

OPINION

What does it take to lead in times of crisis?

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Grocery chain Sobeys CEO Michael Medline, pictured here in a file photo, has sent out an almost daily e-mail to millions of grocery shoppers across Canada detailing what the company is doing to protect customers and employees as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds.

J.P. MOCZULSKI/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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In times of crisis, leadership is tested. And how you behave in difficult circumstances is what will ultimately define you as a leader. The COVID-19 pandemic is a living case study of how to lead (or not) in the face of calamity. Examples of good (and bad) leadership abound.

As you read the frequent bulletins in your local area, listen to organization-

wide announcements from your senior leaders, and watch daily news briefings from heads of state, you'll see the cream rises to the top. The more you read, listen and watch, the more apparent it becomes as to what actions and behaviours constitute exceptional leadership in times of crisis. Here are some of the most obvious.

COMMUNICATE FREQUENTLY

The ancient philosopher Aristotle said *Horror vacui*, or, "Nature abhors a vacuum." His point was that if a vacuum exists in the physical world, it is only momentary, as the matter surrounding it immediately fills the space. Similarity, suitability or quality isn't of importance; all that matters is that the vacuum be filled. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so do people, when it comes to information.

When communication is lacking, data – accurate or not – immediately moves in to fill the vacuum. And this phenomenon is compounded in situations of crisis. Which is why exceptional leaders communicate frequently. Two current examples immediately come to mind.

First, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. No matter your political leanings, it is impossible to deny that Mr. Trudeau has stepped up to communicate frequently during this crisis. His daily press briefings often, out of necessity, contain partial or preliminary information.

Nevertheless it's far better to have incomplete but accurate information relayed than allowing the slew of falsehoods floating around in social media to take over. Fortunately, most Canadians understand and appreciate that even partial information is better than nothing at all.

The second example comes from the corporate world. Michael Medline, chief executive officer of giant grocery chain Sobeys, has sent out an almost daily e-mail to millions of grocery shoppers across Canada. Each e-mail offers specifics, detailing what the company is doing to protect customers and employees, and to maintain the necessary supply chain of goods as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds.

COMMUNICATE CONSISTENTLY

While frequency of communication is important, so is consistency. We have no further to look for proof of this than the stark contrast between our governments in Canada and those just south of our border.

At the Canadian federal level, despite some missteps, senior ministers are all on-message, singing from the same song book. And the same is true in most provinces. But in the United States, the response to the pandemic is mostly dysfunctional, patchwork at best.

U.S. President Donald Trump delivers differing messages from week to week, day to day, some of them in direct contradiction to his own previous words. Add to that an inconsistent approach between American states on how to manage the health risks, and you are left with a vast population that is panicked and frightened.

CALL IT LIKE IT IS

Share truthful facts. Don't deny. Trust that people will appreciate honesty, even if it is not good news. Again, we are seeing examples of good leadership. Both McDonald's and Tim Hortons immediately went public when employees in specific restaurant locations were diagnosed with the virus.

Some airlines and some provinces have real-time information on their websites that list all flights to and from Canada with confirmed COVID-19 cases. In times of crisis, people need to count on honesty from their leaders; so call it like it is.

STAY BALANCED

But balance in communication that relies on trusted sources is also important. Catherine Holt, the CEO of the Victoria Chamber of Commerce, said it succinctly in a March 13 e-mail to businesses. "We are listening carefully to the daily updates by the Provincial Health Officer and following her instructions and advice. We are trying not to do more than she says – so we don't

contribute to an overreaction to the current situation – and we are trying not to do less than she says so that we don't contribute to any risk there may be.”

As a leader, your responsibility is to lead others through crisis. Communicate reliably, openly and honestly. Do it frequently and consistently. And you will be well on your way.

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