

Principles and Strategies for Effective Leadership in the “New Normal”

From Araceli Castaneda

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As my close friend was telling me about the challenges she had gone through during the pandemic, I kept hearing Marty Linsky’s words in my head: “Leadership is an improvisational art: It cannot be scripted moment to moment.”

Like most of us, my friend struggled to keep herself and her team afloat ever since the pandemic hit. At first, she was able to get her people through the initial shock in part by envisioning getting back to “normal,” and to the work they were so passionate about: “Touching” the lives of people all over the world by training them in person so their countries had the basic energy, water, and ICT services they need. However, 12 months into the pandemic, there was still no in-person contact, training, travel, or any way to impactfully reach those she and her team wanted to help. Life was not back to “normal,” nor was it going to be anytime soon. In fact, the devastating effects of the pandemic had extended to every aspect of life, not just work, and the added financial hardships made everything even worse.

While looking for avenues to carry out their most important mission in these very difficult times, my friend and her team kept looking for ways to adapt to the new reality. Her and her team learned some valuable lessons about practicing leadership, in times such as these. I am sharing them with you in hopes that they may help you too:

- **Lean into the uncertainty**
As difficult as it may sound, practicing leadership in these times will require that we learn to cope and thrive in uncertainty. As much as we would like to have a “leader” directing our way, the truth is that no one has the right answers in this new environment. Too much has changed and continues to evolve in unknown ways around us. While we all may have hopes and maybe some educated guesses, no one is in possession of the truth about what the future will actually look like, or how and when things will progress for sure. Learning to live in the discomfort of uncertainty will free up some space for clearer thinking in our brains. Accepting that ambiguity will be part of our lives for the foreseeable future will help ease anxiety.
- **It is all about experimentation**
At PURC, we like to say that leadership is really about what to try next. It is about “next practices” (rather than best practices). When you are in an environment where you have not been before, looking to past practices may not give you the solutions you need. Times like this call for envisioning new concepts, trying new experiments and implementing things we have not done before. Understanding “why” some of these new practices will succeed or fail and excelling in this “why” type of reasoning will be crucial as we design which next steps to try.

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- **Embrace “mistakes”**

Hear me out here! I am one of the most perfectionist people you will ever meet. Yet, I, just like my friend and many others have come to realize that making progress in this “new normal” means accepting that “mistakes” are unavoidable. In fact, mistakes are a necessary part of this evolving process and need to be used as learning tools and experiments that will help us design the necessary next practices to move into the unknown and unknowledgeable. “Mistakes” will happen. It is what we learn from them and how we react to them that will make our future efforts wiser and stronger.

- **Lead with a focus on empathy and communication**

Never have these been so important. In a time in which so many are struggling and uncertainty is king, we must ensure people know you are “there” for them. We must make communication not about the message itself, but about the act on “touching” those we interact and work with, at the office or remotely. Regular communication and empathy will offer an opportunity to connect or reconnect in a meaningful way, to express concern and learn more about what is truly important to those we value. These efforts will be returned with loyalty and willingness to do the best everyone can.

As I listened to her story, I had to wonder how many of us identify with my friend and the struggles she is going through. I, for one, find some of myself in her. Or maybe, it is me that I am looking at in this story. I also hear Marty’s words in the background: “To be effective, you must respond to what is happening. There is no wrong answer.”