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Leadership During the New Norm: The Unsustainable Nature of Crisis Management

There is one core truth about a crisis that we can't afford to ignore: while *any* type of crisis takes its toll (be it personal, professional, local, or global), remaining in a state of adrenaline-driven alarm is unsustainable. It's an appropriate initial response to a situation that threatens to turn our lives and businesses upside down, but eventually adrenaline has done all it can do. As such, we must settle into the new normal. Until an end to the pandemic is declared and we truly know what's ahead, we need a mindset shift – an evolution from crisis management to a transformed method of productivity.

Over the last several weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen leaders effectively launch crisis management tactics, triaging their organizational game plans at impressive speed. Events and travel were promptly canceled. Remote work was kicked into gear. Non-remote facilities were met with new standard operating procedures. In the

worst cases, furloughs and layoffs were the only option. There has been an overwhelming temptation to panic in the face of shortages and uncertainty – it has been a struggle to stay informed while making quick decisions about what is best for business, employees, and customers.

But just as a firefighter's job is to get a fire under control, stay alert until the flames are out, and then depart, it is clear that crisis management is not a long-term job. We must accept our position in the strange middle ground between putting out fires and starting to rebuild. The ashes are still hot, so to speak, and as such, there is a fine balance between safety and productivity. Employees need genuine support – not only in terms of workplace productivity but also emotional and mental wellbeing. If your workforce has transitioned to a remote work environment – the first move in your crisis management plan – now is the time to establish it as a new norm and assess how people are coping with it. How is your company culture being sustained despite this change? Are channels of communication effective? Is leadership still accessible? How are appreciation, recognition, camaraderie, and social connectivity being maintained? What does it look like if an employee falls sick or is struggling to balance work with child care?

Consumer expectations and preferences have likewise shifted, impacting how we brand and deliver our products and services. Initial crisis management efforts included "how we're responding to COVID-19" emails, new store hours, social distancing policies, new delivery and pick-up options, and more. Many companies pushed 'pause' on advertising campaigns and shifted their marketing efforts accordingly. Customers have become more cautious. They have seen brands become more empathetic. They have felt the direct impact of excess demand and struggling supply chains. Until the smoke clears and the way forward really becomes clear, leaders must find a balance between the customer experience and their unique business interests.

These are big questions without simple answers. Ultimately, the toll of the pandemic on your business may have less to do with the virus itself and more to do with the response and attitude of your leadership. Crisis management has had its place, but we do not have infinite energy to focus on what has been lost. What *is* clear is that we need leaders who are flexible, creative, strategic, and empathetic, who can establish a firm foundation in this uncertain time.

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