

Excerpt from

Riding The Tiger: Leading Through Learning in Turbulent Times

by Priscilla Nelson and Ed Cohen

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LEADERSHIP GUIDELINES FOR TURBULENT TIMES

From Chapter 3, The Role of Leadership

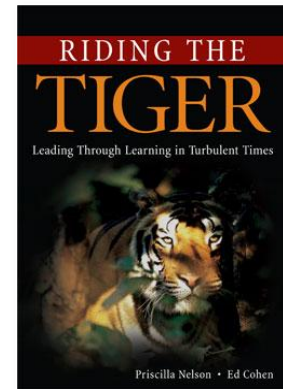


*Don't let the news of today undo the successes
of yesterday or tomorrow.*

—Howard Richmond, MD



During turbulent times, everything speeds up. The pressures of shifting emotions, processes, and demands increase as more and more is expected from everyone. You are simultaneously juggling the daily needs of the business, caring for the wounded, and helping pick up the pieces. Because these difficult periods are stressful, leaders must rapidly and proactively convert emotions into actions. Leaders must concurrently take care of themselves and everyone else. This takes time, patience, empathy, a willingness to shift priorities, and communication—constant communication, even “overcommunication.” The leaders who lead “out loud”—those who maintain transparency, approachability, and integrity—are the ones with whom people want to work, in good times and bad. And these are the leaders whom others seek to become.



The 12 Leadership Guidelines

The approach that works best in this situation is leading through learning—which primarily entails developing leadership guidelines. It is simple and powerful. Leverage learning to assist leaders with the complicated people and relationship dimensions of the business. Develop a set of leadership guidelines. Communicate and teach them to all leaders. Use these guidelines as the basis for coaching conversations.

Here are 12 guidelines we used as part of our leading through learning strategy. Use these guidelines as a basis for your strategy, or adapt them to your unique situation:

1. Understand that we will *never* get back to normal.
2. Take care of one another.
3. React . . . pause . . . respond.
4. Talk—even when you don't believe there is much to say.
5. Be visible—now is not the time to play hide-and-seek.
6. Maintain integrity and high moral values.
7. Optimize costs, with retention in mind.
8. Be a brand ambassador.
9. Assess and rebuild trust.
10. Remember, leaders are human, too.
11. Think like a child.
12. Take care of your emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.

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Understand That We Will Never Get Back to Normal

Organizations are constantly in the process of evolving to something new. An organization in crisis creates revolutionary change, resulting in radical shifts occurring much faster than most people are comfortable handling. It's natural to want a return to the status quo. But no matter how devastating the situation, there is opportunity in a crisis. At the heart of a crisis is learning. There were things that were once considered "normal" that helped pitch your organization into turbulence. This is your opportunity to see those things for the mistakes they were and begin to build better practices.

The only constant about "normal" is that it is always changing. So instead of hoping for and trying to get back to normal, you need to move on, seek better ways to do things, and let these new ways become the new normal.

Take Care of One Another

Leaders must demonstrate emotional intelligence—transparency, empathy, patience, forgiveness, and inclusivity. They are obliged to look for ways to take care of one another. As a leader, first and foremost, explore your own feelings. Find someone with whom you can speak, someone who has an objective view and who provides you with empathic listening. At work, don't be reticent to express your feelings, and allow others to express their feelings without judgment. Words like "hurt," "worried," "cheated," "shock," and "disbelief" will be spoken, along with phrases like "How did this happen?" and "Am I going to lose my job?" Let them flow. There is no need to always have an answer or even a reply. This is the time to be a great listener and to exhibit empathy. Use paraphrasing to let others know you have heard them. People need to verbalize their thoughts and feelings to work through them. They want to be heard and need to feel heard. The simple act of listening rapidly reduces anxiety.

React . . . Pause . . . Respond

For safety and expediency, leaders are counted on to react. Adrenaline pushes energies to parts of the body most required to handle the turbulence. Your mind might be more alert, thinking at a rapid speed, eyes dilated so you can see better, and hearing sharpened—and all this may bring on the "normal" reaction: fight or flight. When you react in that moment, a normal response, it may or may not be right. Pause. Reflect. Then collect as much information as possible, and consider the benefits and consequences of each possible course of action before deciding on the next thing to do. The enterprise's response is critical for leaders to consider. As a leader, you face your own turmoil while the collective enterprise also faces its own. Thus the leader must balance his or her concerns with those of the organization by recognizing this duality and separating personal responses from business responses. For example, as a leader, you must take decisive action to help the company recover and care for others (see chapter 7). Yet as an individual, you must decide how you will respond by taking into consideration all the factors at that time, including your career desires, personal needs, and family situation. No matter how you respond, it will be right for you as long as it comes from information gathering, integrity, an open heart, and seeking to understand.

Talk—Even When You Don't Believe There Is Much to Say

I don't know what to say. Everyone is getting information daily from the company. They can see it on the news. The statements above are just some of the excuses leaders provide when asked why they are not communicating with their teams. There is no such thing as overcommunicating, especially during times of rapid change. No one has a valid excuse for not communicating. Provide regular updates as often as necessary. When Raju's confession set off a crisis of massive proportions, updates were held every hour. Then we shifted to updates every few hours and then to updates daily and weekly. Never cancel an update. This scares people. Even when there isn't much to report, people appreciate being told what is known again and again. They also appreciate the opportunity to ask you questions. They feel more connected to you and the organization with regular access. What may in normal times be seen as overcommunication is good communication during turbulent times. You are communicating enough when people repeat your words to each other and to you. Consistent and continuous messaging prevents the rumor mill from gearing up and demonstrates leader' approachability, transparency, and heartfelt concern.

Be Visible—Now Is Not the Time to Play Hide-and-Seek

I have my own stress to deal with. I have incredibly tight deadlines. I have no time to hangout and talk to people. The statements above are just a few of the excuses you will hear. It's true that leaders are

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tremendously busy working to stabilize the company, have additional requirements placed on their shoulders, and are anxious themselves, but the need of the hour is still the team's. When the leader goes into hiding, people become fearful. They question what is happening, and without the leader's presence, they might even make up the story for him or her. This is how dangerous rumors and urban legends are born. Now is not the time to hide away at home or in your office. Closed doors make people nervous. Open the door, get up from your desk, walk around, and talk with people; let them know you care. During the Satyam scandal, a colleague sent this quotation (we tried to find out who wrote it and couldn't): "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Listen, empathize, share advice, provide words of comfort; just be there. You may be injured; we all are. You may have a lot of work to get done; we all do. Be present, inform, comfort, and provide strength for others.

Maintain Integrity and High Moral Values

During turbulent times, leaders will have to take measures that they might not feel good about. There may be a pending layoff or a potential sale of the company, or quite possibly something even worse set to happen. Current circumstances should not influence, broaden, or distort your definition of integrity and other core values.

Optimize Costs, with Retention in Mind

The most common mistake leaders make during any kind of turbulence is implementing cost optimization, which often includes layoffs, without considering the retention of staff. Cost optimization should be discussed and implemented concurrently with a retention plan. If you must optimize costs, then simultaneously work to retain your best people. Your organization will emerge stronger. During and after turbulent times, retention should be one of the highest priorities. You should make cost optimization decisions, keeping in mind their impact on retention. This information allows you to assess risk and make more informed decisions.

Be a Brand Ambassador

The temptation during crisis is to tell everyone everything—the good, the bad, the ugly. Though transparency and adherence to core values is necessary, especially when leading through turbulence, the organization and its people need leaders who are brand ambassadors. As brand ambassadors, you are responsible for representing the organization both internally and externally in a positive manner. This does not mean stretching the truth. It simply means that you should refrain from making negative statements that might cause further turbulence. It also means seeking advice from your marketing and communications group on when and how to interface with the media and providing consistent messages to everyone.

Assess and Rebuild Trust

Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light, and what is elusive and deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness. Our life is a long and arduous quest after truth." There are many advantages to being a part of an environment that is built on truth. People are more open, and there is greater productivity, less internal competitiveness, stronger relationships, and overall a more positive atmosphere. All stakeholders—from employees to customers, investors, and society—know when they are working with an organization built on trust. That said, damage control and rebuilding a seriously injured organization require difficult decisions that not everyone will understand. For this reason, you and the other leaders in your organization must continuously assess and rebuild trust. Seneca, the Roman philosopher and writer (4 bce–65 ce), taught that "no one can be happy who has been thrust outside the pale of truth. And there are two ways that one can be removed from this realm: by lying, or by being lied to." Can trust be rebuilt? It depends. People trust the organized. In her article "Trust Fall," Pat Galagan (2009, 26–28) notes that "there are some who believe that organizations must do more than apologize and be truthful about past sins. The leadership experts James O'Toole and Warren Bennis caution that trust requires more than honest behavior from leaders. Rather, it takes cultures that reward honesty and punish dishonesty." Galagan continues with a quotation from O'Toole and Bennis: "A new metric of corporate leadership will be the extent to which executives create organizations that are economically, ethically, and socially sustainable."

Remember, Leaders Are Human, Too

Crisis and turbulence bring out both the best and worst in each of us. When your organization is facing difficult times, you go through a lot. You may feel hurt, damaged, worried—and that's just the tip of the

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emotional iceberg. Sometimes you won't be at your best, although it is important for you, as the leader, to hold it together as much as possible.

Think Like a Child

The guideline to think like a child may seem out of place—how could that help, particularly during turbulent times? But when you think about it, children do not carry the same burdens as adults; they live in the moment and, especially when very young, are constantly playing (figure 3-1). They may sense your sadness or turmoil. They may even ask you about it. Children allow you to take the opportunity to see the big picture; they provide a goal for you to get through things. They simplify everything, and this allows you to stop overanalyzing and complicating matters. Soon they will be running around, playing their games. Join them, the time will pass, and you will have a much-needed break. Try it. Live “in the moment” as children tend to do, and surrender to your playful inner child for a short period. This will remind you of the significance of taking time to tune out and not allow business to consume every moment. Work/life balance can still exist, even in a crisis.

Take Care of Your Emotional, Physical, and Spiritual Well-Being

Your health—your emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being—is important all the time, and it is critical during turbulent times. Don't put any aspect of your well-being on hold. You will feel like ignoring your needs— but don't! Calm your mind at night. Get a good night's sleep. If you need to talk with someone, seek a counselor, a coach, or your best friend. Start or continue an exercise routine. Be more mindful of your diet. And look for the comfort that comes from following your own spiritual path. This is not an easy task for most leaders, who become so consumed by their professional responsibilities that they sacrifice everything else. Change and uncertainty at work are draining, but you cannot allow them to take over your life.

Nelson Cohen Global Consulting

At Nelson Cohen Global Consulting, we develop leadership potential to lead, learn, transform and achieve desired results through strategic consulting, succession planning, change management, coaching, speaking and learning services. We've helped businesses in over 40 countries, leverage a leading through learning strategy to transform into great places to work, attract world-class leadership talent, and become more globally competitive.

Priscilla Nelson and Ed Cohen have indeed 'been there' and 'done that.' They authentically deliver guidance that leaders can put into practice immediately. They give us the benefit of their hindsight and insight as they enable us to have more leadership foresight.

Beverly Kaye, Co-author of Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay

We are your strategic guides to leadership



Ed Cohen is a talent executive who has conducted business in more than 40 countries. He is the only chief learning officer to have led two companies (Booz Allen Hamilton and Satyam Computer Services) to the #1 rank in the ASTD BEST Awards. Cohen authored *Leadership Without Borders* (Wiley, 2007) and contributed to *The Next Generation of Corporate Universities* (Pfeiffer, 2007).



Priscilla Nelson has 30 years of talent management experience working with *Fortune* 500 companies throughout the world. She was global director of people leadership at Satyam Computer Services. Nelson has received international acclaim for her work in leadership development, executive coaching, and diversity.