techniques might feel unnatural if you're unaccustomed to such a controlled method, but it will save everyone headaches, reduce time needed for the meeting, and still allow for participant engagement.

Overcommunicate

People will make up a story where one doesn't exist, or when the story they hear doesn't fit their perceptions and beliefs. This dynamic causes a lot of problems, especially in an era when we are still grappling with the impact of social media and ready access to information, fact-based or not, on our society. If you adopt a posture of sending news and updates, even when it seems like it is too frequently, you will set the tone, shape the facts, and be the biggest influence on people's perceptions and emotions. Pass along the state of the business and your perceptions of successes and challenges to help people feel connected to the

bigger picture. Don't wait for an executive or another member of the expected communicators to be the one to provide such updates. Share news from other teams to help people feel connected to others. Share your own updates and thoughts to help people feel connected to you. And, if you sense there might be worry or questions rising, be proactive to find out what is causing it and seek out answers to share with your team to stay in front of things before they take a negative turn.

Conclusion

These things will take time and effort. Being effective in this new environment will require leaders to be purposeful, to develop new skills, and to put even more value on aspects of leadership that tend to get overlooked in favor of daily priorities. Your number one priority right now as a leader is to be there for your team, so they can keep their spirits up, stay productive, and get through this crisis and be ready for when things turn back toward growth.

Steve Schad formed Optima Advisory, LLC to help businesses build the organizational capability they need to achieve planned growth and transformation objectives. We help organizations get better results through people. We do this by providing direct, inside outsourced HR leadership and HR support to businesses to optimize their HR strategies, practices, and programs through an affordable, customer-centric service model.