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LEADERSHIP

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Leading Is Tough Right Now. But You've Got This.

It's not about changing your style—you'll just need to kick things up a notch.

💡 BASED ON INSIGHTS FROM

Harry M. Kraemer

The last few years have not been easy on leaders, to say the least. But according to Harry Kraemer, good leadership still looks a lot like it did pre-pandemic.

“The requirements to be a leader have always remained pretty constant. It’s leading yourself, leading others, communicating like crazy, listening carefully, demonstrating you care,” says Kraemer.

So instead of changing your style, what the current moment calls for “is really turning up the volume.”

Kraemer is a clinical professor of leadership at Kellogg and executive partner with the Chicago-based PE firm Madison Dearborn Partners. Before coming to Kellogg, he was CEO of healthcare giant Baxter International.

In a recent webinar for [The Insightful Leader Live](#), he shared how leaders across an organization can amp up their leadership skills to meet crises with grace.

Double Down on Self-Reflection

Before you can lead others through turbulent times, you need to first lead yourself—which of course requires understanding yourself.

This is pretty much always good advice. Kraemer has long advised leaders to set aside a few minutes each day to self-reflect on what they intended to do, what they actually did, and what they might have done differently—both at work and in other areas of their life. (You can read a full list of his [favorite prompts for self-reflection here](#).)

Self-reflection is even more critical during a crisis, he explains. Even in easy times, we have a tendency to want to move quickly, lest all of our decisions and responsibilities start to pile up. In a crisis, this tendency gets much worse. But this confuses activity with productivity. It is far better to do less, but to be intentional and strategic about how those things are done—especially when time is tight and the stakes are high.

The Insightful Leader: How to L...



Kraemer also advises occasionally looking beyond yourself for this insight—a gut check, if you will, about whether your actions align with the things you say you care about. Specifically, he advises sharing your priorities and values with others, and then waiting to see how they react.

“The good side is when [they] say, ‘Hey, Harry, you know, you can stop here. I mean, I’ve been working with you, I see your actions every day. Based on your actions, I could have guessed what your values are,’” he says. “Now the other side, a little more scary, is when [they] say, ‘Wow, based on your actions, I’m amazed you think those are your values.’”

Double Down on Communication

No matter where you sit in an organization, the key to leading others is influence. And the key to influence is showing people that you understand them: their perspective, their experiences, and at a bare minimum, even just their names.

When Kraemer asks his MBA or executive education students how many of them desire to lead, many hands go up. When he asks them how many of them “relate” well with people, again, there’s a sea of hands. Then he instructs students *not* to raise their hands—he doesn’t want to embarrass them—but to simply reflect: “How many of you know the name of the receptionist, when you walk into the building? How many of you, when you go in the cafeteria, know the names of everybody? And how many children do you have? And when you’re talking to the maintenance folks, do you know their favorite sports team and thank them for everything they are doing?”

If you can truly relate to others and see where they are coming from, you can have an “enormous impact,” Kraemer explains.

Again, this is always the case. But during a crisis, leaders need to “pump it up a lot more.” In addition to continuously checking in to see how people are doing, leaders should be extra diligent with other communication efforts, such as ensuring everybody is crystal clear on their own role, the expectations that are in place, and how people will be held accountable.

Even if you find yourself spending 90 percent of your time on communication, it isn't necessarily a problem. After all, says Kraemer, “If I've got all the right people, and if everybody knows exactly what to do, what else is there to do?”

Same Advice, Lots of Situations

In Kraemer's view, this advice—to focus, above all, on how you relate to and communicate with others—applies to most of the stickiest scenarios in which you are likely to find yourself while leading during a crisis.

Take discussions about future layoffs. Don't promise people that there will never, ever be layoffs, or that their job is theirs for life. These promises are nearly impossible for most

organizations to keep. Instead, be transparent about what would happen if layoffs did occur, and ensure your team that you will do everything in your power to treat them as you would like to be treated. (And then follow through on it.) This could include providing employees with professional-development opportunities while they are employed, as well as helping them find their next role if they are let go.

“At Baxter,” says Kraemer, “we would literally take the time to figure out, on average, how many weeks did it take to find the person another job.”

Or take managing up. Say you are an entry-level employee hoping to influence your manager to do something differently or the CEO hoping to convince your board of directors about the wisdom of your next move.

Once again, the key is relating and communicating. Kraemer advises studying how those above you in the organization operate: What do they respond to? What works and what doesn't? If someone has a big ego, for instance, can you convince them that your idea is actually *their* idea? Or maybe they won't listen to you, but they are likely to listen to someone else. Go ahead and engage that person instead.

As Kraemer says, “I've got to figure out a way to be able to relate to you, so I can change your mind; I can change the direction.”

FEATURED FACULTY

Harry M. Kraemer

Clinical Professor of Leadership