

# Why Strong Leadership Skills Are More Important Now Than Ever



Whether you're managing a team of 15 or 1,500, the crisis has stretched the bounds of our workplaces and demanded that every professional think outside the box.

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Across the United States, nearly every nonessential business big and small has been forced to go remote. This puts people

in leadership positions in a unique spot. As academic director of the Columbia Executive M.S. in Technology Management program, I interact with and coach hundreds of emerging leaders each year. The global health crisis has made the leadership skills we teach more important than ever.

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Despite what you may have heard, leadership is not innate: It can be taught. If you're struggling to lead your team during this pandemic, here's a roundup of my advice with the help of some successful students and alumni.

## **Be open**

An increase in news consumption and seeking of information are common psychological responses to a crisis. On a global level, we see governments holding daily press briefings and ramping up information sharing. It's critical that business leaders also keep the information flowing. EMSTM alumna Sam Wilmot, now the VP of strategic programs at Xerox, says that this idea has kept her team going.

Wimot recommends increasing the number of check-ins you normally would have with your employees. She says it's important to account for the fact that there are no "water-cooler moments," where information is spontaneously shared or connections are made, and that this can lead to feelings of isolation amongst your team. As we continue into month three of working from home, try to keep up or even increase the amount of check-ins with employees. Even if you have no new information to share, sometimes a simple "hello" can go a long way.

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## Be clear and calm

There are plenty of legitimate reasons for business leaders to feel wary during this unprecedented time, but it's important to relay hope to employees who might feel lost. Wimot's advice: Try not to offload too much and stay as bright and positive as possible – while remaining realistic. People are looking to you for cues and signals on the evolving situation. Be strong but be honest and always authentic.

To do this effectively, emotional intelligence is critical. Emotional intelligence is the capacity to be aware of, control and express one's emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically. It should be in every executive's repertoire. The skills it takes to successfully perform in a position of leadership, like emotional intelligence, can be learned and perfected with daily practice. Good leaders remember that every employee under their management is unique and can recognize how to interact with each person to maximize efficiency, productivity and happiness.

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## Be flexible

This crisis has forced us to get comfortable with ambiguity. Laura Kudia, one of my current students and an incoming chief of staff at American Express, says this is one skill that has become particularly handy for her. Before enrolling in the EMSTM program, Kudia spent a decade in the media industry. Her shift to financial services was a complete career pivot. The program gave her “tools in the toolbox” – a combination of hard and soft skills – and taught her to speak the language of tech execs. It also taught her something just as important: to be ready to adapt to and learn from new situations quickly and

efficiently.

As chief of staff to the unit CIO who oversees global risk and tech transformation, Laura's job is to be a translator for the organization. She must speak to the mission and challenges and communicate these to her direct-reports. This, of course, has involved a lot of spontaneous adjustment right now. The entirety of her onboarding was remote, for example. Of course it wasn't ideal, but leaders need to be able to adapt to unforeseen challenges with grace and agility. She credits the ability to do this confidently to her weekly sessions with her Columbia mentor but says now is the time for all leaders to use their conviction.

Leadership is a timeless skill that's being tested now more than ever before. Whether you're managing a team of 15 or 1,500, the crisis has stretched the bounds of our workplaces and demanded that every professional think outside the box. Wilmot and Kudia are two examples of executives who are forging ahead in these uncertain times. If businesses are going to thrive in the weeks and months to come, they should follow their lead and re-examine what it means to be an effective leader.

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