



Leadership in a Time of Crisis

By Bridgette Theurer

If you've made a trip to the grocery store lately (and who hasn't), you've probably noticed some long lines and empty shelves. Lots of products have seemingly evaporated.

What's going on when all the hand sanitizer, toilet paper, cleaning supplies and in some cases, even baby formula, start quickly vanishing from our grocery shelves? It has come to light that some people who don't have babies to feed have been buying formula as a back-up in case milk disappears.

This behavior reflects the deeply embedded threat detection system that lies within each one of us. In fact at a level beneath our conscious awareness, our brains are scanning our environment every 7 seconds for potential threats. Recent neuroscience research cited by Dr. David Rock of the NeuroLeadership Institute shows that we have three levels of threat response wired into our brains. In a crisis we can quickly cycle from level one to level three without considering if our actions are thoughtful or even helpful:

Level 1 Threat: We assess that there is a threat but it lies at a distance – perhaps in some other neighborhood or country. We become more alert and pay attention more vigilantly.

Level 2 Threat: The threat is now in our *own* country or neighborhood. We become not only more alert to the possible threat but we act to address it.

Level 3 Threat: We believe the threat is now bearing down upon us personally and that we're in *imminent danger*. This level is often characterized by panic, loss of pre-frontal cortex thinking, and reduced immune functioning as all of our internal resources go to automatic responses such as fight or flight.

What keeps a family, a team or a nation from level 3 panic, where not only is clear thinking compromised but our immune systems as well? When chaos and uncertainty are swirling all around, we need leaders who can help us *to think clearly about the real threats we face* while at the same time instilling in us a sense of confidence that together, we will prevail.

If we look around right now in our present coronavirus crisis, we can see that some leaders in both the private and public sector are doing just that while others are not. But we each need to provide this kind of leadership for our own families, teams and organizations. Here's what it looks like in action.



Manage Your Own Anxiety First

Like the coronavirus itself, anxiety is highly contagious. But in any relationship system, *it is the leader's anxiety that is the most contagious of all*. Why? Because followers are keenly attuned to and emotionally impacted by their leader's moods, state of mind, body language and presence.

Even if you're not consciously aware of *feeling* anxious, none of us is immune to being infected by anxiety in a crisis (either by fear of the virus itself or the anxiety it spreads in others). As a general rule, the more reluctant a leader is to face their own anxiety the more that anxiety gets distributed to followers. It is what leaders say or do from an anxious place (without realizing they're anxious) that is most likely to set others on edge.

One of the best ways to manage our anxiety is to ask ourselves this question: *How do I behave when I'm anxious and what impact does this have on others?* Perhaps you start to walk or talk faster, become more controlling, avoid anxious others, overdose on the news, or look for someone to blame (that last one is hard to see in ourselves but it's a very common pattern). The point here is to become more aware of your own reactive tendencies, not only because they tend to spread anxiety to others but because you can't change what you don't see.

We're always in the process of "catching" something from our leaders, whether that is calm confidence or anxious uncertainty. When we manage our own anxiety first, our chances of spreading the former and not the latter are exponentially greater.

Be Present and Accountable

A leader's presence is always important in steadying an organization but even more so in anxious times. By presence, I'm referring not only to a leader's physical (or virtual) presence but also to how *present* they are to the system they are leading. We can tell when a leader isn't really "there" even if they're standing right in front of us! It might be common sense, but history is replete with examples of leaders who were MIA at critical times in an unfolding crisis, or tone deaf and distracted when they did show up.

Being present and accountable is also about assuming the mantle of responsibility in a crisis. While anxious others might be tempted to find fault or place blame, we stand out from the crowd when we're able to bring a sense of ownership to an uncertain situation – by doing our part, acknowledging our own mistakes and saying, "the buck stops here."

How present and accountable are you right now to your team, your organization or your family?
How might you be even more so?



Embody Grounded Optimism

In a crisis, people don't need platitudes, they need a clear plan. They don't need Pollyanna thinking, but they do need hope.

Optimism is a key attribute for successful leadership – after all, if you can't paint a realistic picture of a better future for your team, why would they want to go there and what reasons would they have for working hard to make it happen? In a crisis, a certain kind of optimism, what I call *grounded optimism*, is what people need most from their leaders. What is grounded optimism? It's a combination of a leader's transparent and truthful acknowledgement of the "brutal facts" of a situation, while at the same time providing a clear plan for addressing and overcoming those challenges. *Grounded optimism* includes a leader's ability to communicate a message that in essence says, "Despite these real and daunting challenges, we will prevail; and, in the end, we'll come out of this stronger and better." Having said that, the leader then has to back up such an assertion with solid facts and a thoughtful plan.

In addition to communicating grounded optimism a leader has to *embody* it. Why? Because the body never lies. The only way to convincingly communicate grounded optimism is to believe it yourself – not just conceptually but as a lived principle that has muscle memory. If you say you're confident and optimistic that we'll prevail but your body (facial expressions, eyes, gestures, posture, etc.) doesn't support it, no one believes you.

What is the better, more hopeful future you can see for your team or organization in the midst of this crisis? What are the brutal facts or challenges ahead and how can you acknowledge them honestly and transparently? And finally, how can you empower others to be part of the solution and to realize that their actions can and will influence outcomes? As you communicate and embody your answers to these questions, you become a beacon of hope for your family, your friends, and your team.

Be a Step-Down Transformer

When anxiety and reactivity are swirling all around, each one of us has a fundamental choice to make. Will we be someone who ratchets up the anxiety (and passes it on at a higher level to our family members, colleagues or employees) or someone who helps to calm it down? This is what we call a Step-Down Transformer – someone who embodies and communicates an inner calm in a way that lowers others' anxiety.

Picture a set of dominoes that begins to fall over and pick up speed until one of them, perhaps because it is standing a bit further apart from the others, doesn't fall. As a result, it brings to a



halt the cascading chain reaction. We too can stand apart from the emotional climate of the day, while still staying meaningfully connected to others (even if virtually). We do this by thoughtfully managing our own anxiety first, by being present, visible and accountable to those we lead and by embodying and communicating grounded optimism.

Right now, we need all the step-down transformers we can get. Choosing to be one of them makes all the difference.