

Leading in these uncertain times of the pandemic



The Covid-19 pandemic has unleashed much turmoil across the globe, with its impact being felt across organisations and people everywhere. We as a nation are clearly experiencing liminality, a feeling of being in limbo, of being betwixt and between what was before this pandemic – and what is emerging, as events unfold across the globe and South Africa. This period of liminality can be a very unsettling time for individuals, yet it may also be a catalyst for experimentation and learning. This learning has been evidenced in the speedy adaptation to remote working, coupled with virtual leadership and collaborative approaches, when the lockdown commenced here.

Now that the lockdown in South Africa has been extended for another two weeks, the feelings of liminality and anxiety about the economic impact have been heightened for many leaders. Leaders are grappling with what's going to happen and what the implications will be for the economy, organisations, businesses and consumers – and the knock-on effects of these. Leaders are also trying to make sense of what needs to be done regarding their businesses during the pandemic and beyond it. At a personal level, leaders are anticipating the impact on their people and themselves. Leaders therefore have the challenge of being able to engage with the uncertainty in their organisational context and to lead others through this period, while managing their own experienced uncertainty.

What are some of the implications for leaders? Highlighting these will also point to leverage points for where HR can influence and support leaders in their organisations.

Acknowledge and accept the discomfort of uncertainty

While some leaders may be more comfortable with uncertainty, most of them are experiencing vulnerability and anxiety, understandably. Leaders therefore need to be able to acknowledge their own personal uncertainty, to accept the discomfort of uncertainty and to normalise it. In doing this, they can come to terms with the uncertainty – and then find ways to move forward and engage with the uncertainty in their business context. One way that leaders might approach this, is to remind themselves of past changes, crises or periods of uncertainty they have been through, and then to reflect on and remind themselves about how they grew through these periods. Doing this type of reflection can help leaders to consciously adopt a learning mindset in going through this pandemic and the challenges associated with it, and beyond.

However, the current type of change being navigated by organisations is complex and can be expected to be messy and emergent. As a result, leaders must appreciate that their experienced uncertainty (and that of their team members) will be one of flux, as events in their organisations unfold in relation to national developments and their organisations' changing strategies. This means they will need to be aware of and acknowledge the shifts in their emotional states due to the flux of uncertainty in their contexts and also regulate their emotions accordingly, as leaders' emotions are contagious and tend to influence others.

Adopt a learning mindset and foster learning agility

Adopting a learning mindset will lay the foundation for intentionally fostering leaders' learning agility through this period – and, importantly, beyond it – when organisations are talking about having a 're-set' in their businesses or creating a new normal. Learning agility is what enables adaptability. It is about being able to unlearn and let go of certain skills and mental frames that are no longer relevant, and being open-minded to new possibilities and able to take on new perspectives and new skills.

Learning agility has become a buzzword in recent years, but what does it mean for leadership in practice? To begin with, leaders need to frame this period of uncertainty and complexity as a learning opportunity, helping them to set their intention to learn their way through and from the experience of this pandemic and its impact. The leaders' approach to learning will also set the tone for their team members. Aligned with this, leaders must keep abreast with developments related to the pandemic – and developments in their business sector.

In terms of the business and a leader's area of responsibility, it is essential that the leader identify the specific problems being faced and also anticipate those challenges to be encountered as events unfold. And leaders need to proactively look for opportunities to contribute to the sustainability of the business and its future re-set. What must be prioritised in the shorter-term – and how will these items be actioned? Importantly, leaders need to truly care about and prioritise the safety and health of their people in the work arrangements that are established after the easing of lockdown and towards resuming full business operations.

Also, consideration must be given to identifying priorities for the medium-term and beyond. What

opportunities require further exploration, and how will these be approached? To re-set the business on a more sustainable path, what lessons can be learned from this pandemic and how could business be changed for a more sustainable future, that contributes positively to societal and environmental challenges? Should teams be set up with specific focus areas? What options could be experimented with, possibly as pilots, without destabilising the current operations? How will feedback be gathered on any experiments or pilots to be able to course-correct and to learn? In doing all of the above, it is critical that leaders involve and engage with their people and key stakeholders.

Truly engage with people in the business

To enable their team members to engage constructively with the change and uncertainty in their work context, leaders must have compassion for what people are experiencing and be able to contain their anxiety. Containing anxiety does not mean trying to eliminate anxiety or simply offering reassurance. It is about being genuine, listening to others with empathy, and giving them the space to get concerns out into the open. Leaders can assist by guiding people towards identifying areas they can make a contribution to and also create a sense of community within the team by encouraging members to support each other. Adopting this approach, will help team members to redirect their anxiety into a more a positive and hopeful energy.

Focus on communication

Leaders must make communication with their people and key stakeholders a priority as they navigate the changes through this period. Research on the effectiveness of communication during organisational change highlights these crucial aspects that leaders need to focus on when communicating - to be honest while being realistically optimistic, and to foster hope without creating an impression of certainty when they are not in a position to do so. The research also emphasises the need to communicate regularly, even when there has been no progress. Once a commitment has been made to regular communication briefings, it is important to uphold this. In the business context, it can be challenging at times to be fully transparent in communications with employees and key stakeholders, particularly when business negotiations or other forms of consultation are taking place. Yet, in these times of social media, leaders should anticipate that communication will get out into the public and to factor this into the planning and execution of their communication, so that trust and credibility are maintained in the eyes of their employees and key stakeholders.

The times we are going through demand extraordinary leadership, which may be daunting for many leaders, but the challenges encountered will certainly present opportunities for leaders to learn and to influence their businesses towards re-setting them on a more sustainable path.