

# The Economist

## How Leaders Can Use a Crisis to their Career Advantage

by Julie Winkle Giulioni

Leaders have a unique opportunity right now. Everything they choose to do during these challenging times has an impact, either strengthening or weakening their teams and the results they're able to achieve. In fact, this may be the most profound leadership test of our generation – one that will define leaders and the limits of their career advancement for years to come.

Leaders who want to contribute today while distinguishing themselves for tomorrow's opportunities and growth need to focus on three priorities: connections, innovation, and growth. Here's specifically how.

### **Facilitate connections.**

Given the exodus of approximately 89% of employees from the workplace to physically isolated home-based working configurations, connections are beyond frayed at just the time people need them most. Leaders who will distinguish themselves today and beyond understand this dynamic and respond by building the following connections.

- Connections between employees and the organization. Physical distancing only exacerbates the emotional distance employees may feel during a crisis. As a result, leaders need to intentionally connect the dots between what employees are doing and how it serves the mission, vision, and customers. They must keep painting the big picture – and painting each individual into it. And they also need to – when appropriate and authentic – reinforce the organization's commitment to employees. If your organization has made a promise of no furloughs, remind people of that. If across-the-board salary reductions are saving jobs, highlight this. Finding ways to spotlight the organization's connection to employees helps to forge stronger ties that flow in both directions. This level of commitment speaks volumes about the leaders who are able to inspire it – even in a crisis.

- Connections among employees. Considerably higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression are being reported across industries – which isn't surprising. Human beings are social animals and right now there's insufficient connection to promote wellbeing for many. Leaders can bridge the gap by consciously increasing the opportunity for interaction. Zoom happy hours and video-based team meetings are popular options; but there are countless others. Consider pairing employees together as coaching partners to check in and problem solve challenges during this time. Strategically assign tasks and projects in a way that encourages greater collaboration. Invite employees to evaluate the level of connection they feel and suggest ways to elevate it. Leaders whose teams emerge from a crisis stronger and more cohesive prove their worth and set themselves apart from others.
- Connections for themselves. Positioning yourself for advancement post-crisis means using this time to reinforce and expand your professional network. Remain in regular contact with those in your inner circle. Investing in these relationships makes business sense; it also helps you manage your own stress and isolation. But this is also the time to expand your circle by reaching out to those who can offer different perspectives or experiences. Colleagues in other departments or divisions. Competitors. Authors, bloggers, or podcasters you respect. Growing the quality and quantity of your network today can only help your efforts tomorrow.

### **Drive and distribute innovation.**

Over the past several months, innovation has been key to the survival of many organizations. In the years to come, we'll read case studies featuring creative business pivots – from distilleries transitioning to hand-sanitizer production to Michelin-rated restaurants offering gourmet carry-out meals. The leaders of the organizations that innovated will be applauded – and their careers will likely flourish. But leaders can't drive innovation alone; they must distribute it throughout all levels of the organization. Start encouraging greater innovation with the following strategies.

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- Cultivate curiosity and a culture of experimentation. Make it safe – and even pleasant – for people to take a risk, try something new, and step out of the box. Model curiosity yourself to inspire it in others. Wonder out loud and celebrate those who ask ‘why?’ And make sure that your team understands the failure isn’t fatal if they learn from it.
- Set the expectation that ‘innovation’ is part of everyone’s job description. In many organizations, permission to come up with new ideas is reserved for executives or those in R&D. Business conditions and competition – even before the pandemic – no longer allow for that. So, be explicit and let your team know that they should bring their best and most creative thinking to their work. Recognize, coach, and reward accordingly.
- Spread responsibility, authority, and ownership all around. Beyond giving permission and setting expectations, you must enable others to be more innovative. This may mean relinquishing top-down control, allowing for more autonomy, and sharing accountability in new and sometimes uncomfortable ways. But it also means establishing a reputation for your team – one of ingenuity, commitment and innovation – and establishing for yourself a reputation for exceptional leadership worthy of future opportunities.

### **Enable exponential growth and development.**

Growth is only possible when we enter our ‘discomfort zone’ and there’s never greater discomfort than during a crisis. The ambiguity and uncertainty of current workplace conditions conspire to support powerful learning. Additionally, a recent study conducted with Advantage Performance Group last month found that 75% of employees surveyed have the same amount or more time for learning today as compared to pre-COVID. As a result, leaders who aspire to their own future growth and advancement should double-down on the development of their employees now.

This means immediately updating development plans to support current knowledge and skill gaps, while also keeping an eye toward anticipating and preparing for evolving needs. Then it’s a matter of matching targeted experiences with developmental priorities. And the good news is that during a crisis, there are plenty of tasks, projects, and initiatives representing real work that needs to be completed and opportunities for employees to engage in real-time learning as they take them on.

Finally, it’s essential – especially when people are grappling with unfamiliar and stressful circumstances – to incorporate ongoing conversations and processes that ensure that employees pause, reflect, and capture learning for individual use as well as for the benefit of the team and the organization. Committing to learning and development during a crisis means that your team will emerge more capable than before – and so will you.

“Never let a good crisis go to waste.”  
Winston Churchill

While I’m not sure that our global pandemic constitutes a ‘good crisis,’ it’s certainly not something to be wasted by forward-thinking leaders. Thoughtfully and deliberately enhancing connections, innovation, and development during this or any crisis will not only enhance your effectiveness while the storm rages. It will also position you for career advancement and success once the clouds clear and the sun returns.

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*Julie Winkle Giulioni is a champion for workplace growth and development and helps leaders optimize talent and potential within their organizations. Named one of Inc. Magazine’s top 100 leadership speakers, she’s the co-author of the international bestseller, *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go* and author of the *Nautilus* and *Axiom* business book award-winner, *Promotions Are So Yesterday*. Julie is a regular contributor to numerous business publications*