

How to Lead Effectively When Everything Feels Fragile and Nothing Feels Certain

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Whether you're a seasoned investor or budding entrepreneur, it is clear that in today's turbulent world, instability is not an exception – it's the norm, and we must have the tools and mindset to navigate this certain uncertainty.

Embrace adaptive decision-making

Market volatility, supply chain disruptions, team turnover and regulatory shifts are happening at a rapid pace in every industry, and these stressors can feel overwhelming, even existential.

But when we learn from leaders who have operated in some of the world's most fragile environments – conflict zones, post-crisis governments and unstable political systems – we find that such conditions are manageable, and from their experiences, we can draw profound lessons. The leaders who succeed in these environments are the ones who embrace uncertainty, build trust and adapt quickly to rapidly evolving circumstances.

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Build trust to weather crises

Fragile business ecosystems require sensitive adaptability and fluidity. Rigid leadership styles often crack under pressure. Leaders who cling to certainty are quickly outpaced by complexity, while those who embrace adaptive leadership – rooted in learning, iteration and responsiveness – are better equipped for uncertainty. For entrepreneurs, this means moving away from static business plans and embracing agility. Set short-term priorities that allow for learning cycles. Use weekly retrospectives to evaluate what's working. Build feedback loops into your decision-making processes.

The ability to pivot quickly, while staying grounded in core values, is what sets resilient leaders apart. In high-risk environments, trust is the foundation for rapid, effective collaboration.

Collaborative leadership thrives on mutual respect, psychological safety and open communication. As evidenced in modern approaches to “soft and hard” workplace leadership skills, do not wait for a crisis to start building trust. Create a culture of transparency today. Invite dissenting opinions. Share the “why” behind hard decisions. Across turbulent business, social and political landscapes, what I have seen time and time again is that when people feel heard and respected, they are far more likely to rally in difficult times. Trust, once established, becomes the invisible glue holding your organization together when external pressures mount.

Leverage diverse ideas to build resilience

In transitional governments and post-crisis rebuilding, effective leaders often rely on broad coalitions – civil

society, the private sector, and diaspora communities – not just for representation, but as a strategic advantage. Diverse teams bring fresh perspectives, challenge assumptions and innovate under pressure. Entrepreneurs can apply this by hiring for cognitive and experiential diversity, building cross-functional teams and fostering a culture of ownership, reflection and shared purpose. The most resilient teams I've seen weren't just skilled – they were united by something bigger than their job titles.

In my work with the World Bank's Collaborative Leadership for Development program, we saw time and again that moments of acute crisis often opened up space for bold reforms – reforms that would have been politically impossible in calmer times. One example that demonstrates how adaptive leadership and collaborative trust can unlock progress under pressure comes from one of our projects in Nigeria.

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Case study: Nigeria's water reform

In Nigeria, easy access to groundwater and informal water markets made it hard for the government to collect tariffs and maintain infrastructure. We ran a workshop in Obudu with 50+ engineers, water commissioners, business and civil society leaders from six states to shift focus from technical fixes – like tariffs and meters – to adaptive challenges: ensuring payment and preventing water theft by addressing behavior change and stakeholder engagement. By the end of the program, teams had set 11-month goals, built action plans and crafted customized stakeholder messages. The success of these cross-functional teams contributed to national legislation reform on stakeholder engagement.

This example underscores how cross-sector collaboration, local buy-in and a shared sense of purpose can unlock large-scale

systems change. The lessons here are just as relevant for startup founders as they are for policymakers: Deep listening, shared accountability and stakeholder trust are not optional in today's fractured landscape – they're essential.

See crisis as a catalyst

When old systems break down, new ideas can finally take root. Entrepreneurs should view crises not only as threats but as invitations to rethink outdated assumptions. Which processes can be streamlined? What technologies could you adopt now that seemed risky before? Who else needs to be involved in strengthening your team? Crisis forces clarity. Use it to your advantage.

It begins with me

One of the core components of what I teach global leaders is the importance of self-mastery. Leaders working in fragile environments often carry the emotional weight of their teams, communities and constituents. They must find ways to center themselves amid chaos. Similarly, entrepreneurs need practices that build inner resilience. Whether it's breathwork, meditation or structured time for reflection, grounding yourself enables you to find calm and focus – both of which are essential during times of stress.

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Remember: As a leader, your team takes emotional cues from you. The steadier you are, the more stable your organization becomes.

A resilient team begins with each member cultivating self-mastery. Individual transformation is the foundation for systemic change. To foster true collaboration, leaders must empower their teams with the tools to find inner strength and

hone leadership skills needed to navigate uncertainty.

Leading under pressure isn't about having all the answers. It's about having the humility to learn, the courage to act and the wisdom to bring others along. The entrepreneurs who can master these skills will not only weather the storm – they will reshape the landscape in its aftermath.

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