

Lead in the Time of COVID-19



This is not the time for command and control leadership. Autocratic decision-making may help you immediately cope with COVID-19 emergency measures. Now, more than ever, we believe that **leadership the changeosity way, will achieve sustainable growth for your business as it moves to the Future of Work. In this article, we discuss what it means to behave with curiosity, courage, collaboration and caring in these unprecedented times.**

“The only thing worse than bad health is a bad name.”
— **Gabriel García Márquez, Love in the Time of Cholera**

The COVID-19 pandemic is placing unprecedented demands on us, as business leaders. The extent of the problem is not yet understood. The long-term impact of emergency measures remains unknown. How long it will last is an open question. We are seeing some evidence of reactive response in the businesses we encounter; unclear directions, uncertain policies and flip-flop decisions, to name a few examples. The differing reactions of businesses located in Asia, UK, Europe and the US show that the slower and less effective the response, the greater risk of prolonging the economic, political and social consequences of COVID-19. In case of doubt, now is the time to take up the mantle of leading through change. The focus must be on impact on people to respond rather than react to the situation. The reality is that the Future of Work is upon us. If there is any legacy that comes from COVID-19 it is this; uncertainty is the new constant and leaders must embrace sustainable practices that future-proof their businesses from crises to come.

At changeosity, we believe that there are 4 systematic behaviours to adopt in order to lead through this change. Curiosity, courage, collaboration and caring will insulate people and business from harm and ensure you come through this stronger than ever into the Future of Work.



(1) Time for collaboration

Now is not the time for command and control style leadership; authoritative decision-making based on singular expertise and experience. This is because COVID-19 is not a regular emergency situation. In an unprecedented, global crisis that is unfamiliar and not fully understood. No one leader can have all the answers.

We believe that this is a time for **collaboration**, which means:

- **Be visionary:** Your role is to set direction for the company and empower your trusted leaders to create and implement solutions that will ensure you fully navigate what lies ahead to achieve this vision. You are behaving responsibly if you are devolving decision-making to the right people at the right time.
- **Adopt dynamic thinking:** Have a team to advise you on on-going priorities in managing and mitigating the impact of COVID-19. Your 'board of advisors' should be adept at dealing with high-stress, ever-changing conditions in a calm and systematic way. They should come from different disciplines – finance, HR, legal – in order to give you varied perspectives.
- **Transparency and clarity are key:** Share fact-based information that is current. Be clear about what you know, what you don't know and what you are doing to learn more. Your communication should be thoughtful, sensitive and frequent. Clear and simple language should be used to explain what standards are expected to be maintained. We should be open to adapting policies and

approaches as we learn more about the pandemic and how best to deal with its evolution.

- **2-way communication channels:** Reassure your customers and stakeholders that you are confronting the crisis head-on and address their concerns directly and with compassion. Encourage cross-department and function strategies when developing solutions to real-time problems.
- **Avoid judgement:** Be open to course corrections without judgement or adverse reaction. Mistakes are opportunities for learning and growth when you are dealing with quick-sand.
- **Role model responsible behavior:** Discuss issues and share best practices with your peers in industry or beyond. It's a time for abundance thinking not competition advantage. Adopting the collective purpose of sustainable business practices will make the Future of Work inevitable.



(2) Time for curiosity

It's not about dusting off the crisis management plan that has been prepared for emergencies. It might be difficult or impossible to execute in this global situation. The reality is that we just don't know the proportions of this pandemic nor its likely impact on the economy, business and society at large. What we do know, however, is that we might need to adjust business practices in general to ensure we remain resilient and future-proof in times to come.

We believe that this is a time for **curiosity**, which means:

- **Above all, be open:** Acknowledge to yourself and others that your business is facing uncertainty. Only then can you gain credibility



that you are responding in a manner that meets people's expectations of you as a leader.

- **Go on the balcony:** Take a helicopter view of your status to size up the extent of the problem in the reality for your business. This means pause, reflect, assess from different perspectives, consider pre-emptive measures and decide necessary strategic priority actions.
- **Start with customer and stakeholder engagement:** Have open, honest discussions about pain points affecting your and their businesses. Encourage risk transparency to start generating options for mutually agreeable solutions such as payment breaks, repayment plans or varied terms of business.
- **Bottom-line the key issues:** Priority must be to secure access to vital assets necessary for sustainable business. Identify any weak points and sensitivities and come up with a roadmap to address priority risks and threats. Prioritisation of strategies and plans is key here. Your business needs a pragmatic and flexible roadmap to navigate the path ahead. Seek expertise and advice, where necessary.



“When you become comfortable with uncertainty,
infinite possibilities open up in your life.”

Ekhart Tolle

(3) Time for courage

It's time to submerge our egos. Focus must be on what **is** and not what we fear may come. We must face up to the possibility of a deeper, more protracted down-turn in order to create sensible and sustainable solutions. More radical cost-cutting decisions may save businesses in

the long-term. Early divestments may attract higher returns than in a recessionary environment.

We believe that this is a time for **courage**, which means:

- **Explore potential implications on customer and supply chains:** Focus should be on stabilizing your customer and supply chains in the short as well as long-term. Adopt bridging strategies such as supply rationing, pre-booking logistics capacity, using existing stock, high-priority status on orders. Also consider replacement arrangements such as low-cost outsourcing, automation and alternative suppliers.
- **Critically assess your cash-flows, profit & loss and balance sheets:** Looks at different scenarios and stress test different outcomes e.g. working capital requirements. The purpose is to identify key triggers that may significantly impair liquidity. Have brave discussions with banks and creditors about re-scheduling, lease breaks etc to assist to alleviate pressure points. Optimise cost reduction measures and look at ways to improve cash positions through divestment of non-core business.
- **Confront solvency implications and ability to meet debt obligations:** Review the position of your accounts payable and receivable and the likely impact on both. Respond rather than react by re-negotiating credit terms, renew efforts to collect payments or create payment plans and proactively manage your cash-flows by pushing out creditors.
- **Innovate opportunities:** It may be time for whole-scale change through process, inventory, production and other operations optimization. Be open to challenging assumptions such as the speed or affordability of implementing automated solutions. Look for solutions that are resilient and future-proof.
- **Create a long-term resource strategy:** There may be an urgent need to build in organisational re-design as part of your strategy to minimize payroll costs at this time. Think big and put in place a solution that has long-term efficiency with the Future of Work in mind.



(4) Time for caring

In these times of challenge, our paramount consideration is the cost on human life of this pandemic. At the forefront of our minds, we must consider the personal and professional challenges that employees and families are facing during this crisis. Aside from our health and safety responsibilities as an employer, we have a fundamental duty of care to our workforce to protect them from harm; moral as much as legal.

We believe that this is a time for **caring**, which means:

- **Be human:** Behave with empathy and humility. Embrace these times of uncertainty with calm, composure and confidence. Do this, and you build trust and credibility as a leader to overcome any obstacle, challenge or adversity.
- **Care for yourself:** Be aware of the impact of fatigue and stress in these difficult times. How can you lead yourself and others if you are on empty tank? Compassion starts with compassion for yourself.
- **Focus on others' pain points:** Ask yourself "How are my customers, stakeholders and employees affected by these developments as they unfold?". "How can I alleviate harm and suffering during this time?". "How can I help others?". Come from a place of abundance rather than scarcity.
- **Actively promote psychological safety:** Encourage employees and stakeholders to openly discuss ideas, questions, concerns and fears, without repercussion. Care about their concerns and offer solutions that address or mitigate their impact.
- **Incentivise your employees and stakeholders to act responsibly:** Better to financially keep whole a sick worker than cope with

putting the entire workforce at risk. Guideline papers are useful for non-mandatory issues to assist employees to understand how to behave or make choices for themselves.

- **Customise your approach to personnel issues:** Personnel issues cannot be tackled with a broad brush. Tailor and tier your response based on individual needs. Consider a variety of leave options in a respectful and caring manner (sick, unpaid, holiday, severance package, reduced hours / days by mutual agreement). Provide necessary support and resources to enable safe and productive home working.
- **See this as a blue-print for the Future of Work:** Wide-scale adoption of social distancing is an experiment in action. Embrace the opportunity to fine-tune your home-working practices to better enable industries to move into the Future of Work.



About **changeosity**

We are a Dubai-based boutique consultancy firm. Our three founders have over 70 years of leadership experience in government and multi-national corporates in 50 countries, including 30 years in the Middle East.

Together, we have delivered highly profitable and award-winning transformation in a wide range of sectors in the Middle East.

Our diagnostic, development and implementation programs, together with our coaching, facilitation and leadership services, enable businesses to regenerate, grow and inspire.