

Leadership matters



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Tips for Compassionate Leadership During a Crisis

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with links to further resources

1. Manage State

Compassionate leadership starts with you – you'll only remain calm, think clearly, act decisively and send the right signals to the people around you if you are okay yourself. Your body and mind will react differently throughout this period. The more we notice what's going on for us – physically, emotionally and mentally – the more we can manage it. What are the signs for you of things becoming too much, and what are your coping techniques? Simple breathing exercises can lower heart rate. Talking it through with someone or writing it down can help reduce anxiety. The New Economics Foundation 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' (Connect; Be Active; Take Notice; Keep Learning; Give) is a helpful framework for thinking about the things that build wellbeing – useful for thinking about the small things we can all do to stay well.

2. Focus On The Short Term

Leadership often has a longer-term horizon. In a crisis, people are less interested in the vision of where we're going. They need to know what we're going to do now. Focus on short, simple, realistic goals which enable you to make quick, tangible progress and give people a sense of control. And celebrate that progress. Be clear about roles and responsibilities, and open-minded about who can do what. We tend to pigeon-hole people in roles – yet in a crisis, it's amazing what people are capable of. Daily stand-ups, used in SCRUM methodology, are short (normally 15 minutes), focused (cover the same three questions: what did you do yesterday, what will you do today, what's getting in your way), daily meetings (same time, same place) that provide teams with clarity on the work that needs doing and quickly unblock issues. Here's a [short guide](#) on how to run them.

3. Be Agile

In a crisis, the situation is changing all the time and you need to be able to adapt quickly in response. We can draw on Heifetz's work on Adaptive Leadership for helping groups come together to better understand complex problems and take action. The three-step practice in Adaptive Leadership - observe, interpret, intervene - is as applicable as ever. You can never have all the information you need or wait for the full facts to emerge before making a decision. You need to act quickly. But you shouldn't just go with your intuition. Pause, assess the situation from multiple vantage points (observe/get on the balcony), anticipate what may happen next (interpret), and then act (intervene) and learn from what happens (observe). And of course, decisions and plans are never final – you need to be continually re-assessing the information you have, and constantly refining your priorities and actions. This is no time for egos. Here's [Adaptive Leadership](#) explained in 4 minutes.

4. Keep People Informed

In a crisis, trust is more important than ever. And you'll build that through regular, honest, and clear communications. Tell people what you know, what you don't know, and what you're doing to get clarity. Show them that their concerns, questions, and interests are heard and addressed. Manage expectations. Be clear about the actions you're taking and what is required of them. You're going to make mistakes because you're making decisions based on rapidly changing information. And other people will make mistakes too. People are more likely to forgive these if they trust your intentions. And you'll build that trust by keeping them informed through regular check-ins. As Amy Edmondson recently wrote in an [HBR article](#), "Transparency is 'job one' for leaders in a crisis. Be clear what you know, what you don't know, and what you are doing to learn more".