

Leading Now: Lead Yourself, Know Yourself, and Get Help

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NO ONE WOULD HAVE PREDICTED in March 2020 that 15 days to slow the spread would become a marathon lasting well into 2021. Yet, here we are! This is not the first time we've tackled a long, disruptive challenge. I researched and co-wrote *The Top Performer's Guide to Change* just before the 2008 financial crisis. That turned out to be opportune timing for coaching professionals, teams, and leaders through those stormy years. One thing became very clear during that time: people's positive persistence was at its lowest at the tail end of the crisis.

Here we are again. People are tired! Still, we have much good news on the horizon. Vaccines are being rolled out and there's light at the end of the tunnel. Now is the time to revive our energy and push through to a brighter future. Start by leading yourself.

Lead Yourself

When flying, parents have to be reminded, "If you are caring for a child, in a flight emergency, put your oxygen mask on first, then assist your child." That's because our instinct is to first take care of those who need us. As the airlines know, we can't help anyone if we've passed out.

Leaders need to protect their ability to lead. The research on thrivers (those who thrived, despite horrific challenges) backs this up. Social scientists have discovered keys to their success. All thrivers practiced three protective disciplines that serve leaders today: know thyself, get help, and be practical.

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Know Thyself

Thrivers were found to be keenly realistic about their strengths and weaknesses. This acute honesty

was part of a strategy to leverage their strengths, while frankly recognizing limitations. Leadership studies reinforce this strategy. The best leaders pursue radical self-awareness. Such piercing candor is particularly useful in stressful times, which tend to bring out our best and our worst.

If you've not completed a self-assessment recently, now may be a good time to do so. Formal assessments help us to take a long look in the mirror. You can ask your team, but most people are not skilled or comfortable giving candid feedback. The closer the work relationship, the harder it is.

Fortunately, there are plenty of good, affordable assessments available. These are most likely to provide the best feedback. Alternatively, you can review any recent assessments completed while in your current role. After self-review, simple steps to maximize strengths include:

Focusing on your strengths. Write a list and look at it regularly. No circumstance can take away your core strengths. This technique is proven to build energy and productivity under challenge. Even the simple act of reviewing your strengths is powerfully motivating.

Protecting your energy. Chronic stress and fatigue exacerbate our weaknesses. Small self-care steps make a big difference. Medical research shows four simple habits are powerful restoratives: move your body, get outdoors, eat reasonably, and get quality sleep.

Work with your body. People are more alert at certain times of day. Scheduling according to your energy rhythm makes the day more productive and enjoyable. In addition, the human brain is most alert for 45 minutes of focused attention, without interruption. Alternate focus time with breaks to manage email, return calls, and move about. Computers can multitask and work non-stop effectively—humans can't.

These tips are intentionally simple. Behavioral research shows that success is best achieved with small, manageable steps. This is especially true during stressful periods. Pick one or two that will make the biggest impact. Give them a try. Then embrace the next discipline of success: get help.

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Get Help

People who have overcome huge obstacles often seem like self-reliant and self-sufficient heroes. The reality is quite different. Every thriver relied on outside help. Securing the right support was essential to their success.

For leaders, external advisers are often the best source for support. Family, peers, and staff have their own needs, which taints their input. They're not reliably unbiased, especially under stress. Find a trustworthy advocate who can focus entirely on your interests. Enlist their help.

Be Practical

In addition to engaging help, thrivers approached their situation with piercing practicality. Clearly aware of limitations, they set goals that were realistic, while driving forward. Practical tactics for this strategy include:

1. **Stopping:** Stop any practice, process, or service that is adding needless stress. Even if you spent most of 2020 desperately maintaining everything, don't hesitate to shift now. You can bring it back later if it matters in the long term. Ask yourself: *What stressful extras can I drop now?*

2. **Pausing:** Put a pause on any large initiatives that are overloading the system. Just because you planned it, doesn't mean you have to exhaust yourself and your team to do it. Ask yourself: *What will happen if I push this out to later?*
3. **Pivoting:** As Winston Churchill aptly said during the massive disruption of WWII, "Never let a good crisis go to waste." Today's crisis is an opportunity to innovate. It's an ideal time to shift things for yourself, your team, and/or your clients. Ask yourself: *What is the opportunity I can seize now because people expect things to be different?*

Flexibility and shedding old expectations are hallmarks of the practical thriving approach. Now is an excellent time to stop, pause, and pivot to accelerate your future success.

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Lead Your Team

Stopping, pausing, and pivoting are also helpful strategies for leading your team. In-person practices often don't work virtually. The list of inefficiencies is long: email overload, Zoom fatigue, increased errors, technology glitches, and more (in addition to the burden of those caring for children at home, while working full time). Leading a team during a pandemic is hard. What follows are a few techniques to alleviate team stress:

Stop email overload. Clients tell me their volume of email has multiplied exponentially. They literally cannot keep up. Rather than relying on email, schedule more frequent brief phone check-ins. Talking live is much faster and a better medium for questions, clarification, and discussion.

Pause the screen time. Virtual work has shackled people to their computer screens for hours upon hours. Clients tell me they routinely sit at the computer all day and late into the night. Leaders can model and encourage their teams to take much-needed breaks from the screen.

Pivot and be creative. Engage the team to work in creative ways. A great way to model healthy creativity is to encourage walking or coffee break calls (inside or out, as weather permits). Moving about is one of the best ways to restore energy, creativity, and enthusiasm.

Virtual isolation makes it challenging for teams to stay engaged, motivated, and aligned. The day I wrote this article, I talked with a leader whose team had become increasingly disengaged. Notably, this is an extremely high-performing team. Everyone is outstanding and hardworking, but even this team is a bit sluggish. After our discussion, it became clear the team needed more personal contact—not email, not texts, not instant messages. Starting immediately, they're pivoting to more brief conversations. Technology is great, but it doesn't replace the positive energy that comes from personal communication.

The focus of 2020 was driving people into their homes. In 2021, we'll need to pivot to draw people back to the workplace. Inertia is a powerful human force. While people miss working together, they've also gotten used to working from home. Teams will need positive motivation to return to offices. Leaders who focus on team bonding now will have teams excited to be together again, live! ■