

## The Psychology of Crisis Leadership

Law firm leaders<sup>1</sup> are intensely focused on responding to the CoronaVirus crisis. However, despite their best efforts, many leaders are telling me that their people are experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, fear, and emotional overload. That's not surprising, given the pace and magnitude of the changes affecting us all.

This crisis definitely has psychological consequences—specifically, it has upended our basic needs for predictability, control and human connection, and has thereby generated enormous stress while reducing our sense of well-being.

In this article, I'll explain why and how the crisis disrupts these needs. I'll then explain what you as a leader can do to help restore that well-being and ensure that your decisions and actions land in the best possible way.

### *The Crisis Disrupts*

Any crisis creates disruption, but the disruption is usually limited to one realm or another. The CoronaVirus crisis has disrupted almost every aspect of our lives all at once, and it's done so fairly suddenly. We're all feeling potential threats to our health, our finances, and our relationships.

While you can't control the course of the virus and the global consequences it causes, many of you are already taking wise remedial steps to respond to the disruption, such as insuring social distancing, providing tech resources for working remotely,

---

<sup>1</sup> For purposes of brevity and clarity, I've addressed leaders in law firms only, but this article actually applies equally to leaders of corporate law departments.



ensuring continuity of service to clients, increasing communication, and making sure that your people are ok.

But taking the right steps is only part of effective leadership. It's equally essential to pay attention to *how* you communicate and execute those steps. Your mindset, your pace, your empathy—all of these have an impact on how effective your leadership actions will be, and on how receptive your people will be. Your style and tone influence whether your people will experience predictability, control and connection, or just the opposite.

Let's take a look at the three needs I've mentioned:

**Predictability**: In a crisis, people hunger for predictability. We need to know what to expect. Uncertainty is not all bad--our brains rely on it as a signal that a threat is imminent. But escalating uncertainty can trigger anxiety (which is basically fear about an unknown future). When anxiety is elevated, our ability to problem-solve and think rationally declines, our capacity to connect with others is inhibited, and our immune response is weakened. One antidote is to focus our attention on the things that remain predictable in order to provide at least some stability. Here are three examples of how to do that:

*Create small pockets of predictability.* Establish a regular, periodic briefing time, for example, so that people have a *regular* expectation that they'll be updated about critical information at the same time each day, each week, etc. I recommend doing this even if there's nothing new to report. Steps like this can create a pocket of predictability.

Also, insure that messaging to your people from different leaders is consistent. Nothing kills predictability like mixed messages.



*Remind your people of those things that remain stable and predictable.* Remind people regularly about resources that remain available and operational. When our attention is only focused on the uncertainty, it feeds fear; but if you can also re-direct peoples' attention to things that remain unchanged, it can be reassuring.

*Be a role model by managing your own fears.* Role-modeling is a powerful tool, particularly in a crisis. In times of uncertainty, people look to their leaders for cues about how to react. Leaders need to remain calm, focused and authentic. Let people know what steps you are taking. Before you speak, ask yourself if others will receive your demeanor as reassuring or as alarming. Even bad news can be conveyed in a way that reassures people that you're on top of it. Your steadiness and emotional honesty can be one of the most important ways you have to restore a sense of calm and predictability among your people.

**Control:** In general, most people want autonomy, that is, to feel like we exert some *control*, that we have at least some significant input into our lives as they unfold. We want choices. My research shows that we lawyers have an even greater need for this than the general public.

The crisis has disrupted our autonomy already in a number of ways—for example, federal, state and local governments have all issued warnings to maintain social distance, and even to self-quarantine. They've made a number of other recommendations that limit our freedom in the name of protecting everyone's health.

But at the same time, luckily, the crisis offers new opportunities for autonomy—if we capitalize on them. For example, many of us are working from home with the added autonomy that this brings.



Try to be sensitive to the need that your lawyers have for some subjective sense of choice and control. Focus on what *can* be controlled more than on what can't be controlled.

Another step you can take: give your people binary choices whenever you make a decision, instead of just imposing a decision on them.

For example, “Let's set up a call for next week—Do you want to call me? Or do you want me to initiate the call?” It may seem like a relatively trivial choice, but to a brain in high alert mode, lots of simple choices like this one can be calming and serve to restore a sense of control.

Even better, actively encourage your people to innovate as they work from home. Empower them to invent new ways of working in light of all the disruptive changes. One of the strengths of the U.S. culture is our penchant for taking hierarchy with a grain of salt when common sense tells us that improvising is better. Giving your lawyers permission to channel their inner MacGuyver can beef up their psychological sense of control just when it's needed most.

**Connection:** More and more emerging research underlines the importance of relationships. They build psychological resilience. They strengthen our immune system—a nice feature when trying to fight off a virus. They increase both personal happiness and work satisfaction. Good relationships have even been shown to prolong life.

The mandate to practice “social distancing” ironically imposes barriers to connection at a time when it would do us the most good.



What can you as a leader do? Convene videoconferences with your lawyers frequently. We often assume that the main benefit of videoconferencing is the efficiency of disseminating information or discussing issues, but they also serve a very important social purpose. Convene them more often than you think is logically necessary.

Also, encourage your lawyers to keep in touch with each other, especially via visual media like Skype or Zoom or even Instagram and other static social media. And encourage them to check in with friends, loved ones, and isolated or vulnerable members of their social circle. [Isolation](#) can produce sadness and lower immune response. According to [Harvard Business Review](#), the legal profession is already the loneliest profession.

Another aspect of social connection is the need we all have to be part of something larger than ourselves. In a crisis like this, there's an opportunity to tap into our innate need to feel connected to all others. One potential silver lining to the crisis is that because it's a threat to the entire planet, people are more inclined to unite around the sentiment that "we're all in this together." In fact, it's dawning on many of us that we are truly linked to all others in very concrete ways. When I seclude myself in my home, I'm not just avoiding my own exposure to the virus—I'm also actively taking a step to protect others in my community from possible infection. Ironically, isolation is itself a community-minded act.

### **In Summary:**

Here, in one spot, are the actionable suggestions I've mentioned which derive from the principles I've outlined. I've also added some additional do's and don'ts that derive from the same principles:



Set up a *regular* time to communicate with your people, to inform them, to keep them up to date about developments and about steps that you're taking. It's reassuring to know that there's a particular time every day or every week when they'll hear from you.

Overcommunicate. In a time of uncertainty, communication is reassuring, lowers anxiety, and builds community.

Communicate by Skype or Zoom if you can. Video is the most emotionally connected medium, and in a time of crisis, you need to foster connection. If video is impractical, do your updates and check-ins via telephone conference call. Only as a last resort use email—it's less personal, less connected, and invites one-way communication and less give-and-take.

Encourage your people to reach out to loved ones, friends, clients, and others in their communities just to check in and see how people are doing. When people work remotely, it can be isolating. Reaching out is good for your lawyers and good for those they call.

This is not the time for a command-and-control leadership style. Everyone knows that you don't know how this will turn out. Instead, adopt a two-way communication style, seek the input of your people. Care for them, check in with them. See how everyone's doing. Build community. Be as authentic and compassionate as you can. Despite how uncomfortable many lawyers find it, vulnerability in a time of crisis builds trust, bonds, and connection.

Communicate to *everyone*—lawyers, business services professionals/legal operations/admin staff, support staff. Don't use different messaging for lawyers and others—everyone needs to hear the same message. (If you need to discuss financial or other



sensitive issues, you can always convene a separate partners-only call.)

Give people an opportunity to express their feelings and report ways that they're coping.

Direct peoples' attention towards those things that remain operational, that remain stable, things they can count on. In a time of change and uncertainty, it's reassuring to remind people about things that *aren't* changing.

Create routines, rituals, things that people can look forward to on a regular basis. The familiar is always calming and reassuring.

Above all, exercise your empathy muscle. Put yourself in the shoes of the other person. Ask yourself what experience they may be having. Ask yourself how your communication may land—are they likely to receive it the way you meant it?

Slow down—pay attention to your demeanor in talking to others. Pay attention not only to the *content* of your messaging but to the *way* you deliver it. Especially in a time of crisis, people are more sensitized to hearing tone and nuance. If you're stressy in the way you communicate, for example, then you'll arouse stress in your listener. Deliver your messages in calm, steady, reassuring ways.

Take time out during the day to manage your own stress. Take long, slow deep breaths. Exhale longer than you inhale. Or, do 5 minutes of progressive muscle relaxation—starting with your feet, tighten the muscles to a count of 3 (“one, two three . . .”), then slowly relax the muscles (“three, two, one . . .”), and work your way to the top of your scalp. Or consider mindfulness meditation.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Some suggested books on mindfulness meditation: *Search Inside Yourself* by Chade-Meng Tan; *10% Happier* by Dan Harris; *Mindfulness for Beginners* by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Some suggested apps for mindfulness meditation: Insight Timer; Calm; Headspace; 10% Happier.



You'll be most effective as a leader when you “put your own oxygen mask on first.”

The bottom line is that your actions as a leader matter more now than ever. If you take those actions in a way that restores some sense of predictability, gives choices to your people, and supports maintaining connections, you will lower everyone's stress, foster greater well-being, and maintain productivity and performance despite the crisis.

– XXX –

Dr. Larry Richard is the founder and principal consultant at LawyerBrain LLC. You can reach him at [drlarryrichard@lawyerbrain.com](mailto:drlarryrichard@lawyerbrain.com) or at [www.lawyerbrain.com](http://www.lawyerbrain.com).