

Leading in the Storm – The Stockdale Paradox.



Dr Charles du Toit

Going through Facebook this morning it struck me that there is an unexpected upside arising from this global crisis. When humans, live “more lightly on the planet”, nature begins to renew itself. On social media nowadays there are spectacular posts of towns with empty streets, vehicle-less highways, and global air traffic at a standstill. We see cityscapes without smog, the Himalayas from distances last seen pre-industrialisation, wild animals venturing out again and the canals in Venice fish have been seen for the first time in decades.

While humanity is in crises, nature is thriving.

People are also recalibrating. More than ever we are becoming aware that it is our relationships that gives our lives texture. Even the most introverted person would acknowledge that COVID-19 has placed relationships in sharp focus. Our Facebook, what's up, Zoom, party-on, Instagram and you name it; are increasingly becoming lifelines. Our posts have become bizarre. Online parties, housewives posting impromptu broom-dance cleaning, people doing garden and balcony marathons, my brother did the 2092 steps of the Empire State Building, and of course there is the endless COVID-19 humour and the “deep” motivational inserts.

For employees in lockdown, the break from the hectic pressures of the “real world of work” are only partially missed. I am sure that employees in lockdown are not missing the micro managers, the “in your face” aggressive attitude of some of their managers, the moody bosses. No one misses the politics, the ego's, the opinions, the pressure-cooker meetings, month-ends and the occasional and unfortunate public dressing-downs. While this lockdown world has its own stresses, I am convinced that when we get back together again, we will all have subconsciously re-evaluated the quality of our work lives.

So how does this all relate to leadership.

I would propose that while there are numerous “leadership theories”, increasingly we understand that modern leadership is primarily about three core aspects: servant leadership, building trust and acquiring influence. Without trust and influence, managers are forced to use their positional power to achieve results. These two qualities, influence and trust, arise as a consequence of the quality of our leadership relationships.

When this is all over, we will initially just be relieved to be working again. Longer term it is very probable that we will have shifted our expectations of our work lives and particularly our leaders during this lockdown. It is also very probable that our talented subordinates will emerge from the lockdown having had a fresh look at their lives and their work relationships. They will be more aware of what is important in life and who they are connected to. Importantly, more aware of whether they trust or distrust their leader and ultimately whether they will be influenced by their leader or not.

What is the Stockdale paradox? And how does it fit in?



Admiral James Stockdale was the most senior USA POW during the Vietnam War. To personally survive, he expressed a notably contradictory belief system. One that is very relevant to today. **“you must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be”**

In business, and leadership in particular, this translates to accepting the difficult realities of a business' current condition, while believing that the organization and situation will one day rise above them.

For leadership this means that at the moment, while it is exceptionally difficult to effectively lead our people and see anything positive in this crisis, we need to believe that one day things will be different. More importantly, what we do as leaders now will count. How we connect now will influence their trust in us tomorrow. If we take time to be there for our people now, they will be there for us tomorrow.

What do we need to do?



While traditionally we keep work and or private lives separate, with social distancing and lockdown, this is simply not possible given the complexity of many living arrangements. Every employee's situation will be different, and every workgroup will have a different dynamic given the unique mix of those employees. Some of our people will be challenged by working at home with kids or elderly parents. Some will be very lonely. Some will be scared about the future. Some are worried about loved ones. Some will be bored and angry.

If our people are in lockdown, they will need a lot less of the "usual management stuff", but they will still need leadership. Leadership grounded in real authentic relationships. Leadership that is caring and has simultaneously adapted to conveying that caring through digital technology and social media platforms. *(I attached a list of 20 ideas below to get you started on the remote leadership journey).*

If your people are not in lockdown, they are exposed. This will have created a wide range of practical people management issues. Our empathy and authentic care for them will be equally exposed. While it is easy to get caught up in the day today delivery of our business priorities, at this time it is as important to view every action through a leadership window. For instance, how well are we serving our people? Are we effectively connecting with our people? How high is their trust in our leadership?



Our world and that of our followers has hit the reset button. How we lead people now, will set a platform for how work relationships will emerge when all of this is over.

Ideas for remote leading during lockdown and social distancing.



	Idea	Useful?
1.	Start a team social WhatsApp group.	
2.	If you have not yet done it – Set up a team meeting with the sole purpose of chartering the team in these messy circumstances.	
3.	Set a weekly check-in Zoom/Skype team meeting – people need a routine. Even dress for the occasion.	
4.	Ask your team to make a list of the activities they are working on and ask them to submit it once a week to avoid micromanaging.	
5.	Set up a weekly routine one-on-one meeting with each team member.	
6.	Make sure that your 'door is open' that they have easy access to you, even afterhours if they need it.	
7.	Check if any of your people are alone in lockdown, if so, build a lifeline.	
8.	Check with your people about their child responsibilities. It may be necessary to include a 4-year old in team meetings, or to hold team meetings at after bedtime hours.	
9.	Let your people know that if they have needs to inform you – masks, sanitizers, basic food, etc. If they don't have those things make a plan to have them dropped off.	
10.	Make sure you don't miss birthdays during lockdown.	
11.	Ask your people to think about their long-term plans – then set up a one-on-one discussion with them.	
12.	Send people basic information about the current situation and any company development.	
13.	If there is any crisis – someone in the family is ill, dies etc, make sure you are there for them. Use company leverage.	
14.	If employees are forced to use UIF, have HR needs, need to book leave or any other aspect of People Admin, get involved, check with HR or the administrator.	
15.	Ask team members to study up a topic in the field they are working in, and then do a Zoom workshop. Each person to take a turn.	
16.	Make a list of meetings your people are involved in, and then see if you can cut their meeting time down.	
17.	Ask them to take the initiative to keep you informed of their progress on business tasks and let them propose a feedback time and process.	
18.	There are a host of new world, online development activities available. Set up on-line learning activities for your team during lockdown?	
19.	Draw up a list of the work processes in your department and ask team members to identify the most problematic. Then set up individual or team process improvement activities.	
20.	Don't forget to be real, you don't have to have all the answers. - if your people trust you, that's ok	

