

HOW TO LEAD A COMPANY THROUGH THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND ITS AFTERMATH

By Joseph Grenny | Written March 22, 2020

March 2020 will go down in history as the month that changed everything. In a matter of weeks, COVID-19 spread rapidly across the globe rocking governments, stock markets, healthcare systems, education systems, entertainment, travel, you name it. Seemingly nothing was spared. Routine life has been turned on its head for the foreseeable future.

HERE IS MY SPECULATION ABOUT THE MONTHS AHEAD. While these predictions don't necessarily represent the way I think the world *should* be, they do reflect a reasonable social science view of how things *will* be. As I think about both the likely path of the virus, and predictable patterns of human behavior, I expect us to go through the following phases.

1. Denial (January-March 2020)

We fooled ourselves into thinking this was somebody else's problem. We were confident smart people would keep it from ever leaving China. When it hit Italy and then cities in the U.S., some realized denial was delusion. A few politicians made timid responses. Today, however, the President, governors, and mayors are implementing strong containment policies.

2. Containment (Mid-March thru May 2020)

Most are willing to suspend much of our normal lives if it will "flatten the curve." This won't last long in the U.S. for a couple of reasons:

Misunderstanding. Most think the promise of "flattening the curve" means a few weeks of social distancing will dramatically lower the total number of infections and deaths. They're willing to accept Depression-era unemployment levels so long as the period of sacrifice is short. But most experts admit a flatter curve won't lead to less infections. It means we are staggering the number of severely ill patients over a longer period of time to better match the capacity of our healthcare system. For containment to dramatically reduce deaths, we would have to suspend economic and social life for a year and a half or more. When people discover this, their willingness to contain will fade, setting us up for the third phase.

Bad Scorekeeping. The media has created a perfect setup for another motivational blow. They keep a daily drumbeat of "total number of cases" which is undoubtedly far lower than reality. This number will rise at a terrifying

rate as testing becomes more available. This "bad news" will feel like being on a diet of kale and water but seeing the number on the scale go up every day instead of down. People will soon despair that their sacrifices aren't paying off and will become less vigilant about containment just at the time it is needed most.

3. Compromise

As people both tire and lose faith in containment, they will begin to flirt with compromise. By early May, as people's financial and psychological resources reach their limit, they'll ask more penetrating questions. While the early consensus is that "we will sacrifice anything to save millions of lives", within 30-60 days, there will be a growing appetite to find terms of surrender to the virus. Here's how that will happen.

Impatience. When the score is getting worse rather than better, and leaders express no certainty over how long we must put our lives, businesses, educations, and economy on hold, support for containment will erode.

Rationalize and Surrender. Unless a highly effective vaccine is found soon, people will become aware that even after we stem this outbreak, new ones will occur every time we begin to mix in public again. As outbreaks recur, our appetite for repeated isolation will decline. That will bring many to the viral bargaining table.

Eventually, we'll get more used to the idea of losing a couple million of our fellow citizens. We already do. We expect to lose 30,000 every year to auto accidents. It's baked into our

consciousness. We expect to lose a few hundred thousand to diseases like cancer, heart disease, strokes, etc., that could be dramatically reduced if we took draconian measures to change some behaviors. But we've accepted those. We are deeply ambivalent about gun-related deaths. It's become "normal" to lose tens of thousands to opiate-overdoses.

And so on. Joseph Stalin once said, "One death is a tragedy. The death of millions is a statistic." We'll be more willing to compromise with the virus when we accept a certain level of mortality as a normal statistic.

HOW TO LEAD THROUGH THE CRISIS

While my dates may be off by a month or so, I suspect this is close to the cycle we will go through. My recommendations are based on two assumptions:

- 1. A miracle vaccine is more than six months away.**
 - 2. Marginally helpful treatments will be available in the next sixty days.**
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If these assumptions are accurate, you should prepare for "Compromise" now. Here's what you can do:

1. Doing business in an ongoing pandemic requires 200% accountability. We'll be crawling out of our caves with the virus still lurking. People will want to get back to work and get back to living but in a state of heightened vigilance. The new normal will be *risk mitigation* not *risk elimination*. We will make permanent changes in social patterns for greeting, meeting, and living. We may need to permanently surrender handshakes, hugs, and European kisses in favor of bows or Namastes. Annoying, but not overwhelming ransom for a truce.

Compromise means employees and customers will accept an acceptable amount of risk as well. Your job is to ensure they *feel safe* enough in your way of doing business for their risk tolerance. The sooner you get in front of these changes, the sooner we will establish a new acceptable way of living. Organizations that pivot to this new normal best will need both **potent social protocols** and a culture of **200% accountability**.

Successful businesses will develop **social protocols** suited to the new mood. They will rigorously practice social distancing and hygiene habits. For example, they will permanently space workspaces to enforce social distancing. Airlines may need to issue face masks and stagger seating. Effective leaders will change meeting patterns to rely on virtual contact as a default not a temporary inconvenience. Hygiene prompts and associated cleaning products will be ubiquitous. And none of this will succeed without a culture of **200% accountability**.

200% accountability means that not only is each employee 100% accountable for following the standard, they are also 100% accountable for enforcing the standard with everyone

around them—regardless of level or position. The other day, I was at a workplace that had instituted social distancing. And yet, within a few minutes, I saw numerous violations of the norm—people standing inches from one another, shaking hands, touching a colleague's arm, etc. I could tell the recipients of these touches *felt* uncomfortable. But they *said* nothing. Especially if the violator had higher social status than they.

Cruise lines have known for decades that their vessels are ideal playgrounds for aggressive viruses. And yet this outbreak will forever be symbolized by lavish ships turned into prison camps patrolled by microscopic guards. *Having* protocols is meaningless. They only improve outcomes if they are turned into norms. 200% Accountability means employees will have to be skilled at confronting lapses in any of new norms the instant they see it. *The speed with which norms change is a function of the speed with which it becomes normal to confront violations of the new norm.* Unless and until it is "okay" to call out anyone, independent of level or position, on lapses, the norm will be a farce.

2. Make customers and employees feel safe by making the undiscussable discussable. Effective leaders will understand that they must not just make their customers and employees *be* safe, they must make them *feel* safe. The best way to help people feel safe is to make the undiscussable discussable. Your hypervigilant customers are already *thinking* about risk. So, put it on the table where you can address it as the first topic. First and foremost, **let customers know clearly what you're doing** to mitigate risk of spread within your company. This must be done through human contact not mass emails. People don't feel reassured by a well-crafted document. They feel reassured

when a human being looks them in the eye and explains what they are doing to ensure they are safe right here, right now. Measure compliance with your new standards and be honest with your customers about how well (or poorly) you're doing. At the end of the day, customers won't trust you unless you're *trustworthy*. And transparency is the foundation of trustworthiness.

Second, **give them transaction options**. People feel safer when they have choices. Let's say, for example, your company has door-to-door sales agents. Hyper-vigilant homeowners will be immediately uneasy when they see a stranger on their doorstep. They will have no mental space for the pitch so long as they are worried about infection. One company mitigates this perception by having door-to-door salespeople don fresh plastic gloves in front of the homeowner. Each sales agent also sports a lanyard with a bottle of hand gel. After introducing themselves, they offer to continue the conversation either on the porch, through a virtual appointment, or in the home at a safe distance. Surprisingly, agents discover that simply describing the seriousness of their concern for safety, and *offering choices*, leads a far higher percentage of customers to invite the agent inside.

3. Put behaviors in place now that will prepare your business for the next pandemic. Viruses aren't done evolving. There will be a COVID-20, 21 or some other demon in the future. So, we should consider this pandemic to be a dress rehearsal for the next one.

Viruses have to evolve through random mutation. Humans evolve, too. But we generally have to use our oversized brains to do it. We must do it by choice not by mutation. So, let's get started. Let's recognize this moment as an opportunity to develop new patterns of responding to threats, not just as an idiosyncratic inconvenience due to a new wad of DNA. If the next bio-threat is of similar toxicity, we need life and business patterns that move us more routinely to *compromise*. If we don't make *risk mitigation* a way of life, *risk elimination*, and its unbearable costs, will be our only alternative the next time as well.

CRISES ALWAYS COME WITH OPPORTUNITIES.

From this moment will come new norms for working, serving, caring, and connecting with each other. My family is actually closer now than we were two months ago. We have a virtual "Grenny Gab" at 5 p.m. most days that has made me feel more involved in the lives of my children than ever before. We inquire more about one another's needs. We are more vulnerable about sharing our concerns. And we are more generous in reaching out to those who struggle.

This crisis offers the entire planet a similar opportunity. This is the first time in the history of humanity that the entire world turned unitedly against a common foe. We are being presented with an opportunity for future cooperation as we come to recognize that borders are fictions and we are global kin.

I have argued that human nature will inevitably speed us toward a gruesome compromise with the virus that will return us to some new version of normalcy at the cost of some lives. But the real opportunity won't be forced on us. It will require choice and leadership.

If we are wise, we will take advantage of nature's invitation to unprecedented unity with our brothers and sisters worldwide. We will heretofore share information more liberally, pool resources more generously, and intervene anywhere more selflessly. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, the most precious lesson we can learn from this moment is that "Suffering anywhere is a threat to everyone everywhere." Let's not just make this about the virus, let's make it about evolving to a better way of being.

Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and leadership development.