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PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

LEADING SELF AND OTHERS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Dr Yetunde Anibaba

One of the most critical responsibilities of a leader is to provide direction. When the leader does not do this, at least either of two things happen:

1. The team loses focus, and each member does what they deem fit such that there is no harmonisation around a unified objective,
2. A de-facto leader emerges.

If the new leader is one that shares the original goals of the team and commands as much respect or more, then the original equilibrium is maintained or restored depending on how quickly the leader emerges. If the emerged leader has a different but valuable vision for the team, a new equilibrium is reached eventually. Where neither of these is the case, then chaos is probably inevitable. There are other possibilities, but the point is that without leadership, there is no direction; without direction, there is a lack of focused motion, and if taken to the extreme, the result is chaos. So how does the leader ensure that he continues to guide his team through a period of uncertainty effectively?

Stay calm and project calmness. A key characteristic of uncertainty is the absence or dearth of information with which you can make reasonable judgements about cause and effect relationships. So, the first thing that is challenged in such times is your clarity of vision or sight, and consequently, your ability to set the right direction for your team. For many people, this naturally translates to discomfort and even a lack of confidence to move forward. In the extreme case, complete inertia. If not quickly arrested, the lack of confidence filters through the ranks and confusion is the result. Therefore, one of the first things a leader must guard is their ability to remain calm amid uncertainty, as this is probably the first signal that the team members will receive regarding how they should behave in the situation.

Being calm amid uncertainty or crisis does not only affect your team positively, it can also determine your ability to regain sight and therefore craft a new viable direction for the team. Research suggests that anxiety affects your capacity to make sound judgements about the way forward for the team by causing you to be more inclined toward threat-related information (risk-averse) and to interpret ambiguous (a characteristic of uncertainty) information automatically as a threat. Naturally, you will move away from the threat rather than towards it, such that the focus will be on avoidance than action. However, calmness, defined as the ability to maintain a stable disposition under stress, predisposes you to a balanced evaluation of the information available to you,

and therefore reasonable judgement. Which leads us to another thing that is important for leading yourself and others during periods of uncertainty.

Develop agility. You do not need to have all the answers upfront, but you should demonstrate some measure of clarity about and a *growing* understanding of the situation, as well as relevant action steps which you can communicate to your team in a timely, consistent fashion. So, another essential attribute a leader must possess/develop to lead successfully under conditions of uncertainty is agility. According to some research, leadership agility is essentially a suite of competencies that are involved in leading under conditions of rapid change and complexity, including context-setting agility, creative agility, stakeholder agility and self-leadership agility. But underlying these suites of competencies is the ability to take reflective action, where reflective action involves speed-reading the changes around you, the scope of its effect on your context and relevant stakeholders, identifying or crafting the appropriate response, as well as assessing and building your capabilities on the go. Simply put, the ability to learn quickly, come to reasonable judgements about the events happening around you, and take reasonable actions as a result. Developing leadership agility comes from developmental activities that focus on reflective action such as coaching relationships and action-oriented training programmes. It is also developed in the cyclical process of acting (experience), reflecting over your actions and the outcomes, extracting the learning from the process and applying them.

Communicate. A calm disposition may have put the mind of your team at rest in the short term, but they will soon want to know the next line of action as long as the condition of uncertainty subsists. You may have observed in the course of this COVID-19 pandemic that leaders of several organisations that provide one form of service or the other have communicated to their customer base by email, social media or other means. The earlier they did this, the more confident you probably felt about them being on top of their game. Many have also sent follow on emails as the situation unfolded to assure you that they were actively monitoring the events, articulating the actions they were taking to mitigate any form of losses that may accrue to you and the reasoning behind such actions. You could call this signaling. Signaling is an attempt to reduce information asymmetry between two parties. In other words, it is the signaler's (leader) attempt to bring the receiver (team) up to speed with the information the signaler possesses about the situation and minimise or eliminate ambiguity. But for a signal to be useful, it must be clear, consistent, and relatively frequent, at the minimum. This implies that keeping your team on track in

times of uncertainty requires you to keep them informed adequately and consistently.

Embrace vulnerability. Finally, while leaders should be able to demonstrate a measure of calmness amid crisis and uncertainty, they should also be willing to be vulnerable. According to vulnerability expert, Brene Brown, leadership is synonymous with courage, and you cannot be courageous without being vulnerable. Vulnerability here does not imply weakness or submissiveness; it is instead, the quality of being authentic, the willingness to be wrong and to take responsibility for your wrong judgements. The fact that an action can be described as courageous implies there was an element of risk in the action, and risk suggests the possibility of failure. Accepting this possibility knowing that you have put in every reasonable effort to get it right, is the quality of being human. On one hand, it helps your team members connect with you on another level – they are able to bring up issues to you they would ordinarily have suppressed till it blows up in the face of everyone, they are able to offer solutions to challenges the team/organisation may be facing. On the other hand, it reduces stress on the part of the leader and the led, helping everyone deal even better with the period of uncertainty.

In summary, I have articulated four complementary strategies for effectively leading yourself and others in periods of uncertainty. They include maintaining and projecting a calm disposition, developing agility, communicating comprehensively and frequently, and embracing vulnerability. It is, however, essential to note that the trajectory of the evolution of today's world suggests that uncertainty is the new normal, and these strategies need to be too.

Dr Yetunde Anibaba teaches Analysis of Business Problems at Lagos Business School