

During a crisis: Why do some leaders thrive and others survive?

A practical guide to leading and thriving in the new normal



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The level of disruption that leaders are facing today is unprecedented. The complexity and scale of the challenges they are navigating has left many leaders feeling overwhelmed.

But not all leaders are struggling. Some are actually flying. The leaders who are thriving are not doing so by chance. Our research and experience in leadership development over the last 30 years has shown that these leaders are proactively applying three key practices, or ingredients for success.

The first is a leader actively mastering their mindset. The leaders who are doing well are not the ones who have all the answers. Instead, they understand how their mind works and are able to resource themselves, choose their attitude and rebalance when faced with difficulties. As a result, they are able to be at their best more of the time.

Secondly, leaders who are thriving understand that it is up to them to create an environment for others to flourish and be at their best. They ensure that their team feels seen, heard and understood.

The third practice is facilitating great quality conversations. When both the leader and the team are at their best, everyone can begin to have great quality conversations and think creatively together. These conversations, facilitated by the leader, are critical for a group to unlock solutions to the most complex organisational challenges.

These three practices, applied in this particular order, help leaders thrive and solve complex organisational challenges - in times of disruption.

There are many theoretical discussions in the industry around different leadership styles and the characteristics of successful leaders. But there is a distinct lack of practical and actionable guides. As a result, we've put together a guide which will take you through some daily practices that will enable you resource yourself, support others and drive meaningful change in your organisation.

The context and the question

Leaders today are bombarded with increasingly complex challenges.

This year alone we've experienced political and economic unrest across the world, the continual and devastating consequences of global warming, and a pandemic. This pace of change feels unrelenting and will most likely continue to accelerate. Disruption has become such a norm that it's no longer 'news.'

The uniqueness and scale of these challenges has left many leaders feeling overwhelmed. They are navigating within an external environment they cannot control and are faced with problems they have never seen before. However, over the past few months, as the turmoil has increased, we've noticed that *not everyone* has been struggling. There are leaders who are doing better than they were before. Some leaders are quietly thriving, and others are even flying. We often hear 'I'd really love to work out why I am doing so well in this crazy time' and 'the team is the best it's ever been. How can we maintain that?'

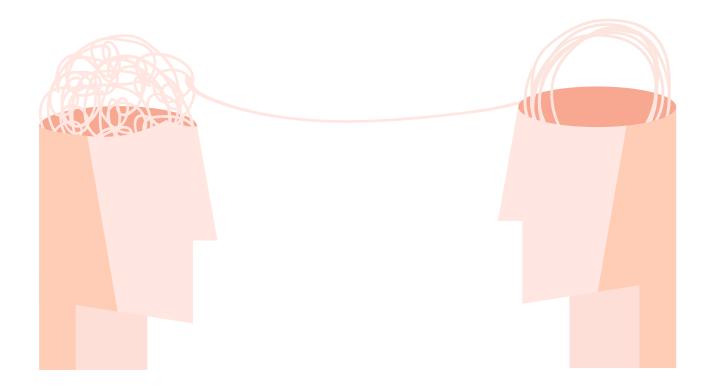
It appears to us that these times of disruption are not so much a leveller but more of a sorting system. Some leaders go under and others rise.

So, the question is, what is making the difference? How are leaders thriving in a world where complexity and change are the new normal?

In this guide we will reveal what we believe these leaders are doing differently. And we will share practices and techniques to enable more leaders to thrive. A common approach to tackling disruption has been to equip leaders with more skills, more knowledge and more competencies. But leaders don't need more skills. Leadership is not about having all the answers.

Equipping leaders with more knowledge is

not sustainable because the challenges they face are constantly evolving and additional knowledge quickly becomes redundant. We need to rip up the old manual. Leaders need to focus much less on their skillset. Instead, they need to master their mindset.



What does it really take to thrive?

We have partnered with thousands of leaders during our 30 years as consultants in leadership development. Time and time again, we have observed a similar pattern of behaviour in the leaders who are successfully navigating extremely complex situations, finding great solutions to seemingly impossible problems, and having a great time doing so. These experiences have helped us understand what it takes to thrive during disruption.

So, what does it take? Leaders who are succeeding are proactively applying three key practices:



Mastery of one's mindset as a leader

Organisations rely on their leaders to steer them through unsteady waters. It takes a tremendous amount of energy for a leader to do this well. Therefore, it's imperative that a leader is able to master their mindset in order to take on this challenge. Leaders who are thriving understand *how* their mind works. They are able to resource themselves and choose their attitude when faced with difficulties. They recognise their triggers; they take control of their 'self-talk' and they have learnt how to rebalance themselves when they need to. Consequently, they are able to be at their best more of the time, no matter what life throws at them.



Leaders creating an environment for the team to be at their best

Leaders who are thriving understand that it is up to them to create an environment that allows others to flourish, where members of the team feel seen and heard, where they can be real and where their contributions are valued.

Facilitating great quality conversations



When both the leader and their team are at their best i.e. fully present, open and listening deeply, great quality and solution-focused conversations take place. You will recognise these - they are the conversations where ideas come thick and fast, where one idea builds on another. Once the team have reached this stage, they are in a position to think creatively together and ultimately come up with the solutions and resulting actions that will drive the organisation forwards. Leaders who are thriving understand how to facilitate these conversations.



A really critical point to note here is the ordering. As you can see, the very first step is for leaders to be resourced and at their best. If a leader is not at their best e.g. anxious, irritated or frustrated, it makes it almost impossible to do steps two and three well. Leaders who are thriving understand this. It's very tempting to delve straight into trying to solve organisational problems i.e. going straight to stage three. This is an almost knee-jerk reaction to a crisis and it's where many leaders come unstuck. You need to lay the groundwork of one and two before proceeding to three.

Leaders at their best

Choosing their attitude, resourceful, aware, present

2

Team at their best

Feeling seen, heard and their contributions being valued 3

Everyone having great quality conversations & thinking well together

Listening deeply, open to possibilities and creating together

We find it helpful to express these stages in the form of concentric circles. At the heart of everything is a leader's mindset and their mastery of it. It's what we call an 'inside out' approach to leading. Don't start with the solution, start by focusing on your mindset.

In this guide

We will share the practices that leaders can apply to make each of these steps possible.

Let us begin by focusing on step one: how the leaders who are flourishing are resourcing themselves and managing their state. In order to unpick what these leaders are doing, we first need to explore what happens when we are faced with upheaval. What is the natural human response to disruption?



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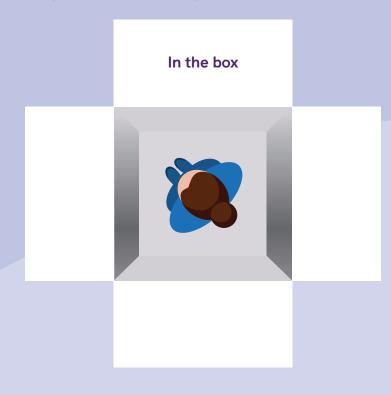
The human response to disruption

Change can be extremely triggering. It breeds uncertainty and fear.

During heightened moments of disruption, we often find ourselves unsettled, feeling anxious, confused and lacking in self-belief. Our self-talk (the voice that runs a narrative in our head) becomes critical, pessimistic and judgmental and it is these thoughts that create our experience and the feeling that we are not at our best. We call this experience 'going in the box'.

We use the metaphor of a box because our experience in these moments feels similar to going inside a box. We shut down and disconnect. We feel unsafe and may struggle to access our creativity. We are 'hijacked' by our own thoughts and are unable to see the reality or possibilities of the situation. We ultimately get knocked off our game, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot.

When we go in the box, we become less aware of ourselves and others around us. Our ability to notice, to listen to others, to be insightful, is hindered. When we are in this state, we are much less likely to have the best quality dialogue with others or make the right choices for our organisation.



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Leaders who are thriving are choosing their state of mind

We cannot control the external environment, but we can choose how we respond to it.

Our mindset, our emotions and our behaviour i.e. the experience we have of a situation, is entirely under our influence. There is good news and bad news here. The bad news is that we create our own experience i.e. we can't blame anyone or anything for us feeling the way we do. The good news is that we create our own experience (through our thoughts and our feelings). We're in charge and we can choose a different attitude.

The leaders who are deftly leading their organisations through disruption are not the ones with all the answers or all the expertise. Rather, they are the ones who have **figured out** how to **choose their state** and **be at their best - 'out of the box' - more of the time**.

Those who are flying still get knocked off their game and go in the box like everyone else, but they are able to recognise when it happens and do something about it, fast. They are more conscious of their thoughts and feelings and the experience they are creating. They have learnt how to resource and rebalance themselves. They can get out of the box.



Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it.

Charles R. Swindoll





What can I do to resource and rebalance myself?

Some of the more common rebalancing techniques might be to do some exercise, go for a walk, talk to another person to get a fresh perspective. But these often take time and sometimes what is required when you are 'in the moment' is a practice that you can apply immediately. We will share a technique that will allow you to do this, but first, let's break down the process that occurs when we go in the box.

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Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Victor Frankl



Triggers

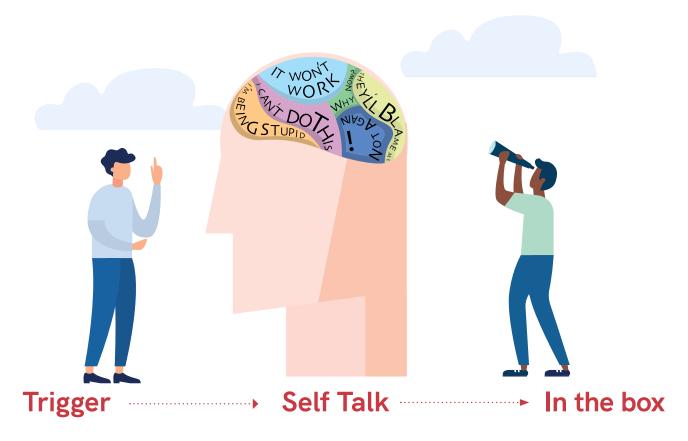
When leaders are bombarded with one problem after another, they often experience multiple 'triggers' throughout the day. A trigger could be as obvious as receiving some bad news, but it could be as subtle as an email or even a certain look someone gives you. Everyone experiences triggers. Many of them we ignore. But sometimes a trigger can kick start the thoughts and feelings that result in us going 'in the box.' In these moments we are not at our best. It can take just a fraction of a second to go in the box after an initial trigger.

To relate this to Viktor Frankl's quote above, the 'stimulus' is the trigger and our response can be to go in the box. But something happens between the trigger and going in the box, and this is what we call 'self-talk.'

What is self-talk?

Self-talk is that inner voice that runs a commentary on our life. This voice can sometimes be useful, reminding us to pick up some milk or running through a list of tasks to complete. However, when we have been triggered, our self-talk can be unhelpful. It can be pessimistic and gloomy and make us catastrophise about what might happen. It can also be highly judgmental and critical of ourselves and others.

When we experience a trigger, our self-talk often interprets it in a negative way and places an unhelpful meaning on this trigger; as a result we go in the box. So it's ultimately our self-talk and not the trigger that puts us in the box. Essentially, we have put ourselves in the box, but as we said before this is good news because it means we also have the ability and the choice to get ourselves out of it.





Choosing my state of mind

Emotion, Truth, Choice (E.T.C)

E.T.C is a technique you can use to get yourself out of the box. When we are triggered and experiencing unhelpful self-talk, we make things up, imagining a worst-case scenario, or worrying about what people think of us. In these moments, we truly believe what our self-talk is telling us. At the heart of the E.T.C practice is our ability to notice these thoughts and feelings, pause, bring ourselves back to the present reality and tell ourselves the truth.

E

Emotion

Notice what you are feeling, physically and emotionally. What are you thinking?

What is your mind saying about you, others, the situation and the consequences? Acknowledge (without judgement) your 'in the box' state.

T

Truth

Take a breath, then tell the truth.

What is really true? What are the helpful truths to remind yourself of?



Choice

Take a breath, then choose.

From a position of truth, make a conscious choice about what you intend to do or not do. What are your options?

E

Step one is to notice your Emotions

When you have been triggered, the first clue is often a physiological change in your state. You might notice your heart rate increase, butterflies in your stomach, sweaty palms. Or you might notice you feel anxious, frustrated, angry or irritated. Slow yourself down and try to tune in to what you are feeling and what you are thinking. Acknowledge your feelings – sometimes just telling yourself 'I'm anxious' can help you begin to rebalance. Notice what your mind is telling you. Self-talk often feels exaggerated and finite. For example, I'm useless' or 'they're useless' or 'there is nothing I can do about this.' Make a mental note of these statements.

Take a breath

The full stops in E.T.C are very important. They are to remind you to breathe! When we are triggered, we can stop breathing. If that sounds crazy, pay attention the next time you are triggered and notice how hard it becomes to take slow, deep breaths.







Step two is to tell yourself the Truth

It's time to counter this self-talk. By establishing what's really true, we can rebalance ourselves. We can reframe the situation in reality, no matter how dramatic the stories we tell ourselves are.

To help you get your mind back to a more grounded and resourceful place, think of a time when you were at your best, a time when things were going well, when you were energised and motivated. How did you feel in that moment? What were you saying to yourself? Notice the voice in your head. It's a different voice. Start to tune into that voice.

What are the 'untruths' and what are the helpful truths?

With that voice in your mind, revisit the self-talk statements you noticed in step one. One by one, start to eliminate all the 'untruths' that your self-talk is telling you are gospel. Ask yourself 'is this something I can 100% guarantee is the truth? Undeniably true?' As with most people, the answer is likely to be 'I guess not, now that I think about it.' Have you made any assumptions? Remember you can never truly know what someone thinks about you unless they've actually told you! Are you exaggerating? Be scientific and honest about each statement. When you notice much of your self-talk is not strictly true, you can begin to reveal some of the helpful truths to rebalance and come back to a place of reality.

Some examples:

"I'm not good enough."	This is not true. I have faced hard challenges before and succeeded.
"I'm being stupid and they all know it."	This is not true. I'm just assuming I know what other people are thinking but I haven't asked, and no one has said I am being stupid.
"They will blame me."	This is not true. I cannot predict this with certainty. I'm also trying to do my best.
"There is nothing I can do about this."	This is not true. There are always possibilities and options.
"I should've done this earlier."	Maybe, but I'm human and 'should haves' or 'could haves' are not helping me right now.





C

Step three is to explore your Choices

Bringing yourself to a place of truth-based reality allows you to make mindful and pragmatic choices about the situation.

Now it's time to explore your options. From a position of truth, make a conscious choice about what you intend to do or not do. What choices do you see that you didn't see before? Next time something like this happens, what could you do? Is there something you can resolve now e.g. a conversation you could have? Think of as many choices as you like. We've found it's helpful to have around three.

By choosing to respond differently, you not only bring yourself out of the box, you also begin to break the cycle. The next time you experience a similar trigger or notice a familiar pattern of self-talk, you will be able to catch it earlier, shift your state and get out of the box sooner. This will enable you to spend more time at your very best.



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How do I create the conditions for others to thrive?

We have described what leaders can do to manage their state and choose their attitude. We sometimes describe this as leaders 'putting their own oxygen mask on first' and from this resourceful state they are then able to support others. The second ingredient that is helping leaders thrive is their ability to create the conditions for others (their colleagues, their team etc.) to be at their best. Leaders cannot steer their organisation through change on their own. Being able to successfully navigate troubled waters takes a team.

First comes empathy

Leaders might automatically assume that in order to support others, they need to direct them and share their own views from the get-go. This is an almost instinctive response. Leaders who are thriving are, in fact, doing things differently. Colleagues and team members are at their best when they are seen and heard, when they feel safe to freely express their views, and when their contributions are valued. Leaders need to connect, empathise and listen deeply before offering an opinion. They need to signal to others that "I see you" and "I hear you." They need to show "it's safe for you to bring yourself."

When you really listen to another person from their point of view, and reflect back to them that understanding, it's like giving them emotional oxygen.

Stephen Covey

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See, hear and then speak

A highly effective way to create this environment is to follow the 'See, Hear and Speak' practice. Through this practice, you can easily tune in to how the other person is. Most importantly, you need to remember that it is See, Hear and *then* Speak. Resist interrupting or offering a solution until you have fully understood and considered the other person's viewpoint.

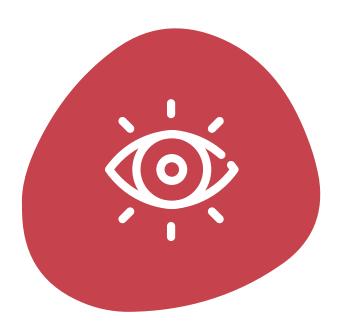
You'll need to be out of the box yourself and fully resourced before attempting this. You can't be present to others and *really* see and hear them if you are listening to your self-talk and are in the box yourself.

See

When we think of a leader who has influenced and inspired us, we may remember that they made eye contact with us, asked us how we were, and invested time in understanding us. Essentially through their actions they said 'I see you and I appreciate you. I want to connect with you.'

Seeing is about building trust and rapport and developing mutual respect and connection. When someone is 'seen', without being judged, they begin to speak openly. They feel comfortable sharing their opinion, without defensiveness or suspicion.

Seeing someone involves understanding their world - what they are good at (and not so good at), what their wider goals are, what their passions are, what makes them tick etc. When you are focusing on a project, it's important to continue that rapport and solicit their opinion and ideas. Really try to get into their shoes.





Hear

Hearing is all about listening deeply. It doesn't just involve letting the other person speak. Rather, it's about reflecting on what they said, being curious and inquisitive, asking questions and playing back what you understood. It's about suspending judgement and being fully open. Hearing is about telling someone 'I have come into your world and I understand.' It's about showing someone that what they are saying has the possibility of shifting and changing you. Get to the root of what the other person is both thinking and feeling.

Speak

Once you have truly seen and heard others, you can then respond. This might come in the form of sharing your thoughts and experiences, and perhaps offering a solution and a vision for the future. The Speak part is all about saying 'now let me share my world with you.'

It's about being honest and communicating your thoughts clearly whilst remaining open and impartial. Through your language it's obvious that you are doing things for the good of others, the project and the company.



When done in this order - See, Hear and then Speak - leaders find that their team is fully invested, inspired and has the courage to act. When a leader and their team are resourced and connected in this way, they are in the best place to tackle complex challenges.





See

- Initiate contact with them
- Create rapport with them
- Notice what you see and get into their shoes
- State your purpose



- Ask open / inquiring questions
- TED "Tell me more, Explain, Describe"
- Feeling questions "How do you feel about..."
- Conclusion questions "What would you like to see happen?"
- Show you're listening to them by playing back - what they've said and what you see and hear they're feeling



Speak

- Share what you see, think and feel in a non-judgmental way
- Share your own experiences, expertise and beliefs

Now great quality, solution-focused conversations are possible

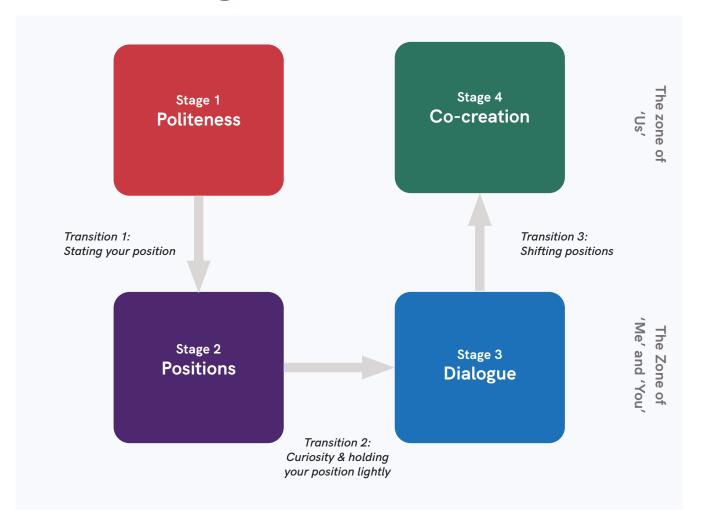
We've explored how leaders can manage their own state. In turn, when they are at their best, they are able to create an environment for others to thrive. At this point, the whole team is in the *best possible place* to tackle the organisational challenges they are facing. When they are hit by headwinds, they can be resourceful together. So, what comes next?

Facilitating quality dialogue is the great unlocker

We've supported hundreds of teams across the globe. From our experience, it has become very clear that the teams who are performing the best are the ones that are having great quality conversations. The quality of this dialogue determines the quality of thinking and in turn this thinking creates the most impactful solutions and courageous actions.

Over the years, we have noticed there are four 'stages of conversation' that highly effective teams consciously move through when they embark on solving their most important challenges. The diagram below shows these four stages and the transitions in order to reach each stage.

Stages of conversation



Stage 1: Politeness

- Being polite, cautious
- Holding back the truth
- Not saying what you think
- "I am saying what I think you want to hear"

Stage 2: Positions

- Straight talking
- Saying what you think
- Sharing opinions, positions, point of view
- Debating, clashing
- "I am my point of view"

Stage 4: Co-creation

- Generative, flow state
- Co-creating something new
- Building on each other's ideas
- "We co-create new points of view"

Stage 3: Dialogue

- Being curious & inquisitive
- Empathic listening
- Seeing oneself as part of the whole
- "I can change my point of view"



Transition 1

Moving from 'Politeness' to 'Stating Positions'

Most teams or groups, no matter how well they know each other, begin the really tough conversations - those that are complex and important - from a place of politeness. People are often careful about what they say, not sharing the true extent of their thoughts or feelings. It becomes obvious when teams get stuck at this stage because all the really crucial conversations end up taking place 'outside the room.'

To move beyond this stage and towards creative dialogue, all the 'positions' or perspectives that are held in the group need to be shared. When this is done proactively and consciously, the sharing of positions can be both quick and simple.

Tips for sharing positions:

-

- Let your voice be heard.
- Share your position or point of view with others, especially when you disagree.
- Hold your position lightly (be open to change).
- Be open to disagreement or being challenged by others
- Share the rationale behind your position.





Practices for sharing positions:



A simple practice for sharing positions can be everyone in the conversation sharing a number from 1 – 10 in response to the extent they agree or disagree with a statement. Within a matter of minutes, all positions that are held in the group are out in the open, something that can sometimes take hours if left to emerge organically during the course of a meeting.

When a more in-depth sharing of positions is needed, a useful practice is:

- 1. Everyone writes down his or her point of view on a post-it note.
- 2. Each person is given the opportunity to read their post-it aloud to the group. Ensure everyone gives their full attention while each position is shared, without interruption.
- 3. Discuss only when all the positions have been shared. This way, the entire group is aware of where there is alignment and where there isn't. This will enable the conversation to remain focused and efficient.





Transition 2

Moving from 'Positions' into 'Dialogue'

You may recognise the type of conversations that often take place in the boardroom and in leadership teams at the 'Positions' stage.

They are the ones where a few voices dominate, positions are stated and people go back and forth rather like a game of ping pong. The level of listening is fairly low resulting in a circular conversation rather than true dialogue where one perspective builds on another.

Moving into Dialogue requires two connected practices:



- 1. Each individual needs to 'hold their position lightly'. This means shifting from being fixed in a position or a particular point of view, to being prepared to explore alternatives. Each person in the conversation is open to the possibility that there might be a different perspective that could be helpful.
- 2. Each individual remains curious about everyone else's position and perspective. They ask questions, listen deeply and seek to understand fully what the alternative points of view are and why they are held.

Both of these practices require a quality of listening that is not often found in meeting rooms. When attention is placed on this transition from 'Positions into Dialogue,' a whole range of new perspectives, ideas and solutions begin to emerge.



Transition 3

Moving from 'Dialogue' into 'Co-creation'

The final transition occurs as a result of great quality dialogue. When members of the group have stated their positions and then held them lightly enough to enquire deeply about alternative positions, there are moments when the conversation shifts into a generative 'flow' state. You will have experienced these times when ideas begin to emerge thick and fast, when people are building on each other's contributions.

This final stage is not a destination. It is not somewhere a group reaches and remains. It can be fleeting and requires a combination of all the practices we have referred to in this guide to sustain it and return to it when the conversation bumps back down to earlier stages.

Practices for reaching creative solution-generating co-creation:



- 1. 'Yes and' vs 'Yes but': For 10 minutes, during the conversation everyone prefaces what they say with "Yes, and"
- 2. Finding a Third Position: Pick a subject that you generally disagree on and where there are multiple perspectives. Each person writes their point of view on a large post-it note. Place these on a wall and find the most polarising views (tensions). Pick one interesting tension and in pairs, work out a new point of view that could encompass both these opposing views. Ask the question: "What is a perspective where 'this' AND 'that' can co-exist?"

It should be noted that each one of these transitions relies on the individual members of the group being at their best and, in turn, this is very dependent on the leader of the group being out of the box and resourceful. Bringing in the earlier practices of E.T.C and See Hear Speak are crucial to solution-generating, co-creation conversations.

Tesco's response to COVID-19

How have organisations put these practices into action during a crisis? An example is Tesco's rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the years, BRIDGE has designed and delivered several leadership programmes for Tesco store managers, directors and country-level CEOs across the globe. These programmes explore how to be at one's best and how to help others to do likewise. The programmes include four levels of learning.

'You make sense' Ask more than tell Listen for content and for feelings Reflect back Test understanding Ask considered questions 'I make 'I see you' sense too' Matching (body, tone) **Building rapport** Share your vision Acknowledge Talk from the heart State your purpose State what you want Feedback Home 'Choose your attitude' Getting out of the box Self-awareness Know your purpose

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Tesco's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is testament to the leadership capabilities they have developed as an organisation. The team in Asia talked us through some of the steps they took to manage the crisis.

Everyone resourced

Alison Horner, CEO of Tesco in Asia, comments, "the first step was to make sure we were all out of the box and supporting one another. Having the right frame of mind enabled us to remain flexible and act swiftly and creatively when the pandemic hit. Practices around rebalancing ourselves were already an integral part of the team's DNA and they enabled us to cope with the significant challenges we were facing."

Everyone connected

Salinla Seehaphan, Corporate Affairs Director at Tesco Lotus, explains that there were "daily meetings across the organisation where people could share what they were noticing and stay connected to the needs of employees, customers and the wider community. These were a vital component to our response to the virus. Knowing that there was a channel in which concerns could be voiced and heard was extremely reassuring to staff. Everyone had the freedom to speak." From the outset, the leadership team listened intently to the feedback, worries, and ideas from customers and employees. Through empathy and deep levels of listening, they were able to quickly ascertain what was needed and then lay out a clear and inspiring purpose.



Driven by a clear purpose

Salinla adds that establishing a clear purpose early on was invaluable because it "focused people's efforts and energy and enabled everyone to stay on mission."

The leadership team identified three objectives:

- 1. Ensuring the safety of staff and customers,
- Meeting the exponential customer demands for groceries whilst keeping products affordable,
- 3. Supporting local communities and doing all we can to help.

Rapid decision making and turnaround times

In order to respond to the ever-evolving situation, Tesco understood the importance of remaining agile and acting quickly. Early on, the leadership team removed any unnecessary processes, roadblocks or red tape. Ideas were signed off within a day and were rolled out immediately.

What are some of the outcomes?

As well as ensuring the safety of stores for staff and customers (social distancing and sanitation measures, distributing hundreds of thousands of masks, enabling priority times for at-risk customers, expanding home delivery and collection offerings), the team focused on supporting their community. They provided job opportunities to tenants within their vicinity who had to close their business. They ran a programme to provide one million meals to those whose livelihoods had been affected, as well as to medical personnel. They also provided essential items to hospitals and medical personnel.





Conclusion

Being a successful leader is entirely possible, and indeed even more critical during times of disruption and uncertainty. It's something that is achievable by anyone who chooses to consciously include these practices into their way of leading.

We hope this guide has provided you with useful ideas to apply to your own life and leadership. Now is your time to embrace this change, go forward and thrive.

About BRIDGE

BRIDGE is a global consultancy specialising in leadership and organisational development. For the past 30 years, we've had the privilege of being a trusted partner to dozens of brands across numerous industries.

We're passionate and committed to enabling organisations to evolve and thrive. Our development solutions focus on creating conscious and courageous leaders, accelerating team performance, making organisational purpose matter and evolving organisations to be future-ready.

We are known for creating highly immersive and award-winning solutions that result in an extraordinary shift in mindset. We convert complex psychological theory into simple, accessible concepts and practices that our clients can use every day.

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