Reflection questions for leaders navigating Covid19

Many of us haven’t been in a ‘developmental’ mindset these last few weeks. I assume none of us are optimizing right now, or ‘killing it,’ at work or in life. In the past six weeks or so, we’ve hunkered down in a physical sense, while also enduring a psychological siege, warding off anxieties about our health, loved ones, businesses, and financial well-being.

As we’ve adjusted to life in our bunkers, you may have little interest in pondering how to be more effective. For example right now I don’t want to read articles about the ‘5 tips on how to be a better parent, home-schooling educator, professional, etc.’ Don’t talk to me about reaching my potential. My mindset is ‘I am at capacity dealing with Covid19, with looking after my young kids, with trying to work from my daughter’s bedroom surrounded by stuffies and ‘Frozen’ Lego, with just keeping everyone *alive*— so I’m ok with being suboptimal right now (and don’t want to feel guilty about it thanks).’
At the same time, we have all grown these past few weeks, though we may not realize it. This pandemic overtook us at a rapid rate, laying waste to the routines and the comforts we took for granted, forcing us to adapt our work and personal lives in sudden and significant ways. As we pivoted our lives at great speed, however, we may not have digested what happened, how the world changed, what the crisis means for our future, or how we’ve grown as a result. Furthermore, we may not have considered our approach to coping with this massive stress, or how we might like to cope in different ways going forward.

In particular, leaders of organizations or institutions have been so focused on surviving these past few weeks, that they may have not found time for reflection. At the same time, they’ve faced unprecedented, once-in-a-career levels of crisis. I have great sympathy for all the people and families affected by the Covid19 crisis, but due to my vocation I have a particular sympathy for leaders — and I would like to try to help them, in some modest and supportive way.

After some consideration, I concluded that the best I can do is offer thoughtful questions. In that vein I’ve compiled a list of reflection questions that might help leaders consolidate their experiences from the past few weeks.

I don’t have all the answers on how to ‘lead through Covid19’ like some superhero. I feel the strain like everyone else — a kind of
wind resistance being applied to work and personal life. But I hope that by asking thoughtful questions, leaders can use them to consolidate the blur of experiences passing them by these last few weeks, and extract something valuable from them.

So as my daughter’s kindergarten teacher suggests when sending out weekly homework assignments, please feel free to consider a few of these questions if they are helpful to you, or not. You are the best person to decide.

**Building awareness of the impact of Covid19**

1. How has Covid19 changed me? My leadership style?

2. How has Covid19 changed members of my team? My organization? My industry/marketplace?

3. How has the stress of Covid19 influenced my interpersonal style? Under stressful conditions do I become more dominant, passive, warm or cold/hostile? What is my ideal interpersonal style, and are there ways I can project it, even when under stress?

4. What am I doing to build awareness of how the crisis is impacting people in my team?
5. Compared to those I’m leading, am I reacting in the same way or differently? If my reaction is different, why is that the case?

6. How am I managing the boredom of home quarantine? How am I managing the new threat of simple actions like going to the grocery store/filling up with gas? How am I reacting to this seesaw between boredom and fear/risk in my daily life?

**Inspirational leadership**

1. What can I do to provide uplift, hope, inspiration to my team and organization?

2. What can I do to communicate using imagery/analogies/metaphors in ways that give hope and inspiration?

3. Can I still find ways to talk optimistically about the future?

4. How can I convey to my team that I have confidence they will be successful?

5. What can I do to show my team that I care about them during this time?

6. How can I go beyond self-interest for the good of the team or organization?
7. How can I share my most important beliefs and values with others, in a way that builds connection but is also comfortable for me?

8. Does my team feel a strong sense of purpose? Can I help them see our purpose even more clearly?

9. How can I demonstrate that morals and ethics are still vital despite this crisis?

Managing others

1. Does my team understand what I expect of them during Covid19? What am I doing to clarify my performance expectations?

2. Which goals for my team do I need to hold onto and continue to push for, and which can I let go? Which are no longer relevant in this new environment?

3. How can I increase my/my team’s focus on short-term, bite-sized goals?

4. If outcomes are out of our control, what can I do to focus my team on following the right process?

5. If overwhelmed, how can I focus my team on learning goals instead of performance outcomes? How can I help the team adopt a curious, exploratory mindset, rather than a performance and results focused mindset?
6. How should my communication patterns with my team change in light of Covid19?

7. How has Covid19 shifted my team’s internal dynamics? How can I facilitate team building during Covid19?

8. Even though I’m focused on navigating the short-term, how can I begin to plan for the future? What’s around the corner? What could the latter half of 2020 look like for me and my team?

9. How has the stress caused by the Covid19 outbreak impacted my decision making? Has it made me more narrow in my perspective? More likely to default to methods I’ve used before? What can I do to stay flexible and open-minded under stress?

10. How am I delegating in this remote, high stress, often virtual environment?

11. How can I continue to reward/reinforce great performance in others during the crisis?

Coping-related questions

1. How can I accept the things I can’t control? How does it feel to accept things I can’t control — empowering, defeatist, something else?
2. How can I let go of the need for mastery, perfection, or even positive feedback during Covid19?

3. Even though so much is out of my control, where do I have more influence than I think?

4. How can I acknowledge the difficulty of this moment, without getting stuck in it?

5. What are the benefits (or potential benefits) of this crisis for me/my team/my organization/my industry?

6. What are some statements/mantras I could say to myself/my team, to help them cope and stay motivated during the crisis? (Examples: this won’t last forever, we will get through this, everyone’s doing the best we can but we can also try to do better.)

7. How will I want to look back on my leadership actions in this moment one year from now? Three years from now?

8. If I could step outside my body and watch myself as an observer during this crisis, what leadership behaviours would I hope to see?

9. What is one thing I/the team is grateful for right now?

10. Even though I’m constrained right now, how can I continue to engage in actions that express/align with my values?
11. How am I consuming news media right now? How is it affecting me? If the impact is negative, how can I change my habits in helpful ways?

As the worst of the Covid19 surge begins to recede, I hope that we can all find strength emerging from the stress and strain of these last few weeks. I further hope that we can reconstitute our hard-earned experiences into a new level of resilience that will benefit us in the future.

I sincerely wish all of you safety and health in this difficult time, and hope this article has given you some useful ideas.

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