

# Remote leadership: empathy as the key to successful crisis management

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**The COVID-19 situation has forced many companies to embrace new ways of working. This means that managers have to supervise their teams remotely while also keeping the business up and running, especially in industries such as retail. For many, this represents an unprecedented challenge.**

The [current situation](#) requires managers to be aware of the effects of the crisis on their employees. As a general rule, they should show empathy and make employee health and wellbeing a priority.

## **Centralised crisis management as a starting point**

A crisis can only be surmounted when available knowledge is continuously analysed against the current state of affairs using open communication and also taken into account with respect to planning. Leaders must not succumb to panic or become frantic. They must make sensible decisions and see to it that these are implemented. Every crisis requires swift action and doesn't leave much time for learning or trying out new things. It's precisely the necessity to make rapid adjustments that puts managers and employees under increased pressure. Establishing centralised crisis management that defines appropriate measures at the beginning of the process is imperative :

**Urgent actions:** actions required for business survival and for stabilising and reassuring different stakeholders.

**Anticipatory actions:** anticipate customer, employee and business needs.

**Relationship investments:** invest in relationships to increase future value.

**Strategic investments:** measures that secure long-term performance.

## **Establish boundaries and manage actively**

Defining such measures, however, is not enough. Managers and employees need to go on the journey together, seeing as the coronavirus crisis affects each of us in our personal day-to-day lives and we all deal with individual challenges differently. Working from home means that the work-life boundary becomes blurred. This situation requires discipline on the one hand and understanding by managers on the other. How can managers succeed in staying

connected to their employees and overcoming the crisis together?

### **Communication is key**

Managers need to communicate coherently to create a sense of calmness and clarity. They should make an effort to provide moral support and connection and maintain the flow of communication. The need for empathy is much greater during a crisis. Despite daily virtual team meetings, it is important to remember to make contact on a personal level. In addition to work, each of us is now facing enormous personal challenges. Managers should thus remain approachable. But how can they do so? Regularly check in with the whole team or individual employees, ideally every day.

- Ask questions such as: What works well? What are the challenges? Where is more support needed? What are you working on at the moment?
- Listen
- Support and encourage the team
- Set clear and realistic objectives
- Be transparent and regularly provide information
- Create confidence
- Focus on what needs to be achieved

### **The courage to act**

Managers need to turn their words into clear actions to maintain employee confidence. Decisiveness shows strength during a crisis. Employees should always be made aware of what is really at stake, what is important, what is urgent, what is not so important and what is irrelevant. Clear goals provide orientation and relief. Specifically, this means:

- Accepting [the new normal](#)
- Providing the necessary tools
- Focusing on the capabilities of the team

### **Bolstering morale**

The shift to working from home represents a cultural change for most organisations. Various digital tools and platforms are used to maintain a sense of community and team cohesion. It is particularly important for organisations to express a certain amount of tolerance for different living situations. However, the responsibility for establishing clear rules and setting priorities rests with the management. In short, this can be achieved by:

- Allowing flexibility in employee time management
- Establishing clear boundaries for work hours (balance between work time/availability and breaks)
- Respecting individual needs

- Offering to coach

### **Inclusion is called for**

All team members – from key players to support employees – must be given attention. This especially applies to employees who do not interact with the team on a daily basis because they work part-time, for instance. It is important to ensure that they also feel integrated and connected to the team. Here are some helpful pointers:

- Assign practical tasks to strengthen team solidarity and provide a sense of wellbeing
- Focus on the individual and collective strengths of team members

Managers must remain empathetic, consistent and proactive, as the most important thing right now is to feel connected during this period of social isolation. You can do this by talking about personal matters instead of work during the first few minutes of a meeting. This strengthens team spirit and creates more confidence. Ultimately, this crisis gives managers and companies the opportunity to change and improve teamwork in the long term.