

---

# Leadership through Uncertainty

10 Enduring lessons for turbulent times

# Leadership through Uncertainty

Uncertain times can severely test (and reveal) the quality of an organisation's leadership. It is during these times that great leaders act - and act decisively. Through their actions, they set an example for everyone in the organisation and stand as the difference between thriving in a crisis or suffering irreparable damage. Indeed, turbulent environments often increase the distance between winners and losers in competitive markets. Those that outpace the competition are often defined by the effectiveness of their leadership team.

So how do effective leaders deal with uncertainty? Here are 10 enduring lessons for organisations to consider.

## 1. COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE (AND THEN COMMUNICATE MORE)



Uncertainty produces anxiety throughout the workforce and among customers, suppliers and investors. Silence will be interpreted as (very) bad news. It is essential to communicate (and reinforce) a clear perspective on what is happening and what it means for the organisation.

### KEY QUESTIONS

- Are your leaders communicating often even when they don't have all the answers?
- Do your leaders demonstrate the poise and composure to reassure all stakeholders that the organisation is in safe hands?

## 2. HELP OTHERS LEAD



One person alone cannot lead in turbulent times. The organisation needs many leaders in times of such rapid, constant and unpredictable change. The best leaders step up at this time and help others lead - they do not retreat behind an understandable level of stress and information overload. Leaders who enable and create other leaders are catalysts for widespread change across leadership teams and boards.

### KEY QUESTIONS

- Is the next generation of leaders stepping up? Who is choosing to lead in these uncertain times?
- Is the current leadership asking for help across the organisation?
- Is the culture of the organisation one that allows people to lead without authority?

## 3. PLAN FOR THE LONG AND SHORT TERM



Great leaders have the ability to devote the appropriate resources to the immediate needs of the organisation while maintaining a focus on long-term strategic goals. These leaders don't hesitate to make the hard choices to address short-term priorities; they also demonstrate the courage to preserve the investments that are essential to the long-term health of the organisation. In the face of uncertainty, weak leaders are guided primarily by concerns over the "optics" of their decisions; strong leaders are guided by a clear view of the sacrifices required to preserve strategic direction.

### KEY QUESTIONS

- Are your leaders balancing short-term, tactical decision making with the long-term goals of the organisation?
- Are your leaders using data, rather than gut feel alone, to make decisions?
- Are your leaders considering short-term and long-term opportunities that turbulent times create, as well as managing the risks?

#### 4. FOCUS ON CORE VALUES



An organisation's mission, culture and values are put to the test in turbulent times. Great leaders communicate and amplify the organisation's mission to reassure and galvanize those around them. They identify "culture carriers" to set a visible example by reinforcing the culture and values that will guide the organisation through difficult periods. They consistently convey (in word and deed) that the organisation's enduring values are the best tool for navigating short-term challenges.

#### KEY QUESTIONS

- Do your leaders know which aspects of your culture will inspire people to overcome difficult situations?
- Can you identify the 'culture carriers' in your organization?
- How are your leaders communicating the importance of your organization's culture and values?

#### 5. ENGAGE EARLY, WITH PURPOSE AND HUMILITY



Even when under pressure, great leaders engage purposefully with those around them to marshal the energy of the broader workforce. They create a sense of togetherness by having the humility to listen to a wide range of opinions - not just those from their leadership team - and focus on asking questions rather than attempting to serve as the universal source of answers.

#### KEY QUESTIONS

- Are your leaders emotionally aware enough to listen, as well as tell?
- Does the organisation see the leader as authentic?
- Who is responsible for looking after your leaders, and what support mechanisms are in place?

#### 6. LOOK OUTWARD

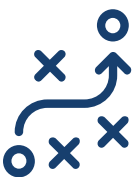


A natural reaction to a sudden shock is to withdraw inward. The best leaders actively resist this instinct. They look outward to employees, suppliers, customers, boards and investors, gathering the insight required to enable better decision making. This should be a two-way channel at all levels, with insights flowing to and from all key stakeholders.

#### KEY QUESTIONS

- Do your current leaders have a network of peers inside and outside the organisation who can share insight?
- Are your leaders open to new information to help better decision making rather than as a way of gathering power?
- Does your organisation have a culture of openness that encourages ideas and insight from all levels?

#### 7. CREATE ORDER FROM CHAOS



In the early days of a crisis, great leaders cut through the clutter of conflicting data and opinions, identifying the areas that need attention and allocating resources accordingly. They quickly develop and communicate a point of view on the best path forward, providing a welcome sense of direction to an organisation that might otherwise be paralyzed by indecision.

#### KEY QUESTIONS

- Do your leaders have the ability to cope with complexity?
- Do your leaders have the flexibility to make quick decisions and communicate them clearly?
- Can your leaders manage multiple stakeholders inside and outside the organisation proactively?

## 8. KNOW WHEN TO PIVOT



Great leaders are unsentimental about the strategies and tactics that have led to their success. They know the moment when abandoning what has always worked is less risky than sticking with the playbook. This ability to choose the right time to change tack instils confidence in the organisation and injects the energy needed to drive change.

### KEY QUESTIONS

- Are your leaders disposed to action over analysis and information gathering?
- How do your leaders approach risk?
- Is your organisation's culture open and inclusive enough to move and evolve rapidly?

## 9. EXUDE REALISTIC OPTIMISM



Great leaders must honestly accept the gravity of challenging situations. They communicate this openly and honestly and are humble enough to admit they don't have all the answers. Doing so provides them with credibility to also share an optimistic, authentic vision that is both reassuring and realistic.

### KEY QUESTIONS

- Do your leaders have the confidence to answer questions honestly even when they don't have all the answers?
- Are your leaders outwardly optimistic about the organisation's ability to navigate difficult times?

## 10. DEMONSTRATE GRIT



Grit is the mental toughness, perseverance and unwavering focus with which great leaders approach challenges. This means seeing tasks through to completion, maintaining the highest performance standards and exuding calm and optimism. In serving as a role model of these qualities, the best leaders lift the collective resilience and tenacity of the entire organisation.

### KEY QUESTIONS

- Do your leaders maintain focus and energy even when momentum is lacking in the organisation?
- Do your leaders maintain high standards regardless of the pressures the individual and organisation are under?
- Do your leaders inspire confidence in themselves and the organisation?

Russell Reynolds Associates is a global leader in assessment, recruitment and succession planning for boards of directors, chief executive officers and key roles within the C-suite. With more than 370 consultants in 46 offices around the world, we work closely with public, private and nonprofit organizations across all industries and regions. We help our clients build teams of transformational leaders who can meet today's challenges and anticipate the digital, economic, environmental and political trends that are reshaping the global business environment. Find out more at [www.russellreynolds.com](http://www.russellreynolds.com). Follow us on Twitter: [@RRAonLeadership](https://twitter.com/RRAonLeadership)

