

BALANCING MENTAL HEALTH AND LEADERSHIP CREDIBILITY DURING COVID-19

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As summer fades and the days grow shorter, my positive mantra “there is always a silver lining” is also beginning to fade. I have always believed that good comes out of everything and there is a lesson to be learned from every situation. However, despite having been through many personal crises and applying the learnings to my life and career, I have been feeling the sustained impact of working from home during the pandemic.

After the first few months of adjusting to the new realities of work, I welcomed the summer. I started to appreciate a coffee in the morning with my husband and going for a walk before I started my day. I loved that I was no longer spending hours navigating the backed-up traffic on the 401. I also quickly learned to adjust to the use of different technology that allowed me to connect with my team and clients. However, as the season changes once again, my concern is that the next phase is likely to be harder, and I worry my attitude may influence how I show up as a leader and colleague. Can I continue at this pace? What will it feel like to spend a long winter working from home? And how will I feel being cut off from my family and friends again?

Since the beginning of COVID, it was clear that the mental health of employees was going to be one of the biggest challenges we faced as leaders. Moving into the summer months brought some relief and an interruption from what was beginning to feel like Ground Hog Day. Many companies realized that employees needed a break and encouraged them to book vacation time to unwind from the never-ending work/life carousel. COVID was going to be a marathon and employees needed time for themselves.

As we enter another stage of COVID and the colder months, there will be no escaping to our decks, cottages, or local parks. The possibility of another lock down is very real, and we may soon be sent back to the same mundane indoor routines. Doctors and mental health professionals know spending time outdoors, especially in green spaces, is one of the fastest ways to improve our health and happiness.

So, we will have to be very conscious of the possibility of another lock-down and what being inside may mean for our moods.

If you want employees to rally around their mental health to ensure resilience during times of uncertainty, leaders must start by taking care of their own mental health first. How your employees experience your leadership during COVID will create the story that they will tell about you in the future. Leaders can no longer hide behind their position as it has become clear that the adage “do as I say not what I do” will not be tolerated. Employees are at the end of their rope and are feeling worn out. Leaders must be careful NOT to demonstrate bad behaviours such as moodiness, lack of patience, anger, etc. as this will be noticed by employees. It is your job to manage your stress levels by taking care of yourself. Start with empathy, authenticity, and kindness. Be honest if you are having a hard day, let people know today may not be the best day for you to make that decision or have that conversation. Share what you are doing to look after yourself – this is a time to lead by example.

Here are some actions that you can start applying to demonstrate that taking care of yourself should always be a priority:

Accept your own vulnerability – leaders are human and are not perfect.

- Share your story and your challenges.
- Don't be afraid to be vulnerable as you will be surprised how much support you will receive from your team and other leaders.
- Employees will not have your back if they don't know who you are nor will they share their vulnerability if you appear to be perfect.
- Employees fear being judged for their flaws just as you do.
- Allow yourself to feel.

Look after your mental, physical and emotional health – take care of your wellbeing in a way that works best for you.

- Exercise or go for a walk
- Practice meditation
- Enjoy lunch with your family or indulge in a daily mid-day cup of tea
- Speak with a therapist or a good friend
- Keep a journal of your thoughts

If you want to be a strong and compassionate leader, do whatever it takes to increase your positive mental health. To conserve and replenish your emotional resources, you must invest in yourself first.

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