Under Pressure: 6 Ways to Be a Good Manager in an Ongoing Crisis



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As the Twitterverse put it, “We’re not just at home working. We’re at home, during a crisis, trying to work.” Over the past year, crisis mode has become the new normal. Even the most fortunate among us is likely struggling in some way. Knowing this, good managers everywhere are feeling pressure to “fix” situations for their teams. Guess what? You can’t fix this crisis. And that’s ok. Even if you don’t have control over the conditions or fallout from the ongoing public health, social justice and economic crises, you do have control over building and supporting your team‘s resilience.

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It’s time for a new approach to the situation we’re in now that we’ve officially crossed into the long-term-near-permanence territory. Businesses must acknowledge new priorities and goals, and managers must be open to fresh ideas and candid discussions with employees. To help managers reframe their thinking, here are five best practices to consider.

1. Acknowledge you can’t solve everything

Many managers are stressed out knowing their team members feel isolated and anxious, may be grieving or are stretched thin between work, childcare, homeschooling, elder care and more. The fact that you know what your team members are struggling with means you’ve been consistently checking in with them – job well done. Although you can’t fix what they’re each going through, the very act of asking “how are you feeling?” and making space in meetings or one-on-ones for everyone to answer can be a more supportive and effective approach than trying to be the problem-solver.

Rather than trying to solve every problem, having and showing emotional intelligence (EQ) can go a long way. One exercise that Udemy instructor Leila Bulling Towne uses when coaching clients is called, “Feel it. Place it. Get it.” Feel it: Identify what you are feeling by finding where you’re feeling stress in your body. Are you over-heating? Stomachache? Place it: Why are you feeling that way? Who is there? What’s the situation? Get it: This is when we connect all of the dots and can begin to assess ways to alleviate our stress. By bringing this type of perspective to our teams, we can ultimately build their EQ muscle and create space to increase resilience.

2. Support a psychologically safe work environment

A psychologically safe environment is one in which employees feel safe, comfortable, included and can share perspectives and challenges and make mistakes without fear of repercussion. Amy Edmondson, Harvard professor and author of *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*, links psychological safety to innovation and business success. In addition, feeling secure to speak one's mind is particularly important today for helping individuals cope in different ways with what's going on in the world. For example, a safe space makes it alright for someone to say, "I need to take a break; I'm too upset to work right now."

Team members can't do good work if they're sick or highly stressed. Therefore, it's important to clearly communicate to your team how wellbeing and mental and physical health are a top priority. Managers should regularly encourage team members to take time off and take care of their families and themselves. Although you still need to have conversations about work and productivity, these can come second. Taking this approach might seem frustrating from a business perspective, but compassion and empathy have to be at the forefront in a crisis. And if you need further convincing, this approach also makes good business sense by helping to prevent burnout or increased turnover.

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3. Give yourself permission to say, "I don't know"

The early days of this global crisis, during which we essentially kept trying to operate as we always had – albeit

from home – did not provide anyone with a playbook on how to manage this alternate reality in the longer term. Because we're all trying to do our best to figure it out as we go, it's ok to give yourself space to admit to your team that you aren't sure how to handle a new situation. As my brother likes to say, "I don't know; this is my first pandemic." I'm not recommending that you shouldn't bother trying to find solutions to new challenges. But often, admitting you don't know takes the pressure off and allows for more collaboration, innovation and even buy-in to try something different. At Udemy, where I work, we leveraged a Slack channel for managers to provide a way to lean on and support each other – they use it to ask questions and discuss helpful resources and information.

4. Help your team reframe their perspective

Most of what we're dealing with right now is truly difficult. Even so, some of what we're dealing with can be tackled with mindset. The stress and anxiety that comes with a crisis push us into raw emotional states, and things that wouldn't normally bother us, might be just enough to set us over the edge. Early in the pandemic, I recall intense frustration over a simple failed cookie recipe. Something I would normally have laughed off. A little time and distance later and I know this was a manifestation of other feelings, completely unrelated. Helping our teams reframe perspectives by looking at situations through a different lens can be a game-changer and help us see what's actually bothering us.

Ask your team to identify the problem, challenge their assumptions, and then reframe it. This can be as simple as asking how someone we admire would respond to the situation, or how a fictional character might react. All it takes is a tweak in the angle to look at a situation in a whole new

way.

5. Create space to learn through challenges

For me, learning is the way to process challenges and is my path forward during uncertainty. Unfortunately with everything going on within organizations around the world, many employees either feel like they don't have the time to set aside for learning, or they worry that they need to always look busy and can't take a "break" to learn. Latent fear about furloughs or cutbacks permeates even healthy businesses. Learning shouldn't be thought of as a break but as an essential part of any career. "Signal value" can go a long way in creating time and space for learning within teams. For my team, I expect and try to model that learning is part of the job. I start team meetings by asking about a recent "win" and a "learning" from each person. As a business leader, you can lead by example by regularly talking about the learning you're doing and the impact that it's having as you navigate and adapt to change.

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6. Communicate proactively

Many employees will continue working remotely this year. As we experienced in 2020, regular communication is key to keeping teams working in sync and feeling connected. It's critical to continue communicating transparently, authentically and in a timely manner – about work as well as events that impact our lives. For example, most employees appreciate when leaders acknowledge an event in the news, share their own perspectives and communicate empathy for others.

For many, 2021 feels hopeful. A new year presents an opportunity to start fresh. Although it's good to be positive, and we need hope to keep moving forward, the

challenges we've been facing over the last year are far from over. Successfully managing a team during a long-term crisis requires fostering team agility and resilience to roll with the punches. You can do this by reframing priorities and getting real about what support your team members need to adapt in today's world.

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