



Leadership interrupted: Welcoming possibility



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Being an effective leader during a global pandemic where change is fast and often unpredictable is no small task. Some days it feels like anything can happen. Because it does.

Mario Andretti said, "If everything seems under control, you're just not going fast enough."

But even race car drivers take pit stops. We can't run all the time at high speed. We need to change the tires, make repairs, and refuel. To keep going, sometimes we have to stop and take pause.

A leadership pit stop on a changing track with uncertain conditions can feel just as urgent as a car race. Despite that impulse to fix everything now, it's important to look at the ways we've always done things and begin to imagine the ways we can do things differently.

When things feel uncomfortable and unpredictable, it's easy to become numb to the prospects of our own lives. We just want to feel better — even just different. We want to return to our sense of normal.

The trouble is that's not possible. Once our expectations about what's going to happen become disrupted, staying the course usually no longer makes sense. It's hard to remember that facing a different future opens possibilities and changes the way we think. We may not be able to see the answer, but we can find new paths and destinations. In the words of Robert Frost, "Two roads diverged...and I — I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."



Here are some things to consider as you lead into change.

Culture

Culture is both the way things happen in an organization and the physical environment of work. It's how the office is furnished and decorated, who sits where, the language we use, norms for behavior, and the social interactions that people are accustomed to.

When the work environment changes because of disruptions and shifts in how and where work gets done, the structure and cues for culture also change.

We have all been adapting to change for a while now. Constant change is not something humans get good at with practice. It's stressful. Even positive and desired changes are big adjustments, much like moving, graduating, having a baby, or getting a puppy. Changes you don't choose are even more difficult to adjust to.

☒ Look at what has changed in your organization and what is changing.

Create structure and cues that can be consistent and help people stay grounded. Get input from employees about what's in their way, what they need, and what would help. Maybe it's no meetings on Thursday so people can think and create. Are there processes you can shift to provide better workflows? Are people getting the kinds of breaks they need — quiet, social, active, restful?

When things are changing, it's hard to keep track of how it's affecting your people and culture. As a leader, you have the ability to build and create the kind of culture you want. Get some feedback and be willing to address issues in creative ways. Then model that culture.



Perspective and connection

Leaders have a unique perspective. It can also be very limited because people tend to tell bosses what they want to hear.

Take time to broaden your perspective. Step outside yourself to build and strengthen what's going on with your team. Get to know people, not just your direct reports. Take 30 minutes a week to have coffee with someone, even virtually, where you talk about things other than work.

Those connections build trust and compassion, which are essential when everything is changing.



Inclusion and belonging

Leadership is not about you. Your success depends on the success of every member of the team. There is a difference between being a strong leader and a good leader. A strong leader leads by command and control. A good leader sees their team as humans in their full lives.

Good leaders understand that employees have their own priorities, life experiences, challenges, needs, and goals. Even people who look the same or have similar backgrounds can be very different. Diversity, inclusion, and belonging is about expanding the organization's strengths and abilities. Actively seek out people who are different from you, learn from them, and value each person and their contributions.

Part of being a good leader is seeing there can be many right ways of doing things and you may not have thought of them. Demonstrate that you are invested in your people's success. Listen to and appreciate everyone.



Curiosity

Curiosity is the key to possibility. It's a capacitor and generative. But it requires courage, openness, and a willingness to try something new even if you don't know how it's going to turn out. The last thing you want in a dynamic environment is a bad case of certainty. You may miss the path through because you can't see past your assumptions or fears.



It's okay to not know and try things. Curiosity can be guided by wisdom and tethered to reason. Take calculated risks. But first, set down what you think is real and explore what might be.



Compassion and understanding

People are sick and tired, literally and figuratively. It's been a lot. And it's not over. Your people are grieving, caring for loved ones, have unpredictable school and childcare schedules, and are doing more physical and emotional labor to just keep going.

Have compassion for what people are up against. Meet people where they are, acknowledge what is, and start there. Sometimes this means getting over your own expectations and feelings about how things should be.

Step into what is and begin where you're at with understanding and care for your people.



Adaptability

Shifting circumstances require adaptability and the capacity to change how things work, when things happen, and who is doing them. Sometimes it means changing where work happens or even what the work is.

Being flexible and aware of the big picture and what you are trying to achieve is essential to leading in changing circumstances.



Self-care

Don't forget to take care of yourself. It's easy for leaders to focus on work and forget their own requirements for rest, food, exercise, and caring relationships. Be open about how you are caring for yourself and make it okay for your team to care for themselves.

☒ A burnt-out, depressed, and exhausted leader will drag things down instead of lift others up.

We are all dealing with a lot and have been. It won't last forever. Resist your instincts to hurry up and fix things. Instead, see the changing environment as an opportunity to foster new ideas, innovations, and ways to work.

It may not be all about you, but by leading with compassion and curiosity, you can make the differences that matter most.

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