

A scenic view of a snowy mountain village. The foreground and middle ground are filled with traditional wooden chalets with dark roofs and light-colored walls, nestled among snow-covered evergreen trees. The background shows a vast, snow-covered mountain range under a clear blue sky. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and winter-themed.

today:tomorrow

LEADING IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

Italy, Ireland, and Denmark on lockdown, the United States on partial lockout, stock markets in free fall, and a steadily mounting toll of fatalities around the world as the World Health Organization [declares](#) COVID-19 a global pandemic. It's unsettling, to say the least, especially for the many people who've never before experienced a major crisis.

How long since business leaders have had to steward their employees (and shareholders) through a full-blown global crisis? It's at least 12 years. Back in 2007–2008, it was the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis that paralyzed the world's financial system and had everybody freaking out—even top central bankers. But that was a digital lifetime ago, in the early years of the iPhone when Facebook had a paltry [100 million users](#) (versus its 2.45 billion active users today). There's a rising generation of employees who may have experienced some patches of turbulence over the past few years, but nothing like the COVID-19 storm the world is now riding. And none of those patches carried with them the risk of widescale fatalities.

This is one of those times when being a seasoned been-there-done-that businessperson (i.e., older) has its advantages. That's not to claim that any leader who lived through the 2008 financial crisis, 9/11, or the late-'90s dotcom crisis has a strategic road map

for spring 2020. What those events showed is that global crises now happen too fast and too unpredictably for any set routes.

Part of the leadership a seasoned businessperson can bring is knowing how it feels to operate without a map in uncharted territory. It's a scary time. It's especially scary when leaders are visibly rattled—or visibly clueless. We all need to see leaders in action, and many of us need to be leaders in action. Below are a few things I suggest we all keep in mind.

There will be pain—for leaders, too. As the global airline industry braces for layoffs and passenger revenue losses currently estimated



Qantas CEO Alan Joyce

as high as \$113 billion, Qantas CEO Alan Joyce [announced](#) he will forgo his salary for the remainder of the financial year. It's an example other CEOs may want to follow. To stay afloat, the airline will have to slash schedules, cut wages, require unpaid leave, and lay off some workers. Like so many other businesses, it must cut deep enough to stay solvent for as long as the crisis lasts but maintain enough capacity to get going again as quickly as possible when it's over.

Stay in your lane. At a time when the media is full of corona punditry, Liverpool F.C. manager Jürgen Klopp has impressed even non-fans with his refusal to jump on the bandwagon. Keeping his eye on managing the \$2.18 billion brand he leads, Klopp emphatically told journalists he is just a football manager and his opinion on coronavirus didn't matter. His [comments](#) went viral as an example of blunt good sense: "It's not important what famous people say ... people with knowledge [should] talk about it."

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Intentions yes, predictions no. Nobody knows how this crisis will play out. Leaders who talk as if they do know, with cocksure pronouncements and authoritative predictions, risk losing the trust of stakeholders. What fosters trust are clearly stated and

explained intentions, with concrete plans to implement them and consistent actions to back them up.

Practice critical thinking. In times of crisis, people are on high alert for danger signals. Rumors, misinformation, and panic spread with alarming speed, especially now that there's digital technology to carry them far and fast. Employees are likely to be feeling a whole range of fears: for their jobs, for their health, for their families and friends, for their finances, and for life as they know it. It's a time for leaders to set an example by how they seek out information and respond to it. [What's the source](#), how reliable is it, and does it jibe with other sources? How does it fit into the bigger picture?

Forge connections. The irony of the COVID-19 crisis is that it is impacting pretty much everyone on the planet, and yet [social distancing](#) is the order of the day. In other words, we need to stay apart as we face it together. That means avoiding gatherings, public places, public transportation, and even the workplace. One of the most critical functions of leadership is fostering togetherness in common purpose. That's a lot easier to do face-to-face in a meeting room than through Zoom or emails. The current crisis is challenging leaders to find new ways to connect with employees and help employees stay connected with each other.

One way or another, this crisis will end. They all do eventually. Ultimately, the toll it will take on your business may have less to do with the virus itself than with your leadership's response to it.



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