

How to Lead

Strong leadership for uncertain times

Business leaders' insights on the unprecedented challenges caused by the coronavirus pandemic

Vas Narasimhan,
CEO of Novartis



You have to lead yourself first to lead your organisation well in a crisis. You have to focus on your wellbeing and mindset. You have to keep perspective, sleep well, maintain healthy habits, and seek diverse sources of knowledge. And you have to take the long view.

You also have to create clarity for your teams and trust them without micromanaging. For Novartis, this fits with our "unbossed" culture – built on purpose-driven and empowered people.

Last, you have to find sources of optimism and compassion – and we see many around the world right now. I believe human resilience and science-based action rise to the occasion when humanity is most in need. The global response is in full swing and we will get past this pandemic and every pandemic to come.

Grant Reid,
CEO of Mars

This is a situation unlike any we've seen before, so there's no playbook to follow. It's times like these when we really rely on our five principles (quality, responsibility, efficiency, mutuality and freedom), because they ground our decision making in empathy and create stability and hope in tumultuous times.

Right now, the needs of our 125,000 Mars associates are front and centre of our considerations. That includes adopting policies to protect their health, providing extra flexibility

to manage quarantine situations, and dealing with the anxiety and impact created by the pandemic.

Despite all this disruption, we're working with our partners to continue delivering Mars products and veterinary services to people and pets the world over who depend upon them.

We certainly don't have all the answers, but we are continuing to communicate frequently and with transparency as things evolve. The most important thing we can all do right now is to remain calm, do our part to prevent the virus from spreading, and take care of each other.

Julie Sweet,
CEO of Accenture



I think there are three things that are really important: the first is transparency and that's true with clients and with our people. It's OK to say "I don't know" but you need to be transparent. Transparency builds trust and it's critical in a crisis.

The second is what I call calm and compassionate. My job as a leader is not to put more stress into a system that is already stressed.

The third piece, which has never been more important, is staying very close to clients and employees, that there's so much fear and anxiety and concern if your only focus is what you're reading and hearing you're often missing what's happening on the ground. If you don't stay very close to clients

and employees you're going to make the wrong decisions. How I'm leading right now is I'm focused very hard on transparency, staying calm and compassionate and staying very close to our clients and employees.

Alex Liu, managing partner at Kearney



I think the urgency and immediacy of communications globally and to all walks of our firm is obvious. Because we're a services business we should not make unilateral decisions just based on what we would like to do.

Also we have to understand the obligations we have to the communities and to clients who are just as unsettled as we are. It's an emergency, it's unplanned. There are a couple of principles you have to lean back on. It's a moment of truth and all moments of truth determine how you look at yourself. It is an opportunity to build trust, which is lacking in institutions these days.

All leaders have to communicate based on authentic communications with all the stakeholders. You have to be realistic, understand people's anxiety, but also be a bit forward looking.

David Winter and David Millstone, Co-CEOs of Standard Industries

There is little precedent for a crisis of this scale and magnitude, and yet we still have to make decisions on a minute-by-minute basis to keep our people safe

while at the same time ensuring the businesses are functioning and moving forward. Those decisions often involve difficult trade-offs.

All of this happens against a backdrop of well-meant but sometimes contradictory and quickly evolving government decisions that we have to react to.

To cut through the noise, we've assembled a group of outside experts from the business, government and medical communities to provide us with the most reliable information available in real time.

Ultimately, the scale of the problem is too big for any one company, and governments will have to step in to manage the crisis and support the economy. But for now, we've had to acknowledge that the old playbooks don't apply and we simply have to trust our instincts.

Warren Kanders, CEO of Safariland



You need to keep a positive attitude. On the other hand, a point we want to get across to everybody is that the world doesn't stop and what we do is important, and [demand] will come back and we need to be there to support our customers and the folks who depend on us. And then we need to be thankful we have a very strong business.

We have contingency plans. If revenues fall we know what we need to do in order to manage through the business. We can balance people. One of the possibilities is you work half a day, I work half a day.

Some work is better than no work.

Richard Gelfond,
CEO of Imax

I think [the priority] is being completely transparent from the very beginning; saying what you know and what you don't know; and, as it unfolds, being agile.

Even though the news has not been generally what people want to hear I think they respect the fact that they tell it to you honestly.

Julian Richer, founder of Richer Sounds



Communication is absolutely key, but you have to be honest . . . We have tried to get the bad news out fast; first, admitting mistakes so that you can learn from them.

It is also important not to overpromise. You don't know what will happen. I can say I will do the right thing in the right circumstances. For example, we are paying three times statutory sick pay, not just if you have got coronavirus but if you need to be at home because you have underlying health problems.

Tim Ryan, chair of PwC US

As leaders . . . it is important for executives to be calm. It is important for executives to focus on some of the positive and heartwarming stories that are happening out there, the stories where people are rallying together, where people are taking care of one another, where people are adapting to new ways of working and doing amazing things in their communities,

because it is those stories that will help inspire others to do the same as we work through this.

And then, lastly, and maybe most importantly, transparency will be the name of the game.

Will Butler Adams,
managing director of Brompton Bicycles



When things get difficult, you need to slow everybody down. You need to remind everybody to batten down the hatches but not to overreact because you may need to survive the next three to six months but you also want to remain in business longer term.

We have a weekly meeting to approve all recruitment and capital expenditure. We have not put this spending on hold, we have just said that everything needs to be approved. We are investing in tooling and some staff. About 80 per cent of recruitment has been put on hold but not 100 per cent.

We are in a very good cash position but we are looking to secure an overdraft. We don't think we need it but we better have it available.

We have got a problem, however, if we cannot ship bikes. This is a problem with the supply chain but the show must go on as best you can and the difference between running at 70 per cent capacity and 80 per cent capacity is quite big. You have got to go back to being entrepreneurial and changing the way you work.

Reporting by Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson, Sarah Neville and Jonathan Moule