

LEADERSHIP IN TIME OF CRISIS

None of the previous global crises of the past decades – 9/11, SARS and the 2008 financial meltdown have equipped us with sufficient learnings for dealing with the Coronavirus. Not only does it present medical, social, financial implications but also puts the ability to lead through such a crisis under the spotlight. Past work and research on leadership can help us make sense of the situation and possibly find ways to better navigate it. This **first brief focuses on our need to adapt**.

In a crisis, leaders face enormous pressure and responsibility on their shoulders as their teams inevitably expect them to have all the answers while at the same time, in the face of a “first of its kind challenge”, they need to adapt, unlearn and be more creative. Two experts at the World Economic Forum, C Hayashi and A Soo, analysed the experience from Hurricane Katrina and the Great East Japan earthquake. They identified **two phases in crisis leadership: the emergency phase followed by an adaptive phase**.

At the start of the emergency, stabilising the situation and buying time is the priority. The authors recommend that grand plans should be avoided to the benefit of lots of numerous experiments. Maintaining the contact alive is critical say the experts. Stabilising the situation requires **frequent and empathetic communication** with all involved to manage the distress caused by the crisis, even if there is not enough information to share.

The second, adaptive and problem-solving phase, requires a different approach to leadership. **Collaboration and collective intelligence** become even more necessary to mobilise all resources and generate creative solutions. As Ron Heifetz puts it, a challenge like the Coronavirus, cannot be solved using existing knowledge unlike a technical problem for which the fix is known. The solution has to be created, it requires learning and coping with the anxiety that comes with it.

Further reading/viewing that may inspire you to create your own way:

- Adaptive leadership in times of crisis (12 min read), C Hayashi and A Soo, WEF, https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_4-1/prism78-86_hayashi-soo.pdf
- On Ron Heifetz’ difference between technical and adaptive challenge: TEDx video (8 min.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioocNc-HvTs> and Harvard Business Review (25 min read) article - <http://www.kwli.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Heifetz-Laurie-2001.pdf>
- Building a psychologically safe workplace, Amy Edmondson, TEDx video (11 min), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhoLuui9gX8>