

DON'T BLAME THE LETTUCE

Insights to help you
grow as a leader and nurture
your workplace culture



ERIC STUTZMAN, WENDY LOEWEN, RANDY GRIESER

ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership

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To our staff, who have taught us the most.

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LEADING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

BY ERIC STUTZMAN

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided useful insights about the effect leadership has on an organization's ability to handle challenging situations. In my consulting work, I have noticed stark differences in the ways leaders have responded to the challenges of the pandemic. In one instance, the executive director of an organization essentially tried to keep things going as they had been, did not communicate well, and did not problem solve effectively with her team. As a direct result, several key leaders were contemplating leaving their positions. By contrast, the owner of a different medium-sized organization had worked hard to listen, communicate on a weekly basis, and ground her employees' actions in what could be done. Her employees were incredibly loyal and focused, and the organization was succeeding financially.

Uncertainty is a constant companion in our rapidly changing world and our workplaces, but the amount of uncertainty we face fluctuates. Our leadership responses will do one of two things: they will either contribute to the uncertainty and the resulting stress and anxiety for employees, or help create order, focus, and a path forward. We all take cues about how to behave and even how to feel about things from the people around us, especially those whose influence shapes our lives – our leaders.



SURVEY STATISTICS

We were interested to see what factors were strongly correlated to the statement, “When the world outside of my organization changes, our leaders are quick to adapt.” Notably, we found that *adapting to change* and *trust between leaders and staff* are closely connected. 97 percent of those who strongly agreed that there is a high level of trust also indicated that their leaders are quick to adapt to change, versus 18 percent for those who strongly disagreed.

Looking back at the height of the pandemic and to other periods of uncertainty that I have experienced as a leader over the past couple of decades, I can see some valuable lessons that leaders should remember in their efforts to deal with present unknowns. To face these challenges, leaders can anchor their responses in the knowledge that periods of heightened uncertainty will pass with time. When a leader expresses their anxiety about the immediate future in strong ways, followers start to panic, which may lead to self-protective behavior like preparing resumes or, in the case of a pandemic, hoarding toilet paper.

I have also learned that people can experience psychological pain from the stress, anxiety, and fear caused by periods of uncertainty. They may also suffer the very real pain of reduced financial means. Healthy leadership responses acknowledge that we cannot avoid all pain, but we can take steps to reduce the impact of uncertain times and help people through to the other side.

Based on our own experiences of navigating challenging circumstances at ACHIEVE, I have learned that the following strategies help reduce the impact of uncertainty and lead to greater focus and calm action.

Remain Focused on Your Mission and Values

It is easy to get distracted by external concerns and invest too much attention in how to respond to the immediate crisis. Although we need to be prudent and think through our plans for when things are difficult, we also need to keep our organization and staff focused on our reason for existing, our core services, and how we want to behave as we work. If we lose focus on our mission and values, or our reason for existing in the first place, we get lost and anxiety and stress follow.

It's precisely during periods of uncertainty that leaders need to ground their actions and those of the people they lead in meaningful work related to the organization's mission. While external conditions may affect the way an organization can function, in most cases they won't affect whether the organization's mission is still valuable. Leaders should be asking staff to answer the question, "Given the current conditions, how can we work toward our mission?" The way work is done may change, but the mission will not.

Stay Calm

Remember that others look to leaders for guidance, and your emotions and expressions will be felt, scrutinized, and interpreted. As a leader, your voice is amplified by your position of influence and power. When a leader panics, so do their followers. When a leader shouts, employees cower. So, take time to compose yourself each day. If you need to express your anxieties or frustrations, do so quietly with other leaders, then turn your attention back to your mission and values, your work, and your plans.



When a leader expresses their anxiety about the immediate future in strong ways, followers start to panic.

When you present to other staff, customers, clients, or stakeholders, focus on creating calm by being calm. If you remain grounded, it will help others do the same. In order for staff to function at their best, they need you to be an anchor point of calm and rational thought.

Be Realistic in Your Communication

Uncertainty can cause people to exaggerate or minimize risks. Being realistic means taking stock of the assets and strengths you already have as well as your potential vulnerabilities. Given the limitations of your own single perspective, being realistic also means staying attuned to what is happening around you and seeking a variety of perspectives from people both inside and outside of your organization. It means looking for reliable news sources.

As you gather information, plan for both contingency *and* normal operations, always relying on your strengths and assets. Be transparent about risks as you communicate with staff, partners, and clients, but also remind people of the organization's strengths and assets. Work *with* your staff to build a plan based on realistic information. When people have realistic information and a plan based on realism, they can focus on their work and their fears will subside.

Take the Long View

Uncertain times will pass, and every leader's goal should be to create order now and see the organization through to better times. Uncertainty fades as we work together in the now to deal with risks and ambiguity. While uncertain times often bring a measure of pain, they also bring growth when we emerge from them.

Ask yourself what your world looks like on the other side of the uncertainty. Where do you want to be as an organization? Keep your eyes focused on a promising future while you work toward it in the now. As you focus on your mission and the future you envision, you will also create the conditions you need to operate in the present.

Show Compassion

Some people within our organizations are more susceptible to the disturbances created by uncertainty. Their susceptibility comes from having fewer resources, whether they are emotional, physical, or financial. Leaders must stay attuned to those who may be more exposed and do what they can to help mitigate risk for them. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, our workplace clearly communicated that staff would be supported to work from home and to stay home if they were sick while receiving pay through our benefits program. Not only did this decrease the risk of someone coming to the office while they were sick and exposing others to the virus, but it also meant that our staff had less anxiety and were able to focus on their work.

When uncertainty is heightened, consider which people are more at risk or perceive themselves to be at risk, and then ask yourself what you can do as a leader to show compassion and to provide resources. As you provide support to individuals at risk, you strengthen their ability to continue working during challenging times. Ultimately this helps you retain your valuable staff and continue the work of your organization through periods of uncertainty.

At ACHIEVE, we have discovered that we can flourish during periods of uncertainty. Although initially we keenly felt the effects of the pandemic, our leadership focused on remaining calm, communicating with realism, taking the long view, and being compassionate. We focused on fulfilling our mission in new and creative ways, and we found a way forward that has been profitable and fulfilling. Uncertainty will pass, and it will come again, so we will take these lessons with us into the future.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think back to your own experience with a period of uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic. How did the leaders around you respond? What led you to feel increased anxiety? What helped you feel calm enough to move to action?
2. How does your organization currently deal with uncertainty? What responses have been helpful to staff? What could you be doing more effectively?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Ask a trusted colleague to rank you on a scale of 1 to 5 in terms of your ability to remain calm during a crisis. Welcome the feedback and ask what they observed that led them to give you that score. Then consider other ways to reinforce your ability to remain calm.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Our Iceberg Is Melting: Changing and Succeeding Under Any Conditions
by John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber (Portfolio, 2016)

GREAT LEADERS ARE ALWAYS SEARCHING FOR NEW IDEAS

and approaches to their work because they know they must continue to evolve in order to succeed in an ever-changing world. And, just like a gardener who knows not to blame their lettuce for failing to thrive, great leaders know that it's the *conditions* of their workplace that affect how their people perform and grow.

This book explores a variety of leadership insights that will help you meet challenges, respond to opportunities, and nurture a healthy workplace culture in new and innovative ways. In addition to each insight, you'll find questions for reflection, a practical application idea, and additional resources related to each topic to help spark your own thoughts and discussions among your teams.

The common themes in this book are workplace culture and relationships. Although there are insights about vision, strategy, and innovation, you will learn that you must first focus on people to be productive and thrive as an organization.



“The authors of *Don't Blame the Lettuce* understand how important relationships are and give practical ways for leaders to improve their workplace culture. This should be required reading for any organization's leaders!”

—ERICA KESWIN, Author, *Rituals Roadmap: The Human Way to Transform Everyday Routines into Workplace Magic*

“This book offers accessible leadership insights with real-world wisdom. The reflection questions, additional resources, and practical applications are valuable for putting what you've learned into practice.”

—CURT COFFMAN, Co-Author, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*

“*Don't Blame the Lettuce* is a charming and inspiring collection of insights from the authors' own life experiences. They each illustrate important lessons about leadership in a memorable and quotable way. I highly recommended this book.”

—JOHN ZENGER, Co-Author, *The Inspiring Leader: Unlocking the Secrets of How Extraordinary Leaders Motivate*

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