

Harvard Business Review

REPRINT HO5LGE PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG MAY 08, 2020

ARTICLE LEADERSHIP & MANAGING PEOPLE

Lead Your Team Into a Post-Pandemic World

by Hubert Joly

Harvard Business Review

LEADERSHIP & MANAGING PEOPLE

Lead Your Team Into a Post-Pandemic World

by Hubert Joly MAY 08, 2020



BILL CLARK/GETTY IMAGES

During the Covid-19 crisis, I've spoken with many CEOs who have shared that a key priority for them, naturally, has been the safety and well-being of their employees. And there are many examples of inspiring actions taken by CEOs and companies in support of their employees. But as we've come to recognize that this crisis will last more than a few short weeks, companies are now defining their approach for the long haul.

I've seen two crucial ideas take hold with corporate leaders.

One: Given the magnitude of the shock and the challenges that this crisis represents, companies must consider the full breadth of their employees' needs as people. Safety is essential, of course, but it's also important to address higher-level needs such as the want for truth, stability, authentic connections, self-esteem, growth, and meaning in the context of the crisis.

Two: Many CEOs have begun thinking about this crisis in three phases. They may assign different names or specific lengths to these phases, but they all roughly map to three distinct time horizons: the shelter-in-place phase, the re-opening phase, and the post Covid-19 phase.

When these two ideas are combined, leaders can operate and lead more effectively by dynamically adjusting how they take care of their employees through the unique challenges of each phase. What follows is a discussion of how companies are and could be addressing workers' needs in each phase.

Human Needs in the Shelter-in-Place Phase

During this first phase, companies have sought to ensure their workers' physical safety. They've implemented work from home measures and sanitized work areas in cases where work is essential, and shifted operating models — adopting contactless delivery, for example.

Beyond safety, they're working to ensure security as well. Many have worked to keep people on the payroll for as long as possible — even if that required furloughs — and increased pay for front-line workers. Some have established employee relief funds to address urgent needs. At some companies, senior executives and board of directors took pay cuts; many have provided back-up childcare solutions and fronted their workers time off to take care of loved ones.

Ever higher up the needs chain, they're trying hard to create connection and support the mental health of their workers. They have communicated with their employees in ongoing, frequent, transparent, and honest ways, seeking out approaches with a human touch — using video rather than just written communication, establishing office hours, instituting a regular coffee time or happy hour, and providing direct access to leaders and colleagues. Importantly, some companies have put in place mental health support options for leaders and employees, including yoga and meditation sessions, to help employees navigate these unprecedented times while keeping some level of sanity.

How are leaders able to address their workers' higher-level needs during this phase? Often during a crisis, we think the masculine superhero leader is the one to get us through troubled times: Be the strongest; be convicted; project infallibility; lead with a kind of singular force. A key observation I would make is that this may not be the best model of leadership here. Of course, we need leaders who have great analytical and problem-solving minds, leaders who are great at making decisions based on facts. But we also need leaders who can demonstrate vulnerability and empathy. It's interesting to observe that many countries that seem to be going through this crisis the most effectively (Germany, Taiwan, New Zealand, Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Denmark) are all womenled and that their leaders seem to combine a science-based approach with a more human touch.

Last, but not least, even now in this shelter-in-place phase, I'm seeing many companies ensuring that the actions they take connect with the company's purpose. As an example, at Best Buy, where I was CEO for seven years, the stated purpose is to enrich lives through technology and so it has focused on enabling its customers to work and learn from home. Many companies are also mobilizing their resources in support of the community in a way that is tied to their purpose, even if it's not entirely obvious at first. Ralph Lauren, whose purpose as a company is to inspire the dream of a better life, may not seem like it has role to play here, but it has mobilized supplier relationships to produce masks and gowns for front-line healthcare workers.

Human Needs in the Re-Opening Phase

Cautiously, but hopefully, many companies have begun planning how to re-open their businesses — a process we now know will likely be long and drawn out. As they prepare for this next phase, they should continue to consider the broad spectrum of their employees'; needs, beyond just creating a physically safe workplace. For example, companies are considering the following measures that span the full range of human needs from basic to advanced:

- Defining the conditions that will ensure a safe reopening of their operations, from in-home services to offices and stores.
- Bringing back as many people as possible. Companies will of course need to decide how many
 employees they are able to call back in and how they will communicate with other furloughed
 employees at that time
- Ensuring ongoing, honest communication with existing and furloughed employees, in a way that is truthful, humane, and caring. Conveying that the world is changing, encouraging the organization to "reset" vs. just "restart," and highlighting that some things are not changing such as the company's core focus and values.
- Paying special attention to the ongoing communication with furloughed employees.
- Helping the employees on the payroll deal with "survivor's guilt" the guilty feeling stemming
 from the fact that the employee is employed (and compensated) while many of their friends and
 colleagues are not. It will be important to highlight the role they can play to help bring as many of
 the furloughed employees back to work.
- Celebrating inspiring news. Good news helps workers' mental health, which is likely compromised right now. As an example, Best Buy has transformed its process to post company news in the elevators of its headquarters, previously called The Lift to a digital posting now called The Uplift.
- Highlighting how the company's activities contribute to the common good and are making a
 difference in people's lives. Defining how the company is able to continue to support the local
 community.

A key requirement for companies in this phase will be to avoid broad policies that don't take into consideration the very different circumstances different employees face. For example, companies must ask themselves, which employees are above the age of 60 and therefore more vulnerable at reopening? How are they being served? Which employees do not have the necessary space and infrastructure in their home to be able to work productively, and would therefore be candidates to

come back to the office sooner rather than later? How many employees suffer from mental health issues that may be aggravated by social isolation? To what extent do some employees have a deep need for social interactions which makes it more important for them to be with other workers sooner? A deeper understanding of workers' needs, even individuals, beyond just safety will make for a better re-opening phase.

Human Needs in the Post-Covid-19 Phase

It will be some time until we reach this phase, but companies are beginning to consider it and prepare for it. For some companies, like those in the travel sector, this can be a challenging phase as declines in consumer demand has the potential to dramatically impact certain businesses, which could translate into significant revenue, cost, and headcount reductions.

The risk for many companies will be to lose hope in their ability to do more than move to being a smaller company.

This is where they can tap in the talent and sense of purpose of their employees to do better than that. As companies begin work on inventing a future that does not exist yet, they would be wise to mobilize the business understanding and sense of purpose of their employees as input to their planning process.

One hypothesis I have is that a strong focus on the purpose of the company, as opposed to its existing business model, can uncover and unleash significant new growth. This is what Best Buy — which during its turnaround faced an existential crisis of its own — experienced when it embraced its purpose of enriching lives through technology. The company unlocked latent demand it didn't know was available to it by deploying an in-home advisor program and new tech support services. The company also entered the health market, deploying tech to help aging seniors live longer at home. At the time, the company could have looked at its situation and turned immediately cost cutting and personnel reduction. Instead it found new growth and ways to retain and grow headcount. Similarly, in the current crisis, companies may find it's a time to find those new areas of demand for fulfilling its purpose.

As a final thought for this phase, staying connected with furloughed employees will enable the companies to re-hire these employees as new job opportunities emerge, either based on growth or on turnover.

How companies and leaders approach the three phases of this crisis and treat all their stakeholders — starting with their employees and the whole range of their human needs — will be real "moments that matter" for their employees, contributing to the level of attachment (or not) the employees will have to the company in the future and to the ability of the company to thrive coming out of the crisis.

Hubert Joly is the Executive Chairman and former CEO of Best Buy