



# Leading During Disruption

The best teams overcome difficult situations to exceed expectations. And good teams that rise to the occasion often find themselves an even more cohesive, productive team after having been through what seems like a meat-grinder.

***How you lead will be one of your team's biggest factors of performance.*** Leadership during disruption is magnified... for better or for worse.

Here's how to step up and lead during difficult times.



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## How Do We React to Large-Scale Disruption?

We are in the midst of global disruption in the form of an invisible virus. Maybe that's why it's creating so much fear. It's the unknown and we're not just uncertain about what is happening in one aspect of our lives, but almost all aspects.

By its nature, disruption knocks us off our base. It disproves what we believe we know to be true. Our mental models for how the world works no longer explain what's happening very well. We're left with uncertainty. In response, we react in a variety of ways – anger, frustration, fear, overreaction, inaction – among others. As we work to gain control in a situation where so many things feel uncontrollable, we'll see weaknesses amplified and strengths overused. After all, those strengths have made us successful up to this point, right? Our goal is to help you **lead through example** and give you tools to help you and your team thrive during what is, quite honestly, something none of us have ever seen before.

In a crisis, leading by example is even more important. Why? Because, when we are uncertain, we don't look internally to create certainty. Instead we look to those around us, especially our leaders. Whether our leader seems concerned or overwhelmed or calm, we are more likely to mirror their reactions. We assume they have different information or know more than we do about a situation. So, their reaction to the crisis must be justified, and the safe thing to do is follow their lead.

You and your team are being asked to work differently during this crisis. You are probably working from home. You are not permitted to travel. There are no large meetings.

You have to create a new normal. This guide is here to help you do just that.



## Setting the Stage

Successfully working in new ways requires the team to understand and not lose sight of the larger context for your work. To optimize your performance and your team's performance during disruption, you have to set the stage by creating a common story of the context for your work.

### **Clarify your missions/purpose**

Why are we here? What are we working to accomplish? What impact will we have? This may not have changed but may be lost in what feels like chaos. If it hasn't changed, reassure your team that what you are trying to achieve, and the team's impact, is not changing. If it has changed, explain what the change is and why it is changing. Connect it to the bigger picture – the overall organization's mission and/or goals, the needs of the organization created by the disruption or shifting priorities.

### **Clarify goals and priorities**

Productivity may dip as people adjust to a new way of working and the complications that could develop from school closings, the need to care for older family members, etc. Clarify goals and priorities for your team. What is a must do versus a nice to do? What may have been critically important during business as usual but falls down the list of priorities now? Talk about if and how you will calibrate the expectations the larger organization has for your team

## Embrace your stakeholders

Disruption can cause individuals and teams to turn their focus inward and lose sight of their stakeholders. Take the team through a stakeholder identification (or reaffirmation) exercise. Make sure you have all the stakeholders on your radar. Then discuss:

- What communication they may need in addition to or different from what you have provided in the past?
- How you will communicate with them now. Does the mode need to change?
- How will you ensure that they are aware of changes that may be occurring in your team as a result of the disruption – new or different processes, processing time, changes in responsibilities because of team members being out, etc.
- How you will ensure you are aware of changes that are impacting them?

## Identify team risks

What risks are there to your team's ability to perform at its highest level by the disruption? How will you cover the work if several members of your team are out with the virus? What if they have elderly family members who need more help than usual? How will they deal with children being home from school for an extended period? What risk mitigation strategies can you put in place? Let your own leader and other key stakeholders know about the risks and the mitigation strategies you identified. Ask what else they see that your team may have missed.

# Adjusting to the New Way of Working

Working from home may be a new way of working for some people or old hat for others. Either way, it's now a reality for virtually everyone on your team. One of your goals is to create a level of predictability for your team in a highly unpredictable situation. Use these tips to help you team adjust to working in a new way, in a new location, in a world of disruption.

## REFLECT

How are you feeling about what is going on? How do you feel about the remote work? In times of uncertainty, your team will calibrate their response to the uncertainty based largely on your response. Set up routines for yourself to help you 'keep calm and carry on.'

## SHOW EMPATHY

People are experiencing everything from minor concern to outright fear, with disruption on multiple fronts. In addition, they may not have the most productive work environment. Schools may close. They may have older relatives to check in on. Their ability to shut it all out may be taxed. Talk about [feelings first](#).

## MOVE OFF EMAIL, COMMUNICATE REAL TIME

Even in the most email-driven organizations, we see each other all the time. When everyone is remote, we don't. Relying only on email can feel isolating. Pick up the phone. Get on Skype. Make a live connection

## SET UP A CADENCE FOR COMMUNICATION

What was your cadence for team and individual meetings to this point? Keep that. What else should you add? This is a rapidly changing situation. At a minimum, daily updates, should be the norm until the pace of disruption slows down. Length of updates can vary, but consistency should not.

## CHECKIN ONE ON ONE

Do personal check-ins with each person. Make sure they are adjusting well and have what they need to succeed. Ask questions. Listen actively.

## Adjusting to the New Way of Working, Continued

### CREATE CONTINGENCY PLANS

There are lots of unknowns and risks right now. What contingencies might your team need? For example, how will they adjust if members become ill and are out for several days? What if they need to care for? Working collaboratively on plans will create buy-in and better solutions.

### CREATE A VIRTUAL BREAK ROOM

Create ways that team members can catch up with each other and chat. It can be as simple as having each other's cell phone numbers to send texts, hop on Facetime or Skype or actually call each other.

### FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT

It's really easy to feel disconnected when everyone is remote. Key drivers of engagement are helping people feel they are part of something bigger, the ability to make progress and feel competent, and the ability to make decisions about how they work. Make sure your team members are feeling good about these factors.

### BREAK THE TENSION

This entire situation can be nerve wracking. Building in some fun could help bring a bit of relief. A silly contest, posting pictures of your 'home office' (which may be the kitchen table!), a rotating responsibility to share a dad joke every day could be just what the team needs. Even in the worst of times we need some fun.

### REVIEW THE WEEK

Whether on shared drive, Slack, or a live meeting, review the week with everyone. What did we accomplish? What issues are we having? How is our communication cadence working? How is everyone feeling?

The more quickly you can use some of these tips consistently, the quicker you will create a rhythm that helps your team create a "new normal" environment.



# Communicating During Disruption

Effective, transparent information is essential during disruption. People need to understand the situation and be given clear facts. Facts, however, are not enough. Your team also needs a rallying point; communication that will inspire and engage them while also helping them to transition to what is now being required of them.

## Storytelling

This can be your [leadership superpower](#). Human beings naturally think in story form. When we are given just facts and information, we're required to do more mental work to translate it into a story. When we are told a story, we insert ourselves into it. Stories about how others have worked through disruption, conquered challenges, pulled together as a team – especially if these are stories that you've personally experienced – can be shared and referred to by the team over and over again.

## Analogies

Mark Bonchek of SHIFT Thinking talks about the importance of analogies when introducing change. An analogy helps an individual make the mental shift between what is familiar and the change. He uses the example of the introduction of the automobile. Before cars, people rode in carriages. To help them understand what an automobile is, it was referred to as a horseless carriage. Eventually, mental models had shifted enough so that analogy was no longer required. The horseless carriage became known as the automobile or car. An analogy that may work in our current situation is how the new working arrangement is like a prolonged business trip. When we're out of the office on business, we need to connect in different ways – skype, facetime, phone calls or group chats but we adapt and find ways to be really effective. The same is true now.

## Great questions

During any kind of change and especially during disruption, people can feel like it is being done to them, that they have no influence. Great questions engage people in understanding the disruption and allow them to exercise the influence they have. Great questions can include things like “what can we control about how we get our work done remotely?” “What is important for you to be able to achieve what you’re expected to do?” “What do you need from me?” “How do you think we should approach this?”

## Humor

This crisis is not funny. It is very serious. However, using a little bit of humor can break the tension that will invariably arrive from lives turned upside down. A great place to start can be with self-deprecating humor. Everyone loves to hear the boss who doesn’t take themselves too seriously and can poke fun at his or her own mistakes. For example, if your four-year-old interrupts a conference call with your team, poke some lighthearted fun at yourself (not the four-year-old). Most of them can probably relate and will be able to laugh along with you.

Your team needs a rallying point, communication that will inspire and engage them





# Create a Team That Thrives During Disruption

This may seem counterintuitive. With everything else going on, we're going to focus on how well we work together and perform as a team? Many teams are able to perform when things are going well, but great teams perform even in the most challenging situations. This new way of work, during significant stress and difficulty, may provide a great opportunity to refocus on being a team, to ensure you are performing well now and to set you up for even higher performance when things return to normal. Depending on how your business is impacted by the disruption (seeing fewer customers? Delaying shipments? Launch dates pushed back?) your team may actually have time to think about how you are functioning as a team.

Some key areas your team could explore are:

- What is our purpose?
- What's effective in how we work together?
- What needs to improve?
- How well do we understand each other's work styles and preferences?
- What underlying tensions are getting in the way and now magnified by this situation? Do we handle conflict well?
- Are we clear on our roles and responsibilities?
- Do you have processes that need to be cleaned up?
- If we are a leadership team, how well are we showing up for our teams and modelling modeling effective behavior during this disruption? How can we be better change leaders?

# How We Can Help You and Your Team Lead During Disruption

**NextBridge Consulting's deep experience in leading change can help you and your teams thrive during disruption. Ways we can help include:**

- **Coaching for leading through disruptive change**
- **Customized virtual team development sessions: 1-2 hour sessions that help your team perform at its highest level during disruption.**
- **Webinars based on our Harvard Business Review articles:**
  - **5 Ways to Help Your Team Be Open to Change**
  - **5 Behaviors of Leaders Who Embrace Change**
- **Adapting your current in-person learning programs to highly- interactive, virtual learning experiences.**

**We're all better together. Let us know how we can help, even if it's just to chat. Reach out to us at [info@nextbridgeconsulting.com](mailto:info@nextbridgeconsulting.com) or 978.475.8424.**

## About Us

NextBridge partners with you to create and execute pragmatic, sustainable business solutions.

We focus on building your organization and culture, developing talent and navigating change.



## About Edith

Edith is NextBridge's managing partner and a widely-recognized consultant, speaker and author. She founded the company under the name Factor In Talent in 1999. Edith previously served as a Partner with Bridge Avenue Partners, Senior Consultant with Accenture, and in leadership roles at Bank of America and Fidelity Investments