

# NAVIGATING CHANGE DURING UNCERTAIN TIMES

**A Comprehensive Guide for Leaders**



*root*®

# CONTENTS

- 3      **NAVIGATING CHANGE DURING UNCERTAINTY**  
Introduction
- 4      **LEADERSHIP DURING UNCERTAINTY – BEST PRACTICES**  
**Building Trust** by Jim Haudan
- 6      **CHANGE PRINCIPALS**  
**Don't Go Changing. 4 Must for Strategy Activation During Chaos**  
by Aleassa Chambers
- 9      **REMOTE ENGAGEMENT**  
**Communication in a COVID World: Creating Connections Has Never Been More Important** by Aleassa Chambers
- 12     **DEFINING THE FUTURE – GETTING CLEAR ON THE WAY FORWARD**  
**Forget That Engagement Survey This Year. It Has No Place.**  
by Bridget Stallkamp  
  
**Setting Business Priorities: A Five-Step Exercise For The Leadership Team** by Jim Haudan
- 21     **BUILDING AN ORGANIZATIONAL MOVEMENT – BRINGING CHANGE TO LIFE**  
**3 Silver Bullets for Making Change Stick** by Rich Berens
- 27     **CRITICAL ROLE OF MANAGERS DURING UNCERTAINTY**  
**Crisis Reveals Managers Superpowers** by Alison Lazenby
- 30     **CONCLUSION**

An illustration featuring a large yellow shape resembling a drop or a splash, set against a background of blue and green wavy lines. Inside the yellow shape are various icons: a sun, a group of people, a bar chart with upward arrows, a group of people in a meeting, a handshake, a paper airplane, and a small boat. Below the yellow shape, two yellow rafts are shown on the water, each with two people rowing. The overall theme is navigating through uncertain waters.

# NAVIGATING CHANGE DURING UNCERTAINTY

As leaders, you're navigating some tricky waters. Change is inevitable whether your organization is thriving or struggling, and the pace at which you must respond to change is accelerating.

The good news is, there are some constants, some best practices you can apply during good change or bad. The organizations and leaders that are consistent about these approaches tend to outperform their competition and maintain market leader status.

During more than 30 years of business, we've compiled a comprehensive set of best practices that leaders at all levels of the business can apply to make implementing strategic change a little easier and a lot more effective.

Much of the content we've included is basic blocking and tackling, but these basics tend to get lost in the shuffle of a crisis or in trying to make a lot of shifts quickly. These approaches, ideas, and tips can make a significant difference to your organization – they create the change and results you need, can improve your employees' experience and engagement, and lead to better customer experiences.



# BUILDING TRUST

by Jim Haudan

Every year, the Edelman Trust Barometer releases a study on the global landscape of trust in institutions. The Spring 2020 update, which shared the results of a survey taken by people in 11 countries from April 15–23, is especially timely given that the survey was administered during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This update identified several areas of deep concern when it comes to trust. Only 38% of people believe their business is doing “well” or “very well” at putting people before profits, and only 39% believe business is doing “well” or “very well” at protecting their employees’ financial well-being and safeguarding their jobs. CEOs scored even worse. Only 29% of respondents believe that CEOs are doing an outstanding job responding to the demands placed on them by the pandemic.

## How can you build trust during times of crisis when it may be more important than ever?

- 1. Re-prioritize and live your organization’s values.** Values are probably the single biggest component to building trust. Organizational values are the backbone for the culture of the organization. Values are to an organization what character is to an individual. Your values need to be discussed and reaffirmed regularly, but especially during a crisis. Values provide the guidance system for knowing when to take a stand, for empowering employees to take risks, for reminding us why we make sacrifices, and for defining where we stand together. Values serve as the basis of acceptable behavior.



The most important aspect of values is that senior leaders not only espouse them, but demonstrate them in their own actions and don't tolerate actions that violate the organization's values in times of crisis and uncertainty.

- 2. Make the stories you tell personal.** Gary Burnison, CEO of Korn Ferry, has regularly sent letters to his friends and clients since March. Each letter provides insights, wisdom, and advice, and begins with a personal story. In one letter, Burnison described the time he was caught in a rip tide as a child and applied it to the lesson of not fighting the current but going with it. Another letter shared a text Burnison received from his dentist about finding cause for celebrating, even if it's just being thankful that COVID-19 social distancing measures also meant no more waiting in reception areas at appointments, reading old magazines. Another recalled Burnison as a 12-year-old at basketball camp, when legendary coach Gene Keady pulled him aside and said, "You're going to be a leader. Never stop believing." That encouragement stayed with him all these years, not only what Keady said but how he made Burnison feel.

These are great reminders that at a time when different work needs to get done – and needs to get done differently – leaders have to change. Today, everyone is a leader, and leadership culminates in how we make others feel. To connect on a human level, being willing and able to express emotion and vulnerability is critical. Your people may admire your intellect and analytical skills, but they will trust you when they can connect to your humanity.

- 3. Embody the maxim "leaders eat last."** The one vital leader trait that builds trust in times of crisis is putting service to others ahead of self. When you see examples every day of leaders caring about the whole of the organization before their own interests, you witness self-interest giving way to shared interest and complete selflessness.

In times of distress, it's natural to worry about surviving and getting through the trauma with minimal personal loss. Yet few behaviors build trust as much as making personal sacrifices and putting the organization and team first. You serve the team. To build trust in a crisis, your ego must take a back seat to the care and success of the team. But if you monitor your ego and put your team first, you'll make the team better, and your servant approach will build exceptional trust.

As research like the Edelman Trust Barometer has stated, "Trust capital is perhaps a business' best insurance policy against crises, risk, and disruption today . . . (and) is also its best investment toward driving positive business impact tomorrow."

If your people don't trust your leadership, then navigating a crisis and delivering future success becomes nearly impossible.



# DON'T GO CHANGING

## 4 Musts for Strategy Activation During Chaos (Change)

*by Aleassa Chambers*

There likely isn't a single organization on the planet that hasn't been affected in some way by COVID-19. Whether your business is making large or small changes, change is still change. And we all know that change is rarely – if ever – easy.

For those of us at Root, the leader in organizational change, we're going through changes too, specifically a dramatic shift in how we do business. Due to the nature of our work, which leverages the power of face-to-face discussion and interactions, we traditionally travel a lot. Well, for now that is grounded. We have every person working from home, which is strange for a company that loves to collaborate over coffee or beer in a conference room. So like all of you, we're discovering new ways of working that could alter our business forever.

### Change Is the Constant

As we Rootsters navigate how we serve our clients using new modalities to substitute for face-to-face conversations, we're also partnering with those clients to redefine how they navigate strategic change, and most importantly, how they engage and connect their people to this change. And while everyone's challenges and changes are specific to their business and people, there are things that stay the same. We know that change has and always will be the constant, and we know that how you *lead* change doesn't change.

Foundationally, you need to be sure you're doing the same things you do when launching quick-moving or short-term strategic initiatives (what we call "little s") that you would do when you're launching your two- to three-year strategies (the "BIG S"). You must move quickly, especially now when your quarterly targets are hanging in the balance. But you can't skip the steps. No matter what.

Whether you're pivoting to tackle changing buyer expectations, making changes to your distribution processes, or implementing new safety protocols, there are fundamentals for successful change. You must make sure everyone understands the *why* behind the change, *what* is changing for the business, and *how* their role is changing. And you can't forget to focus on ensuring the change is sustained, even if it's only a short-term change.

## Get Back to the Basics, But Get a Move On!

The crucial elements for any strategy activation plan are:

1. **Make sure all leaders are aligned.** You might think you're aligned, but the changes you're navigating likely mean different things to different leaders. So get clear on what success looks like for your business during this mid-term strategy shift.

**Move quickly:** This doesn't need to be a two-month process. It can be done in less than a day. You won't regret taking the time, but you might regret not taking the time.

**Hint:** You can't visualize fuzz. Draw a picture of what winning looks like for your business – and it's not usually just a \$ or €.

2. **Gut-check it with the next-level leaders.** Being clear doesn't just apply to the executive leadership team and board. Your functional leaders need to be just as united and clear. And they need to have discussions to make sure their department, division, or plant is supporting the change in the best possible way.

**Move quickly:** In two hours or less, you can have your entire leadership teams seeing the big picture. They'll understand why the change is happening, what's changing, and how they're going to enable the change.

**Hint:** I literally mean show them the big picture. As in a visual. As in a puzzle box top. The powerful effectiveness of a visual paired with fantastic conversations. Change just took off with a blast!

**3. Managers are the conduit to change.** Your frontline employees – truly battling it out on the front lines of your business – need all the support they can get. That comes in the form of managers keeping people engaged, inspired, and motivated, and coaching them through tough times. Be an empathetic listener. Make sure people are up to speed on policies and protocols, which can change daily. Support your frontline people by equipping your managers.

**Move quickly:** Building your managers' skills doesn't have to involve a two-day workshop or a three-day conference. Focus on the absolute essentials: Do they understand the business? Do they understand their role in bridging the business and the front line? Do they know how to coach their people to success? Most importantly, are they focusing on the wins that their people desperately need?

**Hint:** There are lots of cool ways to build your managers' skills quickly. A coaching conversation with their own manager. A micro-module that hits the highlights in short bursts of information.

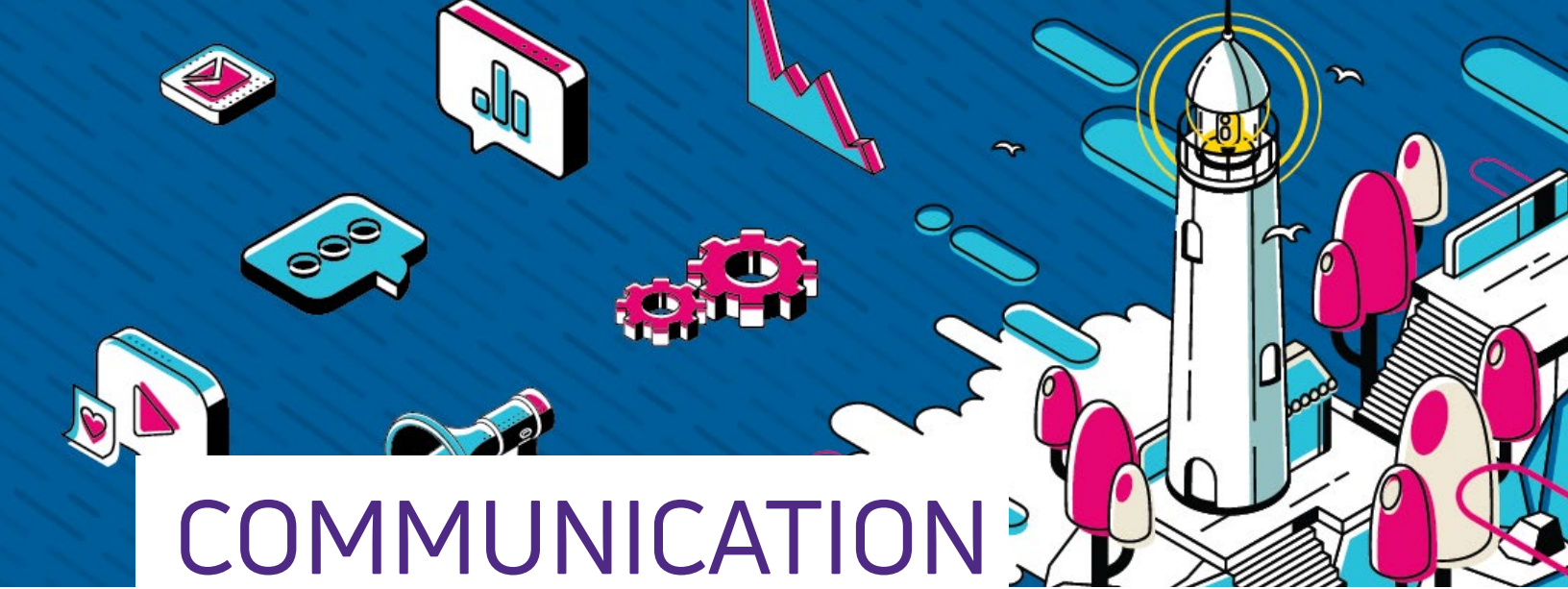
**4. Your people in the trenches need more than a policy memo.** Never underestimate the power of information. Your anxious and stressed people are slogging it out dealing with anxious and stressed customers. Just knowing that there's a plan, that you understand what they're going through, and that you and the other leaders are working to make things the best you can goes a long way for people's mental health. And don't be afraid to admit when you don't have all the answers.

**Move quickly:** Emails don't cut it right now. Remember that visual I mentioned with your next level of leaders? Actually, everyone *must* see that picture – leaders, managers, and your individual contributors. They need to see there's a plan. They need to see what they're all working so hard for and possibly even risking their lives for. While it might feel costly to take time to let people explore the possibilities for themselves (and we know you've been hit hard), we've found that when leaders don't find the time for this conversation (yes, it's a conversation, not a tell), it ends up being more costly in the long run.

**Hint:** One-on-ones with managers. Small-group conversations. It's possible to get to the same results. But people have to see the puzzle box top if you want to get fast results.

The fact is, the only way to catalyze and accelerate results is through your people. If you've talked to Root before, you've heard us say this ad nauseum. You need to move fast right now. There's no doubt. But you can't skip steps. Think about the last time you built something from IKEA. You skip a step and that desk becomes a bookcase. You don't need a bookcase right now. So stick with the process – it's going to lead you down the right road.





# COMMUNICATION IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

## Creating Connections Has Never Been More Important

*by Aleassa Chambers*

As we learn how to live in a world of uncertainty and change, business priorities can shift by the day, the hour, or even the minute. Despite the challenges that leaders face, we can't leave people in the dark as we synthesize information and refine business plans. The need for clear communication is greater than ever. And the competition for your people's attention has never been as fierce as it is right now.

We must act deliberately to engage people. We must come up with alternative ways to create the emotional and intellectual connections that are so important to running a successful business. Despite constantly changing information and data, leaders must give people a complete story. If leaders don't do this, people fill in their own blanks. That story won't be as accurate or complete as the one you're telling them.

### 4 Principles of Remote Engagement

Engagement doesn't mean people are happy enjoying free snacks or a ping-pong table. It means they're willing to give discretionary effort for something they're passionate about or believe in. Right now, for organizations that are going through enormous amounts of change while their employees navigate a crazy home life or tremendous personal uncertainty, engagement is essential. Doing this remotely gets even more challenging. Here are the four principles leaders need to focus on:

- 1. Create emotional connections.** You can only bring out the best in your people if you connect with them emotionally. In times of uncertainty, people's emotions are heightened, and it's critical to connect with them on this level. Helping them connect to their role in driving change for the organization or for your customers is especially important right now.
- 2. Generate intellectual connections.** People want to understand the whole story – the why, what, and how behind leadership's decisions. This is where you eradicate the blanks in the story.
- 3. Encourage behavioral connections.** Human beings learn from one another. We watch how leaders walk the walk or talk the talk. When working remotely, this becomes a challenge and leaders must work harder to ensure it happens.
- 4. Empower social connections.** You need to continue to allow people to recognize and reward one another. That's the socialization, the affirmation, that humans crave. Even if we're not face to face like we were, people still need that human interaction.

## Be a Lighthouse

A lighthouse helps people safely navigate troubled waters. In times of uncertainty, leaders need to be that guide. Determining how you communicate – how often, in what way, and what you say – allows you to become that lighthouse. Here are three steps you can take to light the way forward for your people:

- 1. Use the best vehicle for your message.** Don't feel limited to memos or emails. Would a video be more effective? A mass text, small-group discussion, or virtual meeting? Think about the best way to break through the everyday noise to reach your people.
- 2. Include tasks or actions.** Empower your people with information followed by action. Give them the immediate, specific next step to take and help guide the way for them. This is especially important when face-to-face interactions can't happen and people feel more uncertain than usual.
- 3. Integrate stories in your message.** Stories help people remember and make emotional connections. Using this tool creates intellectual and emotional engagement with your people. Stories can include the vision and current realities of your organization. They can also celebrate successes – stories of your people doing difficult things with grace and kindness, or stories of new ways of working. The sky's the limit.

## Break Through the Clutter

People's workspaces – their homes – can be noisy. Even if your people are in your offices, serving customers, or on the factory floor, there are a lot of distractions right now. Kids and childcare, pets, spouses, roommates, dishes, deliveries – there is a lot happening at any given moment. Leaders must make the most of their communications to stand out and be memorable. Here are three invaluable storytelling tools:

- 1. Know your audience.** You can't tell the same story to everyone, so differentiate your stories based on what will resonate with the audience you are trying to connect with.
- 2. Share big ideas and calls to action.** Calls to action motivate people and give them direction on where to focus. That's very important right now. And make sure you're connecting subsequent communications back to those big ideas.
- 3. Don't follow a straight line.** Really great stories embrace ups and downs. The drama is entertaining and memorable. It's important to embrace your organization's drama. People are looking for honesty and vulnerability from you. That's what they remember, above all else.

## Effective Communication Has Never Been More Critical

There's little doubt that organizations need to implement changes to navigate tremendous challenges right now. When you need people to change their behaviors and skill sets, you have to change their mindsets first. And this begins by creating the intellectual and emotional connections that get them excited and engaged in that change. Therefore, communicating effectively has never been more critical to your organization than it is right now. Be successful and you'll be able to move your business forward, even during the most challenging of times. Like the unprecedented one we are living in right now.



# FORGET THAT ENGAGEMENT SURVEY THIS YEAR

## It Has No Place

by Bridget Stallkamp

Think about the last time your company did an engagement survey. The world looked pretty different, didn't it? Your employees' relationship to the organization has changed, whether your organization is thriving or fighting for survival.

That standard engagement survey has its moment, but this isn't one of them. It's not going to get you what you need this year. Engagement is important, but the focus right now needs to be on determining your readiness to move forward. You need different questions and different perspectives – particularly if the impact on your organization has been significant.

So, if you put your standard engagement survey in the drawer for a while, what should you do instead?

### **You can't just skip it. And you can't just survey.**

You might be thinking, "I have my finger on the pulse, and this is all temporary anyway, so why bother?" or "We need to move fast and be decisive – there's no time for feedback!" That might be what you are thinking, but what your people are likely thinking is that they are being cut out of the conversation.

I hear from leaders all the time that they are worried about over-surveying their employees. But I'm going to call BS on that one. Find me a person who hates giving their opinion on

relevant issues and seeing their opinion reflected in the actions their organization takes. There isn't one!

Everyone wants to be asked for feedback. They just want it to be about things that matter right now. And they want to see leaders make adjustments based on that feedback. Which means you can't just collect data; it needs to be reflected in your go-forward approach.

### **You need to move fast – but you also need to ask more than five questions.**

Pulse surveys are an excellent way to keep track of important metrics once a baseline is established. They deploy quickly and provide the company with great feedback. But honestly, we've blown our current baseline to bits at this point, and the short pulse isn't going to give you enough of the story.

Instead, consider using a smaller sample. For example, I would recommend an assessment that focuses on frontline managers – the most influential group of employees you have. But ask more questions to ensure you are getting the full picture of what's happening. And don't just survey – get people talking, too. Data points are just one small part of the story. Through focus groups or interviews, really dig into why people are feeling the way they feel and what they believe are the best actions to take. Get the story behind the story.

### **You need to ask the right questions – your standard set is going to sound tone deaf.**

Putting out a standard set of questions is very much akin to not acknowledging what's happening in the world today. Rather than looking at the organization in the same way and comparing the results to last year, we need to understand how our people are reacting to this moment of uncertainty.

Specifically, you want a framework that considers an employee's perception of the current state, capabilities, future state, and leadership. When collecting feedback in today's environment, you need to consider aspects of the employee experience, such as:

- **Their perception of the organization's COVID-19 response.** Has there been a loss of trust due to the response? An increase? Are they aligned on how appropriate the response was? Do they feel they can safely voice opinions about it?
- **The stress they are experiencing.** Do they think COVID is overblown or not taken seriously enough? Do they feel pressure daily? How concerned are they about the future?



- **How well equipped they feel.** Do they know what's expected of them? Do they have the tools and training they need for this moment?

These questions will provide insight into where support is needed and where communication and change management tactics can be applied to accelerate strategic shifts.

Engagement surveys or organizational “health” surveys have a place and time. This is not the place and not the time. But don't take that to mean that your people's input isn't important. It's probably more critical to your organization than ever before. What you need right now are insights that will guide organizational shifts so you can move fast and get results fast.



# SETTING BUSINESS PRIORITIES

## A Five-Step Exercise for the Leadership Team

*by Jim Haudan*

64% of executives say they have too many conflicting priorities.

Don't be one of them.

For any plan, initiative, or strategic change to be successful, you need to have a set of clear priorities to guide your actions. The priority-setting process lays the foundation and direction for the rest of the business to follow. Having a plan and aligned priorities that support your objectives creates a common view of the goal and the path to reaching it. It ensures people are aligned and informed throughout the process.

This five-step worksheet will get you started on setting priorities for your business.

## 1. Get clear on what you are “solving for.”

- a. List your biggest organizational challenge in five words or less.
- b. What must you “solve for” to tackle this challenge?
- c. What teams, departments, or lines of business are key to solving the problem or seizing the opportunity?
- d. Does each team or department know what’s at stake if you don’t address the problem or opportunity?
- e. What are the most strategic questions you must answer to solve the “big picture” problem?

## 2. Define what will propel you forward.

- a. For each team, department, or line of business you named above, list one or two priority actions each must take to answer the most strategic questions.
- b. For each team, department, or line of business you named above, list the tools and skills required to execute these actions.
- c. For each team, department, or line of business you named above, assess whether they have the tools or skills you said are required in question 2b. Note the gaps.

### **3. Pace and sequence your priorities — for now, tomorrow, and the future.**

**a.** What three things do you need to accomplish to run your business better today?

**b.** What three new capabilities do you need to build for tomorrow's business?

**c.** What three things are you willing to bet will mean big growth for your organization in the long term?



#### 4. Communicate in a way that resonates.

- a. List five words you would use to describe your strategy and its intended results.
- b. Ban the business speak! Can you simplify these words or put them in “layman’s terms” to communicate them more effectively to managers and, in turn, the front line?
- c. List three examples of behaviors that support the strategy you would like to see others emulate.
- d. What outcomes will these behaviors drive?

## 5. Delineate milestones to highlight accomplishments along the way.

a. What changes should your people make and see in the first 30 days? List three examples.

b. What changes should they make and see in the first 90 days?

c. In six months, what are the top three things you expect to see change the most?

d. What are the top three things you expect to see change in one year? List three examples.

e. In five years, how will your organization have transformed as a result of this new strategy? List three ways.



# 3 SILVER BULLETS FOR MAKING CHANGE STICK

by Rich Berens

Meet Larry, Director of Human Resources.

Larry runs the Human Resources group at a Fortune 1000 company. He's on top of the latest trends and is always well read on what works when it comes to engaging employees. He rolls out training, creates awards programs, and measures progress. But something's off. Despite tremendous focus, turnover is still high and his employee engagement scores have barely moved – which is costing the company big dollars. Needless to say, his leadership team is perplexed and not pleased because growth plans have been stymied and the company isn't where they think it should be. Larry is frustrated and worried because he truly believes he and his team have put some great programs in place.

He thinks to himself:

“What is with this company? I sent out memos explaining the training process we designed to support our growth goals. And I told everyone what it would take to win an award in the town hall meeting. The team leaders were supposed to reinforce all of this directly with their people so there wasn't any confusion. But something's missing. I can't believe we're going to need to revisit this whole thing again. This will be the third time in two years that we go back to the drawing board on engaging our employees. And, gosh, what does that say about my leadership? My thinking?”

While Larry tries to figure out why his plans and programs have gone awry, and what to do about it, consider the following data:

- Unlike Larry, who believes the company has a sound strategy, including an initiative to engage employees, 54% of executives say they do not believe their company's strategy will lead to success.<sup>1</sup>
- 64% of leaders say the biggest frustration for managers is having too many conflicting priorities.<sup>2</sup>
- 39% of workers feel their manager does not know how to best contribute to the company.<sup>3</sup>
- 40% of employees don't understand the company's vision.<sup>4</sup>

Now take a look at this:



While both the data and the image convey similar information about an organization, which one are you most likely to remember after one hour? One month? One year? Now think back to any PowerPoint, memo, or bulleted list you've received from a leader. How much of an impression do words make compared to a visual?

<sup>1</sup> Booz & Company survey of more than 3,500 global leaders, June 2013

<sup>2</sup> Booz & Company survey of more than 3,500 global leaders, June 2013

<sup>3</sup> America's Workforce Survey, January 2012

<sup>4</sup> America's Workforce Survey, January 2012



Now look at this picture that shows a company's view of its marketplace and sets up the new strategy it is about to launch.



Imagine, instead of sending out a memo to introduce your people to a new initiative like Larry did, your company rolled out a new strategy by holding small-group discussions around an image, an image that literally showed where the company was today, where it was headed, how it would get there, and what role everyone plays. How do you think this would change people's understanding of the organization and what was being asked of them?

If you're like most people, you'll remember the Canyon and Pepsi images here and be able to relate the stories they tell months – even years – from now. Studies find that the human brain deciphers image elements simultaneously, while language is decoded in a linear, sequential manner – taking more time to process. Our minds just react differently to visual stimuli.

Instead of sending an email full of text, Larry needed a more effective way to help employees understand the goal and why it was important to achieve it. Here are three elements that ensure people see the big picture and understand their place in it.



## 1. Metaphors

The strength of metaphor is the emotional connection it creates with people about the life and death struggles playing out within an industry or organization. Metaphors make it obvious that if we continue to do what we've done in the past, we do so at our own peril. This is a powerful way to engage people to effect change.

### Metaphors:

- Allow us to simplify new or complex information by comparing it with something we already know
- Accomplish graphically what zip files do for data management: “shrink-wrap” large amounts of information into manageable, usable formats
- Create a visual, common language that helps people more easily exchange data, share information, and discuss the business so they can drive performance

Larry needed to give his people some context and compare what he was asking of them to something they already understood. Things would have gone much more smoothly for him.

As Aristotle said, “The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor.”

## 2. Visualization

By using visuals to appeal to most learners, we give ourselves the greatest chance of creating an engaged and knowledgeable workforce.

While conveying information through metaphor is a powerful technique, adding imagery and visualization greatly helps people learn and retain that information. Learning happens when we stimulate the senses. In some people, one sense is used more than others. Presenting materials that stimulate as many senses as possible increases the chances of successful learning.<sup>5</sup> One study<sup>6</sup> presents four findings that support the use of visualization in learning:

- People learn about 11% audibly and 83% visually.
- Memory improves with imagery because it involves “conjoint retention” of information encoded in different parts of the brain.
- Studies show that technicians make about three times as many errors when using narrative instructions as when using flowcharts.
- Learners sometimes need to see the literal “big picture” to prepare them for the details of a close-up view.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Lieb, “Principles of Adult Learning,” Phoenix, AZ: Vision-South Mountain Community College, Fall 1991

<sup>6</sup> Diane E. Kirrane, “Visual Learning,” Training & Development, vol. 46, no. 9, Sept. 1992

So what does all this mean for businesses?

Visualization is a critical ingredient of employee engagement that delivers numerous benefits to organizations:

- It forces us to “think simpler.” You can’t draw a crisp picture of something that hasn’t been thought through in great detail.
- It captures the drama and emotions of the business by illustrating struggles, risks, threats, opportunities, and emotion in ways that data and words cannot.
- It challenges complacency and inspires activism by conveying both how the business looks and how it feels.

Visuals help us think strategically by showing us the whole picture. This is what gets people to focus on the major forces that drive business rather than on the everyday tactics that often occupy too much time.

### 3. Discussion

So, how do organizations successfully leverage visualization and metaphors in the workplace? How does Larry use these as tools to engage everyone in his initiative and the company’s overall goals? By factoring in how people learn.

You can take it all the way back to Socrates. He engaged small groups of people to question and challenge their assumptions. Even then, he knew people needed other people to sort things out.

In 1899, psychologist and educator William James asserted that adopting a single scientific perspective about a phenomenon only limits what can be learned about it because neither the whole of truth, nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer. This boils down to: taking a single view of anything is just entirely too narrow and serves basically no one. A man ahead of his time.

Over a century later, the work of education researchers Kaplan and Bracey emphasizes the point that learning is enhanced when the learner is engaged in discussion with others.

From way back in human history, all roads point to the effectiveness of sharing with others, learning from them, and appreciating varying perspectives. Socratic dialogue is still around today for a reason. It doesn’t mean having a wide-open free-for-all. It means that the questions are directed and connected to the strategy – they just don’t have a single right or wrong answer.

This is how change happens. When people can test their assumptions, learn from others, and abandon the fear of needing to be exactly right, we can unleash a search for ideas that changes mindsets and behaviors. By revealing unseen barriers, bringing hidden reservations into the open, and collaborating with others in the process, we are better able to create new solutions and succeed in executing any new strategy.

## Final Step: Blending and Applying for Success

If only Larry had known that research in psychology, neuroscience, and education demonstrates these facts about learning:

- Metaphor is essential.
- Visualization enhances comprehension and retention.
- Small-group discussion facilitates the learning process and results in behavior change.

In this uncertain world, the last piece that needs to be tackled is how you blend those three key pieces and, most importantly, apply the approach across your organization.

By bringing 30, 300, or 3,000 of your people together, you're putting an exclamation point on the fact that you're willing to invest a lot of time and resources because you know it's going to catalyze, energize, and accelerate some type of change for your organization.

Why? Those types of events are designed to create powerful outcomes because of the way they deliver the content – meaning, they give people four critical pieces of information:

- Why we're changing
- What's changing
- How we're changing
- How your role (or your team's role) connects to the change

This is achieved by applying the elements we mentioned before – facilitating discussion about the change and creating a strong and memorable visual that makes the change feel real. And even when it's not possible to meet face to face, it's important to create an environment that fosters the same outcomes you'd get from an in-person event.

Your business and your strategy can't wait. And a simple email or video message from the leadership team isn't going to cut it either. You need the experiences and interactivity that foster dialogue and learning from others to reinforce key behaviors that are critical right now to deliver the strategic change your business needs.



# CRISIS REVEALS MANAGERS' SUPERPOWERS

*by Alison Lazenby*

The COVID-19 pandemic has barrelled its way across the globe, leaving social, economic, financial – and in some cases, political – devastation in its wake. But there's something else that has emerged very quickly and with astonishing consistency that I hope will persist: displaying humanity and heart is now a highly visible part of successful leadership. In fact, leading with heart and humanity has emerged as something of a leadership superpower. In the past, enlightened and progressive organizations have embraced humanity with the principles of servant leadership, emotional intelligence, and the like, but they've been far from mainstream. I now see many more organizations coming to the realization that human beings work for us, and if we expect them to show up and devote their time, energy, and talents for our benefit, then we must first embrace their essential humanity.

Engagement stats from around the globe tell us that we have not been doing a great job caring for our most valuable asset: our people. These statistics have plateaued at a scandalously low rate for decades – it's a sad fact that only one in three employees in North America is engaged in their work. Too bad it has taken a pandemic to wake us up from this malaise and treat this like the huge problem, and opportunity, it presents.

## **Will Leading with Heart and Humanity Be a Legacy of COVID-19?**

The reason I have dedicated much of my professional life to helping managers is that they are the absolute linchpins when it comes to engaging their teams. More than anything

or anyone else in the workplace, direct managers and supervisors influence employee engagement. Sadly, most of the time, research and data tell us they are not doing such a great job – which is why engagement has limped along year after year relatively unchanged at 30–35%. Why do our managers and leaders miss the mark so badly? Let me assure you that it's not for lack of trying.

Most managers I have met want to do a better job, but they don't know how. And they often default to a stereotypical approach that is overly intellectual, rational, and dry – missing the warmth and authenticity of genuine human connection and emotion. They're focused on making an intellectual connection with their people. But leaders must connect with people's minds and hearts in order to inspire their people to care, to feel engaged, about what they do at work each day.

During this pandemic, while all the rules are suspended and we find ourselves plunged into a Twilight Zone of sorts, a very strange thing is happening. The default leadership setting has changed for many managers, and they have started to lead intuitively. They have found a superpower. They've dispensed with the notion that a leader “directs,” has all the answers, and has to be buttoned up at all times (all of which alienate rather than engage) and have recognized that their people need empathy more than anything else right now.

Daily excursions into team members' homes via webcam are blurring the boundary between work and home, and perhaps for the first time managers are seeing their direct reports' partners, children, pets, kitchen tables, basements, beards, and gray hair. They are seeing their team members as mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, carers, providers – as whole people rather than simply work colleagues. And they are responding as human beings – with heart and humanity, sometimes for the first time.

It's been heartwarming to hear so many stories of leaders making daily calls to team members who live alone to make sure they are okay, sending care packages, making personal protective equipment for their teams, rescheduling meetings and shifts to accommodate homeschooling, and leaning in to demonstrate genuine care and support.

The way team members are responding and showing up surely tells us all that this is what work should be like. When your manager or supervisor cares about you as a person and will invest time to help you and make sure you are safe, you are going to show up and do your best for them and for the organization every single time. It's a no-brainer.

## The Four Emerging Superpowers

Besides **caring more openly for their people (Superpower #1)**, managers are exhibiting several other superpowers as a result of the current situation.



**Superpower #2: Vulnerability and transparency.** Now more than ever, managers are showing up in crumpled T-shirts in their basements on their webcams while multitasking. And that's okay. It gives permission for others to do the same. (Longer term, I sincerely hope the iron will make a comeback!) Leaders are admitting they don't have all the answers and trusting their teams to surface ideas and solutions and execute them. It's been well documented that leaders can't have all the answers and shouldn't be afraid to say so, but it seems that an unprecedented crisis is leveling the playing field and giving managers the forum to be vulnerable with their people.

**Superpower #3: Ambiguity.** Increasingly, I'm seeing managers get comfortable with ambiguity – that curious gray area that often accompanies significant change. This is a time to rely on our purpose or mission to provide direction and our values to guide our behavior. These vital business constructs don't often filter down to our frontline leaders in a practical way to guide daily work. But when our daily work is thrown into a spin, there is real utility in our mission and values – and for someone who has been involved in crafting a good many mission or vision statements, it's been heartening to see them being embraced fully as a true leadership compass.

**Superpower #4: Ability to motivate for short-term goals.** Another leadership superpower I've observed in recent weeks is that managers have had to rally their teams very quickly around new and sometimes very short-term goals. Often we are so focused on creating and then executing well thought-out, very detailed plans. But many of these long-term strategies have been paused or completely abandoned as businesses grapple to stay afloat and reframe what success or winning looks like.

Our own cross-industry survey of 300 managers reveals that they are galvanizing teams around three main things: changing customer demands, shifting operations, and workplace safety. And the great news is that most have done in a few weeks what may have taken months to accomplish in the past. They have been able to quickly reorient their teams to deliver significant change in extremely difficult circumstances. And this is in huge part because of the other superpowers: they have been empathetic, more vulnerable, and more able to operate in ambiguity as leaders.

## **We Need these Leadership Superpowers to Stick**

My hope is that the new leadership superpowers that have bubbled to the surface during this crisis will continue as we begin to stabilize. When intellectually smart and agile leaders can also lead with vulnerability and heart, they can accomplish amazing things with their teams. And that should start to chip away at the disappointing engagement statistics and change our relationship with work forever. If the current crisis can lead us to a more engaged workforce, that would constitute one very welcome and positive outcome.



# CONCLUSION

Change requires commitment, focus, and a process that gives every person in the company a connection to your big-picture strategy or your critical strategic initiative. It requires leaders to get past their underestimation of the power of a front line. It needs organizations that empower managers with the capabilities and knowledge to coach people to support that change, daily, weekly, and monthly.

And above all else, it can't be done without connecting the hearts and the smarts.

Let Root know if you need help.

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