

Six steps for leaders to demonstrate calmness and optimism in a crisis *(from McKinsey article, Apr 2020)*

When the path ahead is uncertain, people turn to leaders for clarity and hope for a better future. They want someone with a positive vision who is confident about tackling the problems we face, yet courageous enough to confront uncomfortable truths and admit what they do not know.

To stay calm and optimistic while under such pressure, leaders should practice **integrative awareness**: being aware of the changing reality in the outside world and how they are responding, both emotionally and physically. This practice allows leaders to shift from viewing challenges as roadblocks to seeing them as problems to be solved and even learned from. Leaders can avoid overreacting to challenges or jumping to conclusions. It helps leaders recognise these stress responses as opportunities to pause and reflect before acting, enabling them to lead with deliberate calm and bounded optimism. It is essential to project confidence that the organisation will find its way through the crisis, but also show that you recognise its severity. No one wants to follow a pessimist, but they don't want blind optimism either.

In crisis situations, leaders must make a deliberate choice to practice a calm state of mind. Then they can step back from a fraught or high-stakes situation and choose how to respond, rather than reacting instinctively. A leader who is deliberately calm realises that fear, channelled from uncomfortable facts or emotions, offers potentially valuable information and doesn't get unhinged by it. Reframing a threat as an opportunity for learning and innovation turns an uncertain situation into one of hope and possibility.

Here are six practices that leaders can follow to develop their integrative awareness. While they may seem straightforward, too often leaders don't follow them, thinking they'll worry about themselves after the crisis has passed. That won't work in the current context.

1. Adapt your personal operating model

Your priorities, your roles, your time, and your energy are all elements of the way you operate on a daily basis. Create an operating model that can act as your compass, especially in a crisis that is expected to last for some time. As the coronavirus emerged as a threat, we saw that many leaders went into overdrive, working around the clock to respond effectively. It was only after some time had passed that most started to build more of a structure into their lives.

Review the model over the page and ask yourself: How does your personal operating model align with the changes in your work life right now? What does this mean for how you operate with your direct leadership team? What does this mean for how you engage with your family? What are your "non-negotiables" (such as sufficient sleep, regular exercise, meditation, or healthy food)?

Leaders can create a personal operating model to help them function at their best.

Four key elements

Your priorities



- **My purpose and personal aspirations**
- **What and who is important to me:**
 - Values
 - Principles to live by
 - Family
 - Career

Your roles



- **Personal roles and focus**
 - Work: find most value as leader and colleague
 - Family member: choose how to be a role model for spouse, sibling, parent
 - Volunteer: choose focus
 - Friend: decide what kind of friend you want to be and which relationships to nurture
- **Leverage and orchestration**
 - Work: eg, create win-win situations that give you leverage and others opportunities
 - Home: eg, what to accomplish (you and partner) and what to outsource
- **Be inspirational:** Role model, inspire individuals and teams, build capabilities and confidence

Your time



- **Be present:** Proactively plan schedule to be present when needed
- **Be efficient**
 - Manage workflow to maximize time: collect, process, organize, review (eg, email) efficiently
 - Create time slots where you have no "to-do's"
- **Make the right trade-offs in the moment**
 - Protect time for long-term needs, including critical priorities

Your energy



- **Self-awareness**
 - Recognize what gives you energy and adds meaning to your life
- **Energy practices**
 - Practice habits that help you be your best
 - Body (sleep, nutrition, exercise)
 - Mind (mindfulness, emotional flexibility, space for renewal and connection)
 - Purpose, meaning (care for others, belonging)

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2. Set your intention

Take a few minutes at the start of the day to review your agenda, identify high-stakes topics, and set intentions for what you want to accomplish. This enables you to predict potential "emotional hot spots". What challenges, curveballs or brutal facts might you have to face? How will you stay focused on what matters most? How do you intend to react emotionally? What are your non-negotiables and where can you give ground? Also reflect on how your behaviour and actions will affect other people.

3. Regulate your reactions

When in a stressful situation, try to observe your emotions so you can recognise the reaction, pausing to assess and engage your rational mind before choosing a response.

Let's say on a videoconference you're asked a question you hadn't prepared for. What do you do when fear takes over? The most natural reaction is to try to avoid the issue. But even



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if you pause very briefly to take in the atmosphere, you can respond effectively. And there is no shame in asking for help.

4. Practice reflection

Reflection is a way to process what happened during the day. What moments were difficult and why, how did you feel, and why did you respond the way you did? Reflection helps you analyse your reactive behaviour and its drivers. Ask trusted colleagues for feedback about critical moments where you had to respond under pressure. What are your blind spots and how can you address them? People have many ways to reflect. Some meditate, others reflect while running or walking the dog. The important thing is to make it a regular practice.

5. Reframe your perspective

When we're tired from stress, we tend to see negative messages and threats more readily than opportunities and positive messages. Keeping a balance and staying realistic is not easy. When facing a difficult situation, try to redirect away from the immediate negative explanation and toward an exploration of other possibilities that could be true. Viewing the issue through different possibilities and scenarios, from the most positive to the most negative, can help in planning responses.

When faced with a difficult situation, ask yourself: Am I jumping to conclusions too fast? What else can be true at this moment? What is important to me and my team right now? With the information on the table now, make a conscious decision about the best way to move toward what matters most.

6. Manage your energy

One of the most difficult things to do in times of crisis is to balance work needs with your own physical well-being. In a crisis atmosphere, you will need recovery time, or at some point something will give—performance or, worse, health. Top athletes know this, and they make sure they build in sufficient time for recovery when they train for top performance. Apart from recovery time, which may be different for everyone, micro practices that are in support of healthy recovery can include meditation, breathing exercises, cardio sports activities, and even power naps.

Leadership in a crisis like this is an enormous responsibility, yet it can also be seen as a great privilege. Integrative awareness keeps leaders centred in the storm, giving them the focus they need to take care of themselves and the people and organisations they lead.