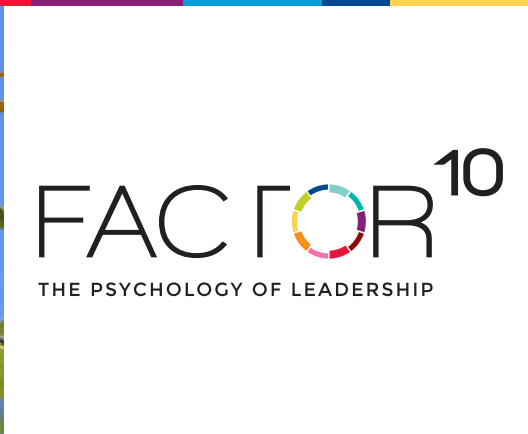


# Building Resilience during Covid-19

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL HANDBOOK



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# Bracing yourself for the storm

## Your own well-being during the crisis

### You are your biggest asset – and risk

Lockdown – and the bigger Covid-19 context – is a very rocky road. You are living and leading your business through a context of ‘clear and present danger’. Is it an exaggeration to use a military term? No, it isn’t. The uncertainty, unknowns and risks (to both your health and your business) are real. And yet the biggest risk you face at the moment is not external, it is internal. To be direct, YOU and your well-being are at the heart of any risk assessment. Your resilience is potentially both your biggest asset and the greatest risk to your business survival.

### Acting with CARE

There is nothing soft about your own mental and physical well-being. Your resilience is a critical business asset and you need to treat it as such. Navigating lockdown (and beyond) is not about endurance. It requires intentional action. There are four key levers you can use to deliberately manage your health and mindset – Connection, Awareness, Routine Reset and Energy Experiments. These are at the heart of your own care. CARE, get it?

#### Connection

Connection with others is essential in these uncertain times. Humans are a social species and we need interpersonal connection for our psychological and physical health. Your relationships with others is the most important predictor of your resilience. Keeping connected with your loved ones, mentors and teams is critical in these times. Making time to check-in with your teams every day; and building time with your friends and families will add to your sense of well-being. We all need to feel a deepened sense of care in a crisis. Aside from all your virtual meetings, how about getting your team together for a virtual lunch, taking your mentor out for a virtual coffee or getting your loved ones online for a virtual meal? Feeling you’re not alone in this is key for your own resilience.

#### Awareness

The uncertainty and sense of being under threat makes this is a time of heightened feelings. You’re probably having ups and downs; good and bad days. Identifying and naming your feelings; and seeing them as ‘data’ – giving you key information on your situation and your response to it – enables you to pause, choose your next action and react more consciously and intentionally.<sup>1</sup> Fear might be showing how to keep yourself safe; sadness might be highlighting a sense of loss; excitement might be highlighting the possibilities ahead; boredom might be showing you this is a marathon not a sprint. Denying your feelings or pushing them away makes them more likely to resurface unconsciously and trigger less rational and emotionally intelligent actions. It keeps you stuck in unproductive ways of thinking and feeling helpless.

Using your emotions as a ‘data’ gives you a map. It gives you a sense of what is in your control (and what isn’t) and helps to focus your attention productively. It enables you to focus on facts and to pause before you act. It helps you to calmly move forward and take tough decisions. It shifts your brain into being able to plan and problem solve for new possibilities. It builds your own confidence; and that of those around you. It grounds you in ‘realistic optimism’ – a sense that you will succeed in the long run, although the short term will be tough.

#### Routine Reset

Reflect on your routine and identify key practises that are helpful to you, your loved ones and teams.<sup>2</sup> Use this time to reset. Your vision and values are guideposts – directing your focus on what matters most to you.

- Sleep, nutrition, hydration and exercise are an essential foundation for everything else.

- Build a sense of structure and routine into your days. This helps keep a sense of normality and predictability in unpredictable times. Get up at your usual time and get dressed for work. Virtual daily team huddles at a set time provide a structured way of connecting and aligning. Prioritising and keeping focused on the most important tasks are useful anchors and promote clarity in a confusing time.
- Take breaks during the day and end work at a reasonable time. Have down time each day. Your days are probably longer than usual, with hours spent on-line. Unplug. Be mindful about how much time you are spending on screens. Monitor your news sources and make sure they are credible. Minimise your time on social media. Mute Whatsapp groups constantly pinging.
- Make week days different to weekends so that the time is less of a 'blur'. How about starting a Friday night braai ritual? Scheduling 'silly time' with your children? Or doing a family exercise session first thing on a Saturday.
- Build mindfulness, meditation, prayer, journaling, gratitude and reflection into your days.

## Energy Experiments

This is a time to try out new things and build new habits. Managing your energy – not your time – is an important shift for you to make <sup>3</sup>. It time to experiment. Give it a go! Have fun! Use the time to do things you have been meaning to get around to. Try things out, if they don't work, try something new. Try that crazy new idea you have been holding back on. Have a family meal across the country using Facetime. Take part in a live, virtual dance competition. Worship in a streamed service. Figure out what energises you and do more of this. Everyday.

Be kind to yourself and give yourself permission to be human in all of this. Your resilience depends on you having periods of rest and recovery, not simply throwing everything you have at it and enduring. <sup>4</sup>

## Three Tools

Here are three tools to help you to move forward from denial to creativity:

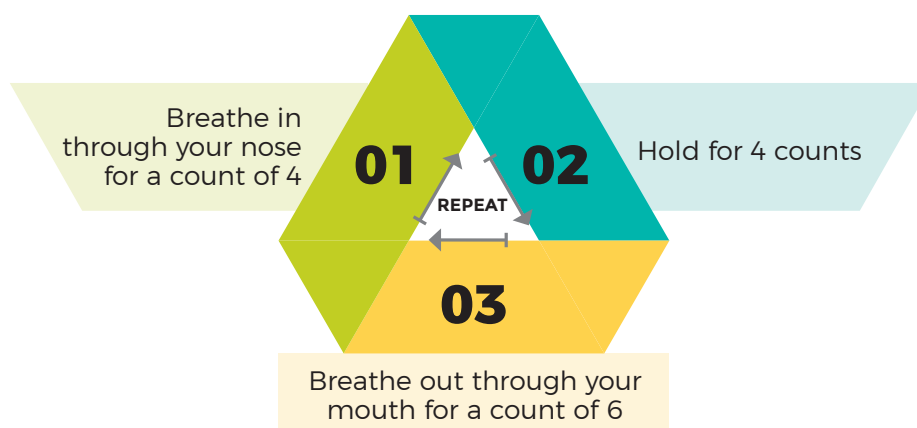
**TOOL 1:** Conscious breaths

**TOOL 2:** CARE Audit worksheet

**TOOL 3:** CARE coach how-to-guide

### Tool 1:

If you find your emotions spinning and your mind racing, use your breath to centre and calm you. Don't scoff – US Marines use this technique!



It takes 90 – 120 seconds to mitigate the stress hormone cortisol in your body and return your brain to clearer thinking and complex problem-solving.



## Tool 2: CARE Audit Worksheet

Care	Description	Self-Assessment <i>How am I doing? Score out of 10</i>	Actions <i>What one thing can I change to shift my score?</i>
Connection	Daily connection with your loved ones and team.		
Awareness of emotions	Daily 'feelings check' so that you can respond intentionally.		
Routine reset	Daily routine implemented		
	7+ hours sleep every night		
	Vegetables and protein every day focusing on vitamin C, D and zinc		
	8 glasses of water or herbal teas with no milk every day		
	Exercise for 30 minutes everyday		
	Downtime every day		
Energy experiments	Daily energy experiment		

## Tool 3: CARE coaching how-to-guide

**Here's your third tool: a simple CARE Coaching how-to-guide. It's simple:**

Invite a mentor to be your CARE coach for the next 2 months (they care about you, you respect them, you want to live up to commitments you make to them)

Have 1x 30-minute call per week to discuss your well-being. Suggested agenda below:

- i. **SHARE** (5mins): In each call, start by sharing a 5-minute summary of how you've taken CARE of yourself for the last week, by answering these 3 questions:
  1. Overall, score how well you feel (out of 10)
  2. What's working well?
  3. What's the biggest gap in your wellbeing right now?
- ii. **DISCUSS** (20mins): Allow them to question and challenge and guide. Focus on building from what's working; being clear on obstacles you are hitting and practical actions you can take. Ideally build a cycle of repetition, rituals and reminder so you entrench new habits.
- iii. **COMMIT** (5mins): Close off with your commitments for the next week
  - a. Your goal on how well you will feel this time next week (out of 10)
  - b. The most important change you will make next week to protect your wellness.

## This will pass – make it count

The lockdown and COVID-19 crisis will end. This is the time to ensure that you're clear on what you want for yourself, your business and your loved ones. Linking that to your personal and business vision and your values will help you feel anchored in the bigger picture. It will give this time a greater sense of meaning. It will help you to elevate your perspective and allow you to focus on the possibilities and opportunities around you – to reframe the situation – rather than being stuck in a survivalist headspace. This will pass – take CARE in this uncertain new world so that you can learn as fast as you can and build the path ahead as you walk it.

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## Endnotes

1. <https://hbr.org/2016/11/how-to-manage-your-emotions-without-fighting-them>
2. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pulse-mental-health/202004/10-things-mentally-strong-people-do-during-pandemic>
3. <https://hbr.org/2007/10/manage-your-energy-not-your-time>
4. <https://hbr.org/2016/06/resilience-is-about-how-you-recharge-not-how-you-endure>

# Being real about your emotions

## This IS loss

You are confronting the brutal reality of the current situation. You are leading through lost revenue, reduced budgets, a shrinking organisation and new projects and products being slashed. Don't underestimate the impact of this - it feels tough because it is tough. That discomfort you're feeling - is grief.<sup>1</sup>

You are experiencing multiple, concurrent losses. Your vision for the future, your business and your team matter to you. And losing any parts of these is a painful, psychological experience. To navigate this sense of ending; and transition to a new beginning takes vulnerability and courage. It takes you leaning in to the emotions and grieving; so that you can move onward and see the opportunities in the midst of the loss.

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## Name it to tame it

David Kessler, a world expert on grief stresses the importance of acknowledging what's happening inside you as key to being able to move forward.

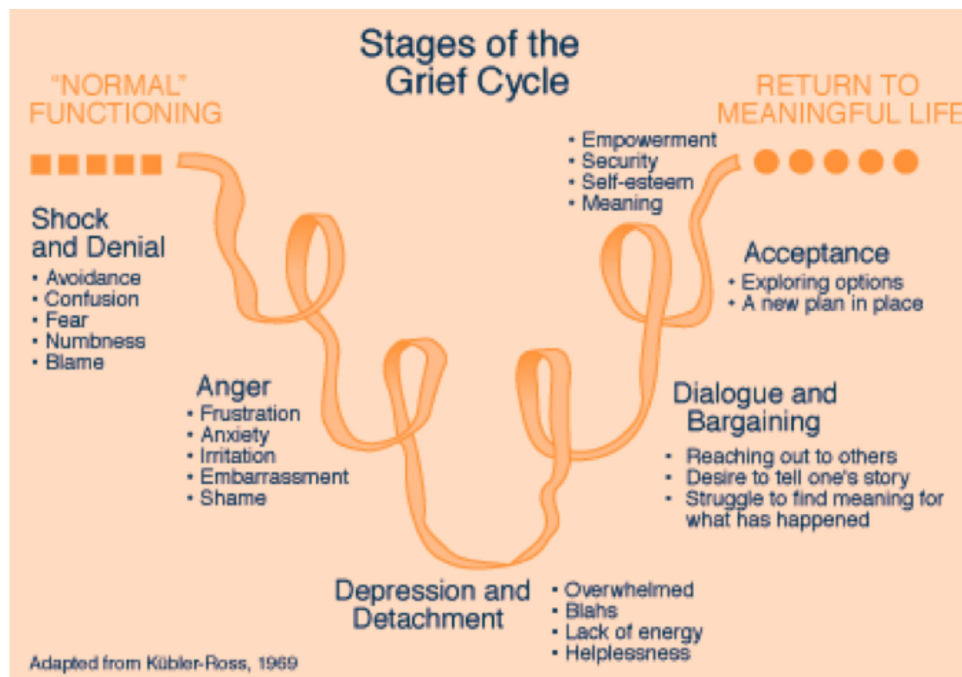
Psychologists talk about 'name it to tame it':

1. Recognising and naming what you are feeling enables the emotion to lessen and move through you.
2. You'll probably feel it in your body first - racing heart, clenched jaw, sweaty palms, butterflies in your stomach, hunched shoulders. Listening to your body helps you to notice and interpret how you are feeling.
3. Ignoring or fighting your feelings doesn't help reduce the emotion.
4. It usually results in you being triggered by something often unrelated and then exploding - or imploding - in less appropriate or constructive ways.

Kessler says 'It's important we acknowledge what we go through... Fighting it doesn't help because your body is producing the feeling. If we allow the feelings to happen, they'll happen in an orderly way, and it empowers us. Then we're not victims... We feel it and it goes and then we go to the next feeling... It's absurd to think we shouldn't feel grief right now. Let yourself feel the grief and keep going.'

It is in our openness to be vulnerable and experience the discomfort of real, challenging emotions that enable us to tap into our courage and resourcefulness. Vulnerability and courage are two sides of the same coin.

Being clear on the different stages of grief is a useful starting. We included this in one of our first articles. Here is a reminder of the typical phases that you – and your team – might be going through:



Understanding the stages of grief is a start to you being able to 'name and tame' the feelings associated with grief. Remember that the stages are not entirely linear and you may not experience them in this order. This is not a checklist, but it does provide some scaffolding for the unknown world you have entered:

1. There's denial, which we say a lot of early on: 'This virus won't affect us.'
2. There's anger: 'You're making me stay home and closing down my opportunities to generate revenue.'
3. There's sadness: 'I don't know when this will end.'
4. There's bargaining: 'Okay, if we are in Lockdown for five weeks everything will be better, right?'
5. Then there is 'acceptance' - 'We have to figure out how to proceed.'

Acceptance, as you might imagine, is where the power lies. We find control in acceptance. 'We can work virtually, we can sell some of our products, we can put in protective measures for our team'. This is the point when we let go of the past, we come to terms with what has ended and we can start preparing for what is ahead. This marks the possibility of a 'new beginning'. We can even find meaning and identify opportunities arising from our losses, if we process the different emotions of the grief cycle deliberately.

Tips to deal with the emotions and way your body might feel with grief:

1. Come into the present using the grounding and breathing techniques we covered previously.
2. Give yourself permission to 'feel all the feels' for a window of time everyday in a confidential, safe space
3. Role-model your vulnerability for your team – Say things like 'I am feeling worried. And this is what I am doing about that. Here's how you can help me. How are you feeling and how can I help you?'
4. Let go of what you can't control. Make a list of what is and what isn't in your control, and figure out your next move or action for everything that is in your control.
5. Stock up on compassion. Everyone will have different levels of fear and grief and it manifests in different ways. Even when your team or partner is unpleasant or aggressive, understand that you are seeing their grief in action. Be patient. Think about who someone usually is and cut them some slack because of the challenging context.



## Then reframe it

As you lean in to your emotions with vulnerability and you acknowledge them, they will move forward. You will learn that emotions are temporary. They come and go. They change. You can now shift your thinking about your situation and the meaning that you give to your circumstances. You can choose to move your experience from a negative frame to a more hopeful one, filled with opportunities.

You can ‘reframe’ your situation. Reframing helps you to see something in a new way, in a context that allows you to recognise and appreciate the positive aspects of your situation. Reframing helps you to use whatever life hands you as opportunities to be taken advantage of, rather than problems to be avoided. It is not a denial that the challenge that you have been dealt is a difficult one. Even though your circumstance may be fraught with hardship, reframing enables to you look at the possibilities at the same time. It requires you to shift your perspective - to put on another lens - and to look at the situation differently. This process allows you an expanded view of your reality.<sup>2</sup>

### To reframe your situation:

**Step 1: Identify your current view**

How am I looking at the situation at present?

What am I thinking, feeling, doing?

**Step 2: Check your assumptions**

How could I see the situation differently?

How else could I interpret this experience?

**Step 3: Re-Framing (Changing your Perspective)**

How can I see opportunities or possibilities that this change could bring?

What would someone I look up to do in this situation?

**Step 4: Check your new view our frame**

How would my new frame or perspective change things for me?

By reframing the situation, you will probably be able to see gains and positives that were less obvious to you than the losses of the current situation. It enables you to ask ‘what else might be true here?’ and ‘how can I see this from another perspective?’ Even in the COVID-19 context, you will probably be able to see the possible gains from paring back to essentials, focusing on ‘cleaning house’ and being able to cut out areas of waste in your business. It will probably bring priorities into perspective.

Reframing helps you to see the new beginning ahead and the possibilities that can emerge as you build your business’s new trajectory. It allows you to access strengths and resources that you may not have been clear until now. It will help you to make small bets or take small steps in the right direction of travel. It helps you to take optimistic action. This will energise you and your team; and create a sense of optimism and possibility. It will start to feel like the future is emerging.

### Tool

Use this to check-in with yourself and shift through vulnerability to courage:

Check-In with yourself		Day & Date	Day & Date	Day & Date	Day & Date	Day & Date	Day & Date
<b>Name It to Tame It</b>	What are you feeling today?						
	How do you know? (What is your body telling you?)						
<b>Reframe It</b>	If you shift your view, what else might be true here?						
	What changes with this new perspective?						
	What new resources and/or opportunities emerge?						
	What’s your best move today?						

## You don't need to see the whole staircase

This is a time of loss. You probably feel it in a number of ways. Give yourself permission to acknowledge your feelings and spend a moment 'feeling the feels'. You'll see that they'll move onward and so will you. You'll then be able to reframe your current situation, acknowledge how tough it is AND see it from a different perspective. Possibilities and opportunities will emerge. So will your own strengths and resources. You'll be able to sense the future ahead and start taking steps to build this. And this is enough to create movement. Listen to Martin Luther King and 'take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.' You're building the staircase with your vulnerability and your courage. Keep going.

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## Endnotes

- 1 <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>
2. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/za/blog/stronger-the-broken-places/201712/reframing>

# Quieting your inner storm to lead through the outer storm

## Calming the noise

Your mind is spinning. You're having 1000 thoughts a minute. Your emotions are all over the place. You're awake at 2am worrying about your business. You dread the decisions ahead - how to cut costs, whether you will need to retrench staff, who will stay and who will go. You're overwhelmed with everything that needs to be done and don't know where to start. You feel paralysed.

Paradoxically, while all you can hear is the noise of your worry, you'll actually be less able to solve the problems you're wrestling with. Building your own intentional, internal calm is the only way you can lead through the outer storm and effectively impact on your business and your team's security.

This requires you to calm your internal noise - first turning down the volume; and then changing the channel.

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## Turning down the volume

If you are feeling aggressive, confrontational or overwhelmed to the point of not being able to take clear, sound action; it is time to stop and turn down the volume. Your level of worry may have escalated into anxiety and even panic. You may be feeling the impact of 'fight-flight-or-freeze' as the danger cues bombarding you trigger a cascade of stress hormones resulting in physiological changes gearing you for a quick reaction. The brain's command centre triggers the sympathetic nervous system's response which functions like an accelerator in a car. It triggers the 'fight-flight-or-freeze' response, providing the body with a burst of energy. Your heart pounds, you breath faster and more shallowly and your muscles tense for action. It also narrows your peripheral vision and limits your ability to solve complex problems. You are completely wired for physical survival. The problem is that your foot can get 'stuck' on the accelerator, stopping you being able to use the parts of the brain that can actually solve the problems you are facing.<sup>1</sup>

To turn down the volume of your racing brain, you need to actively evoke a different part of your nervous system. This puts on the brakes, turns down the stress response and allows your dangerous cortisol and adrenaline levels to fall.

You can do this by 'grounding' yourself. Practical ways to do this include deep 4-7-8 abdominal breathing, using the 5-4-3-2-1 technique, focusing on a soothing word (such as peace or calm), visualising tranquil scenes, repetitive prayer or mindfulness meditation using one of the host of apps available like Headspace or Calm. These keep you focused in the present and stop the swirl of your racing thoughts and feelings.

## 4-7-8 breathing

This exercise uses abdominal (or belly) breathing to help you relax. You can do this exercise either sitting or lying down.

1. To start, take a deep, slow breath from your belly, and silently count to 4 as you breathe in.
2. Hold your breath, and silently count from 1 to 7.
3. Breathe out completely as you silently count from 1 to 8. Try to get all the air out of your lungs by the time you count to 8.
4. Repeat 3 to 7 times or until you feel calm.
5. Notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.

## 5,4,3,2,1 technique:

Pay attention to your breathing. Slow, deep, long breaths help you find a state of calm. Once you find your breath, go through the following steps to help ground yourself:

- 5: Acknowledge **FIVE** things you see around you. It could be a pen, a spot on the wall, a tree outside, - anything in your surroundings.
- 4: Acknowledge **FOUR** things you can touch around you. It could be your laptop, a desk, or the ground under your feet.
- 3: Acknowledge **THREE** things you hear. This could be any external sound. If you can hear - could be someone talking, birdsong, a car passing. Focus on things you can hear outside of your body.
- 2: Acknowledge **TWO** things you can smell. Maybe you smell ink or coffee.
- 1: Acknowledge **ONE** thing you can taste. What does the inside of your mouth taste like—minty toothpaste?

Movement also helps to ground you. Exercise not only deepens breathing but also releases endorphins which relieve muscle tension and boost energy. Even more importantly, by really focusing on how your body feels as you move, you can interrupt the constant flow of worries running through your head.

Check how you're feeling before and after grounding yourself, giving yourself a score out of ten. This will help you to notice the shifts you've made.

## Change the channel

Now that you have turned down the volume of your racing thoughts by grounding yourself, you can turn to the next step - changing the channel to a more constructive and useful one. Research shows that while you're worrying, you often feel temporarily less anxious. Running over the problem in your head distracts you from your emotions and makes you feel like you're getting something accomplished. But worrying and problem-solving are two completely different processes.

### Problem-solving involves:

- evaluating a situation,
- coming up with concrete steps for dealing with it, and then
- putting the plan into action.

Worrying is often a way we try to predict what the future has in store—a way to prevent unpleasant surprises and control the outcome. The problem is, it doesn't work. Thinking about all the things that could go wrong doesn't make life any more predictable. Worrying rarely leads to solutions. No matter how much time you spend dwelling on worst-case scenarios, you're no more prepared to deal with them should they actually happen. Productive, solvable worries are those you can take action on right away.

You can change your channel by challenging your thoughts, deciding if the worry is solvable or not<sup>2</sup>, rallying your support and dialling up your strengths:

## 1. Challenging your thoughts:

Ask yourself:

- What's the evidence that what you are thinking is true?
- Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- What's the probability that what you're thinking about will actually happen? If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- Is your thinking helpful? How is worrying helping you and how it is an obstacle?

## 2. Deciding if the worry is solvable or unsolvable:

Next, assess if the worry you're grappling with is solvable or not.

### **If the worry is solvable, start brainstorming**

1. Make a list of all the possible solutions you can think of.
2. Try not to get too hung up on finding the perfect solution.
3. Focus on the things you have the power to change, rather than the circumstances or realities beyond your control.
4. After you've evaluated your options, make a plan of action.
5. Once you have a plan and start doing something about the problem, you'll feel much less anxious.

### **If the worry is not solvable, challenge it and accept the uncertainty**

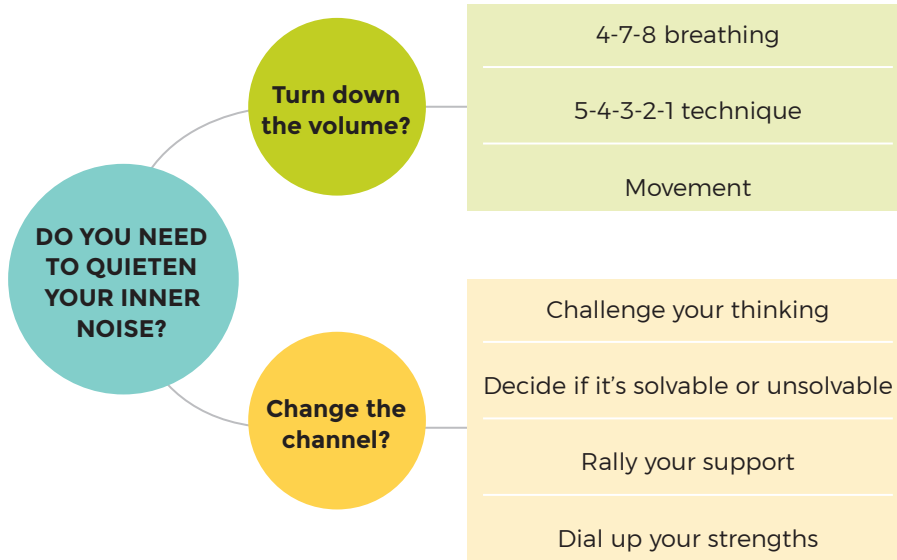
1. If the worry is not solvable, accept the uncertainty.
2. Tune into your emotions. Worrying about uncertainty is often a way to avoid unpleasant emotions. But by tuning into your emotions you can start to accept your feelings, even those that are uncomfortable or don't make sense.
3. Rallying your social support: Mentors, advisors, relatives and partners boost your ability to build calm and change the channel to a more positive, constructive one. Talking to someone who will actively listen to you without judging, criticising or adding to your worry - is one of the most effective ways to make your worries seem less threatening. Keeping everything to yourself only causes things to build up until they seem overwhelming. Saying your thoughts out loud can often help you to make sense of what you're feeling and put things into perspective. If your fears are unwarranted, verbalising them can expose them for what they are—needless worries. And if your fears are justified, sharing them with someone else can produce solutions that you may not have thought of alone.
4. Dialling up your strengths: Finally, focus on listing your strengths and identify how you can use these as resources to solve the problems you're facing. Combined with your own values and vision, these create the energy and courage you'll need to solve the problems ahead.





## Tool

Use this tool to achieve deliberate calm



### The quieter you become, the more you can hear

Quieten your inner noise will help you to achieve the calm, focused and clear thinking you'll need to move forward and solve the problems ahead of you. Tune down the volume and then change the channel. The quieter you are, the more you can hear. Your strengths and resourcefulness are there. Listen for them.

## Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response>
- 2 <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm>



# Bracing yourself to deliver bad news about job losses

'Here's the hard truth: You're going to be tested in ways you can't even imagine', says First Round's Josh Kopelman about the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>1</sup> This has never been more true as you find yourself facing what every leader and founder dreads – having to retrench people and reduce remaining employee pay.

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Whilst this is devastating for the employee's concerned, it is also a difficult experience for you. You'll need to brace yourself to deliver this news. Preparing well is key –

- Take advice
- Formulate a clear gameplan
- Act decisively
- Communicate often and personally,
- Do as much as you can for those leaving; and
- Engage with those staying.

Keep your values and your culture close – this is a defining moment in your business – and to navigate through and beyond it, you'll need them to steer by.

## Take advice

Consulting with your circle of trusted mentors and advisors is key. Explore all the alternatives to retrenching employees – voluntary exits, reduced hours, pay cuts, unpaid leave. A robust assessment of alternatives will help you to feel sure that you had no alternatives. Speak to labour law experts (like Labournet). They will guide you through the legal requirements and suggest non-discriminatory, ethical practices.

## Formulate a clear gameplan

Once you are clear that retrenchments are your only option, you will need to formulate a clear game plan. This should keep you in the legal and ethical territory. It should also align to and show your values and culture in action – this will be important to win the trust and engagement of the employees remaining with the business; and your customers.

Your gameplan should answer these questions<sup>2</sup>.

- What criteria will you use in selecting employees who will be impacted?
- What process will you follow?
- Who will be affected?
- What timeline will you use?
- What retrenchment packages and benefits will you provide?
- How will you communicate? Particularly given that it will probably need to be done virtually, how will you make sure this is done with compassion?
- How will you support your managers if they need to lead parts of this process?
- How will you assist those affected with references, referrals, UIF assistance and counselling?
- How will you ensure continuity in roles and contributions?
- How will you inform all stakeholders of the decision? (Stakeholders include your current employees, customers and suppliers)
- How will you address motivation, fearfulness and trust within your remaining team?

## Act decisively

Once you have your gameplan and are prepared, act decisively. If your business has been experiencing problems – a drop in revenue, fewer customers, cuts in budgets – your employees are likely to be aware and concerned anyway. Making the decision and acting resolutely will make the process clearer and less painful for those concerned.

## Communicate often and personally

First, give your employees information about the business problems and provide some sense of the alternatives that you are considering early on. Open and honest communication will help employees understand how the crisis is impacting the company and can create a greater understanding of the difficult decisions the company is facing.

This will increase the trust of the remaining employees. You might not have been able to avoid retrenchments, but the remaining employees will feel that you have demonstrated respect and transparency by communicating proactively with them and thoughtfully pursuing other options.

While you don't want to elicit fear or panic, employees want to understand how the company is faring in these tough economic times. People will be more resilient if they understand how outside forces are impacting their job, their profession, their industry and their company.

Once you have decided to cut jobs, communication should be a key part of your gameplan. Your communication should be:

- Consistent
- Clear and
- Two-way

You could host a town hall meeting for the entire company. Then, your team of managers can host smaller sessions with their teams.

Ideally you or the relevant manager should meet with each of the impacted employees individually – even if this is virtual – and provide them with the answers to the questions they will certainly ask about the process, the timeline, the retrenchment packages and benefits.

Listening to what concerns each person and addressing this will go a long way to the process feeling respectful and dignified for those impacted.

### For example:

- Longtime employees might need reassurance that the retrenchment wasn't due to poor performance
- Those with dependents might be more focused on what this means for their family

Everyone reacts differently during stressful situations, but knowing your team well and what is important to them can help you be more focused and empathic, making a difficult conversation more compassionate.

Just as this is difficult for you, laying off employees will be the hardest of their job for your managers. Support them by providing tools, resources, and support with delivering difficult news so they feel more prepared for these conversations.

### Some ways you can support your people managers<sup>3</sup>

- Meet with them to acknowledge the challenges, the importance of their role, and describe the company's approach for supporting the impacted employees. Link this to your business values.
- Create a forum (whether an online chat channel or recurring meeting) for leaders and HR to talk about employee reactions and how to answer difficult questions that come up.

## Do as much as you can for those leaving

How you handle the retrenchments tells a lasting story of your organisation's culture. This is a defining moment and your actions and interactions will be seen as showcasing your culture in action. You should reflect on how you can show support and care for the employees leaving your business. Aside from severance packages, you could reflect on whether you can provide:

- Time for employees to process, gather their belongings and say goodbyes
- Extended health benefits
- Transition counselling, employee assistance or resume preparation
- Assistance with accessing unemployment benefits
- Introductions to, or job listings from, other local employers who may be hiring
- Written and verbal references.

Your relationship with your employees should not end when they leave your employment. You can continue to reach out to:

- Check-in on their wellbeing
- Provide updates of any job connections made with other employers
- Remind them of resources that continue to be available
- Ensure they know that they can be rehired in the future to replace attrition or address new priorities.

## Engage with those staying

Remaining employees often feel 'survivor guilt' after a retrenchment process. Often, the colleagues who left are friends. If you don't address this, these feelings of guilt can impact motivation levels and undermine your culture. You can strengthen your relationship with the remaining team by:

- Calling employees to see how they are doing and what support they would find helpful
- Making time in meetings for employees to talk about how they are doing, especially seeing as they may be working longer hours now that colleagues have left
- Letting employees know how the business is helping those who have left and making them aware wherever placements are successful so they can see your care in action

Continue to focus on your values and building your culture – this is more important than ever.

## Tool

Gameplan	Comments and Actions
Who are your advisors?	
What alternatives have you explored?	
What criteria will you use in selecting employees who will be impacted?	
What process will you follow?	
Who will be affected?	
What timeline will you use?	
What retrenchment package and benefits will you provide?	
How will you assist those affected with references, referrals, unemployment benefit assistance and counselling?	
How will you communicate? Particularly given that it will probably need to be done virtually, how will you make sure this is done with compassion?	

Gameplan	Comments and Actions
How will you support your managers if they need to lead parts of this process?	
How will you ensure continuity in roles and contributions?	
How will you inform all stakeholders of the decision? (Stakeholders include your current employees, customers and suppliers)	
How will you address motivation, fearfulness and trust withing your remaining team?	

## Moving forward with clarity and care

You are preparing for one of the hardest tasks. Yet a well thought through gameplan helps to show clarity and compassion at this tough time. Bringing certainty, respect and care to the employees who are impacted by the layoffs enables you to end their time with your business with a sense of dignity and humanity. That is the most you can do. It allows you to move forward with trust and credibility; to re-engage with the team remaining in the business. And builds a bridge to the future.

## Endnotes

1. [https://firstround.com/review/the-founders-field-guide-for-navigating-this-crisis-advice-from-recession-era-leaders-investors-and-ceos-currently-at-the-helm/#text\\_619f0flc6639495096ea63693aebdbe5](https://firstround.com/review/the-founders-field-guide-for-navigating-this-crisis-advice-from-recession-era-leaders-investors-and-ceos-currently-at-the-helm/#text_619f0flc6639495096ea63693aebdbe5)
2. <https://www.greatplacetowork.com/resources/blog/how-to-maintain-trust-during-layoffs>
3. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/tips-for-compassionate-layoffs-1918586>



You are taking tough decisions and fighting to save the future of your business. Preparation, and resolve have been key. Now is the time for communicating your decisions and path ahead. As difficult as the message is, how you communicate will help you to land the message with clarity and compassion.

## Balancing transparency and hope

It's a founder's job to balance transparency and hope," Josh Kopelman of First Round says. "On the one hand, it's important to be realistic and transparent with your team. You don't want to keep secrets. Founders must maintain their credibility, especially in a crisis. You can recover from making a lot of mistakes – but you can't recover from a loss of credibility. You don't want to say everything's going to be fine if it's not. It's okay as a founder to say, 'I don't know,' or to say, 'Here's what I'm concerned about.' But you also have to recognise that your job is to maintain hope at the same time. You need to be sure to tell them that even if the waters are choppy, the destination will be worth it. If you don't provide both in a crisis, it's a failure of leadership," he continues.<sup>1</sup>

## Communicating with clarity, consistency, compassion and brain-friendly messaging

**Be clear:** Use your gameplan to ensure you are clear and forthright with employees about impending changes and their impact. Make your senior team the single source of truth and get ahead of any other messages. The grapevine will be in overdrive and this cuts out this added noise. Town hall meetings, team meetings and one-on-ones with direct reports – even if these are virtual – are ways for members of you and your senior team to get in front of their teams. Encourage questions and answer these as openly and honestly as possible. Consider an anonymous or confidential way for employees to submit questions or feedback – for instance, an email box or employee survey. Address each question that comes in, and if a question cannot be answered, explain why. If you don't know the answer, commit to finding it and getting back on the answer. No matter what, do not fabricate an answer. This reduces your credibility and creates distrust.

**Be consistent:** It's essential that your senior team convey a consistent message in all interactions. Take the time to create talking points that they can use when holding team meetings, FAQ documents with answers to questions. Send summary emails after meetings. Be direct and concise. This will help affected employees to know exactly where they stand and help process the message.

**Check-in regularly with your employees.** According to Ellen Kullman – a global leader who has led through times of crisis – 'just when you are tired of saying the message, people will start to believe you.' Provide updates on the strides that have been made, successes and next steps. Utilize various communication vehicles such as email, team meetings and video to creatively disseminate information and maintain employee engagement.

**Be compassionate:** Recognise that employees affected may need time to process the news. Allow them different reactions and heightened emotions. Be available to provide further information after your initial conversations.

**Be brain-friendly:** In a crisis, our brains process messages more effectively if they include at least six of the principles below<sup>2</sup>:

Principle	How To
Set the context and acknowledge concerns	"You've likely noticed X. You're probably wondering Y. I realize you must be feeling Z."
Share a know /don't know/ will know statement and plan	"Here is what we know, here is what we don't know, and here is when we will know more or update you."
Clarify the decision criteria	Show people how decisions were made or will be made.
State the common goal	Reconnect to the company mission, values, and/or vision. Make unifying statements.  Bonus: add urgency statement (why this matters now more than ever).
Provide options	Where possible, offer some degree of choice or autonomy (e.g., two options).
Make a call to action / share the plan	List specific (small) steps people can take. Make the action/behaviour clear.
Commit to a communication cadence	Provide certainty of cadence, even if you can't provide certainty of message.  Use language of commitment (e.g., We promise to hold a briefing every Friday).
Identify information channels	Let them know where to go for questions and what to use as the sources of truth.  Consider creating FAQ docs, Slack channels, or dedicated contacts/task forces

Other useful tactics from LearningLabs include:

1. **Make 'know / don't know / will know' statements.** Here is what we know, here is what we don't know, here is when we will know or provide an update. Train leaders to do this well.
2. **Balance loss and hope statements.** Acknowledge the sadness of the situation and also make space for looking forward. For example: "This is very much a time of loss. It is also a time to unite around our cause."
3. **Reset priorities.** Reset org-level, team-level, and individual priorities and definitions of role success. Consider making a stop-start-continue list.
4. **Design early wins.** Give your employees something to celebrate soon and often. Break up projects and goals into very small increments and make progress visible.
5. **Provide training.** If employees have to do more with less and take on new responsibilities, make sure you are setting them up for success by offering the necessary training to handle their new roles well.
6. **Extract the learning.** For projects or responsibilities that are being eliminated, acknowledge the loss that people might be experiencing. Hold a formal wrap-up so that team members can celebrate past wins and extract any learning they can apply in the future.

## Tool

Planning brain-friendly communication about retrenchments

Principle	How To	My Comms
Set the context and acknowledge concerns	"You've likely noticed X. You're probably wondering Y. I realize you must be feeling Z."	
Share a know /don't know/ will know statement and plan	"Here is what we know, here is what we don't know, and here is when we will know more or update you."	
Clarify the decision criteria	Show people how decisions were made or will be made.	
State the common goal	Reconnect to the company mission, values, and/or vision. Make unifying statements.  Bonus: add urgency statement (why this matters now more than ever).	
Provide options	Where possible, offer some degree of choice or autonomy (e.g., two options).	
Make a call to action / share the plan	List specific (small) steps people can take. Make the action/behaviour clear.	
Commit to a communication cadence	Provide certainty of cadence, even if you can't provide certainty of message.  Use language of commitment (e.g., We promise to hold a briefing every Friday).	
Identify information channels	Let them know where to go for questions and what to use as the sources of truth.  Consider creating FAQ docs, Slack channels, or dedicated contacts/task forces	

Being prepared, acting with decisiveness and resolve; and communicating clearly, consistently, compassionately and in a brain-friendly style will bring a sense of certainty and care to a difficult time. This will help you fight onwards.

## Endnotes

1. [https://firstround.com/review/the-founders-field-guide-for-navigating-this-crisis-advice-from-recession-era-leaders-investors-and-ceos-currently-at-the-helm/#text\\_619f0flc6639495096ea63693aebdbe5](https://firstround.com/review/the-founders-field-guide-for-navigating-this-crisis-advice-from-recession-era-leaders-investors-and-ceos-currently-at-the-helm/#text_619f0flc6639495096ea63693aebdbe5)
2. <https://lifelabslearning.com/lab/crisis-audit/>
3. <https://firstround.com/review/staying-connected-is-key-to-your-startups-survival-heres-how-to-nail-internal-comms/>

# Getting the team aligned to lead through the storm

You have to cut costs – right down to the muscle. This means staff are affected and retrenchments lie ahead. This is hard in any circumstance, but the current context makes it harder. All eyes are on you as you navigate the uncertainty and lead through the storm. Align your senior team and have a game plan – fast. From then onwards it is all about communicating clearly, consistently and compassionately. This is an opportunity to live your values, under the most testing circumstances.

## Align your senior team

Aligning your senior team is urgent and needs to happen both fast and with a clear plan in mind. They're likely to be 'pulled in different directions', concerned for their people, responsible to the organisation and worried about their own fate. Communicate with clarity, consistency and compassion. (More on these two steps below).

Now engage and align with the senior team staying. Allow time and space for difficult conversations and hard emotions. The team will be experiencing a sense of loss. Be absolutely clear on accountability, authority, lines of communication and contribution needed now that some team members are leaving. Set direction based on the business's vision and frame your approach using your values. Inspire the team on a common purpose to write the business's new future. Ensure the senior team remaining are visible and present with their people and are multipliers for you. Emphasise the importance of embodying the business values in their interactions and actions.

## Have a game plan

With an aligned team behind you formulate a clear game plan. Unite the team behind mapping and then shifting the business's trajectory out of the current situation. Keep them focused on what they can control and what where your combined actions can make a difference. Be brutal about prioritising. Use their insights and perspectives to help frame solutions. Listen more than you talk. Formulate a plan outlining what will change and who will be impacted. Ensure that you partner with Labournet on the legal process to follow when cutting roles and letting staff go. Make sure that you are completely clear on the answers to questions that employees affected will ask on timing, process to be followed, their retrenchment packages, benefits and tax implications. Figure out when and how you will communicate – knowing that this will most probably need to be done virtually. Building a clear game plan will create a sense of certainty amidst all the uncertainty. These conversations may need to happen fast, but you'll have a better chance of easing your own and the employee's anxiety if you can provide them with answers about what happens next. It will also add to your credibility and build trust with team that is remaining.

## Live your values

This is a critical moment in your business's history. How you live your values under the hardest circumstances is pivotal. It will shape your future culture and the levels of trust within the business. Your every move and message will be watched, consciously or not. Walk your talk. Be reliable and consistent. Use every situation to role model your values. Be visible and present. Take responsibility. Treat people with dignity, fairness, and respect. Show empathy and compassion, composure and courage. These are the moments that show real leadership.

## Communicate with clarity, consistency and compassion

**Be clear:** Use your game plan to ensure you are clear and forthright with employees about impending changes and their impact. Make your senior team the single source of truth and get ahead of any other messages. The grapevine will be in overdrive and this cuts out this added noise. Town hall meetings, team meetings and one-on-ones with direct reports – even if these are virtual – are ways for members of you and your senior team to get in front of their teams. Encourage questions and answer these as openly and honestly as possible. Consider an anonymous or

confidential way for employees to submit questions or feedback – for instance, an email box or employee survey. Address each question that comes in, and if a question cannot be answered, explain why. If you don't know the answer, commit to finding it and getting back on the answer. No matter what, do not fabricate an answer. This reduces your credibility and creates distrust.

**Be consistent:** It's essential that your senior team convey a consistent message in all interactions. Take the time to create talking points that they can use when holding team meetings, FAQ documents with answers to questions. Send summary emails after meetings. Be direct and concise. This will help employees affected to know exactly where they stand and help process the message.

Touchbase regularly with your employees. According to Ellen Kullman – a global leader who has led through times of crisis – ‘just when you are tired of saying the message, people will start to believe you.’ Provide updates on the strides that have been made, successes and next steps. Utilize various communication vehicles such as email, team meetings and video to creatively disseminate information and maintain employee engagement.

### Be transparent with your wider team

Whilst you may have been focusing on the road ahead, you also need to be transparent with with the wider team. They will feel uncertain about their own security. They will be looking to you and your senior team to provide clarity and communication on their situation. Although providing absolute certainty is not possible in the current context, explain what has happened and why. Provide direction on what is going to happen next and their role in the building the business ahead. Re-iterate what has not changed – the business vision and values. Schedule regular communication sessions and re-iterate the message about building forward.

### Take care of your well-being

This is a time of high, ongoing pressure and stress. You and your senior team probably feel the weight of responsibility of your actions and your impact on the livelihoods (and lives) of your employees. Ensure that you are taking care of your team's well-being. Take care of your own. Refer back to the previous articles on managing your own inner calm and well-being. Ensure you all have ways to decompress and manage your stress levels – having downtime, exercising, eating regularly and healthily, drinking enough water and focusing on your sleep – are key. Check-in with your team on their own well-being and give them a safe space to share their feelings. Use your own support network of trusted advisors, mentors, friends and partners to give you a place to share your own feelings.

Element	Outcomes	Accountable	Timing	Actions Needed
<b>Align your senior team</b>	Clarity on the way ahead			
	Experience respect, dignity and fairness			
	Communicate clearly, consistently & compassionately			
	Acknowledge loss and feelings			
	Mobilise around purpose			
	Focus on business's new future			
	Clarity on accountability, authority, lines of communication, contribution needed			
	Involve in developing game plan			
	Embody values			
	Be visible and present			
	Unite team			



Element	Outcomes	Accountable	Timing	Actions Needed
<b>Get a gameplan</b>	Shift trajectory			
	Focus on what can impact			
	Frame solutions			
	Formulate a plan			
	Clarity on who will be impacted, process and packages, timings			
<b>Live your values</b>	Walk the talk			
	Show empathy and compassion, courage and composure			
<b>Communicate</b>	Communicate clearly what, how, when and who			
	Communicate one single message			
	Provide forums for two-way communication			
	Touchbase regularly			
	Show you care			

### Building forward from this

It is a challenging and stressful time – for you, your senior team and your wider team. Yet there are ways to do this better, rather than worse. Align your senior team, to quickly implement a game plan and to live your values. Clear, consistent and compassionate communication will create some certainty and a sense of care in the midst of this difficult process. This will be the basis for you to build forward.

# Inspiring your team beyond the impact of the storm

## This IS collective loss

Your team is confronting the brutal reality of the current situation. You are leading them through lost revenue, reduced budgets, colleagues laid off and exciting new projects postponed. You know that this feels tough because it is tough - that the discomfort that you're all feeling is grief.<sup>1</sup> You are experiencing multiple, concurrent losses both as individuals and as a collective. You understand that this is a time of navigating endings by being vulnerable and courageous - naming and taming your emotions; and reframing the current situation to see opportunities in the many losses around you. More than ever, this is a time for you to build hope in your team so that they can dial up their energy and motivation. You need them to persevere and more than that - to perform - as you build your new future together.

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## Focus forward

Richard Branson understands that while you are feeling a sense of loss; your team will be facing similar emotions and 'will look to you for guidance on how to respond.'

### He has four key tips<sup>2</sup>:

1. **Start talking:** Have an honest and open dialogue in which everyone can offer their ideas and opinions. Discourage them from blaming others, but own your personal mistakes and allow other team members to do the same. Encourage your people to bring their expertise into these conversations. Nobody else knows their area of the business better than they do, so let them share their views on what's happening.
2. **Focus on the future.** It's important to dissect what has happened and perform a post-mortem on your business to make sure that you don't repeat the same mistakes. But it's equally important to be focused on what happens next. When things go wrong in business, consider it an opportunity to take stock and determine whether you're heading in the right direction. Decide whether your business could benefit from pivoting its focus to something else - maybe one part of your product or service is proving popular even if the business as a whole isn't working out. If that's the case, re-focus your efforts on this aspect.
3. **Remember why you started.** When everything goes wrong, it's easy to forget why you got into business in the first place. But remind yourself why you were passionate about this project. As I've written before, no business will succeed if the only goal is to make money. Whenever we launch a new Virgin business, we look at how we can offer a product or service that's truly different from what everyone else in the industry is offering. So, during tough times, stop and think back to when you launched your start-up. What was it that you wanted to achieve? Spend time with your team, discuss your goals, and revise them if necessary.
4. **Put staff first.** Remember that above everything else in your business, your staff should be No. 1. If your people are happy and engaged, customers will follow. I've spent much of my time during the past 40 years working out how we take care of our staff at Virgin...If you look after your people, they will look after your business.

You're are only as strong as the teams that surround you. You need to make sure that you include them in conversations when times are tough. The people on the front lines of your business will often have the best ideas on how to improve things for customers.

Also find out the things keeping your team awake at night –

- Worried about whether they will be paid on time, in full this month?
- Concerned about their safety on the frontlines?
- Distracted by working from home?

These ‘hygiene’ factors may not motivate your team, but by not addressing them, you run the risk of your team being demotivated and disengaged. You might not be able to give everyone the answers or the certainty they want; but clear, consistent and transparent communication builds trust and engagement.

## Make hope happen

Focusing forward needs you to build hope in your team. The global expert on hope – psychologist Shane Lopez - defines hope as “the belief that the future will be better than the present, along with the belief that you have the power to make it so.”<sup>3</sup>

In this way of looking at hope, it is something that you as a leader can actively build. It is not merely wishful thinking.

Hope needs:

1. **Goals:** You probably have goals already. Are these specific, measurable, attainable, inspiring and time based?
2. **Pathways:** Do you have a clear game plan, or ‘pathways’ to get from point A, where you are now, to point B, which is goal attainment.
3. **Confidence:** Do you believe in your own ability and mental energy to work and pursue your identified goals along your selected pathways?

Pathways and confidence work in tandem; they reverberate in such a way that the more you have of both, the easier it is to pursue and attain your goals. They make the wish for a better future something deliberate and active. They make hope a verb, not a noun. They focus forward by inspiring your teams to move towards higher ground, clearly charting the path ahead and believing that collectively you have the energy and capability to achieve what you have set out to do.

Research on hope shows that it plays a central role in persistence, motivation, engagement, conscientiousness and innovation. It tangibly increases productivity by 12 – 14%! It also helps teams to overcome obstacles. When hopeful teams bump into an obstacle, they just generate more pathways. They figure ways around and over the obstacle. When teams who are low-hope bump into an obstacle, they get stuck and frustrated, and they may have a downward spiral in performance, mood or attendance.

Hopeful teams tend to be realistic in how hard it will be and the obstacles they will face but they also know that they’re good at changing tack and developing new routes if necessary. Teams that are hopeful are also good at asking for help and support when they need it to achieve their goal. They’re agile and resourceful; and good at re-assessing if goals are do-able and how to achieve rejig goals if needed. People with low hope stay stuck. Hope helps teams to widen their perspective and take longer range views. It is the antidote to fear, which whilst useful for survival, narrows the perspective and range of responses. Hope unleashes creativity and innovation.

To build hope in your teams:

- Review your goals as you focus forward. Are they smart? Do they have clear pathways? Are you confident you have the capability and energy to achieve these? If no, how can you have smarter goals, clearer pathways and more confidence?
- Use the language of hope in your business. Make sure you and your teams are talking about your goals, your pathways and your confidence to achieve these.
- Focus on playing to your strengths. Link your individual and collective strengths to your wider purpose to build and bolster your confidence.
- Reflect on your own level of hopefulness as a leader. What are your natural strengths? Where are there opportunities? What actions can you take? Who is a role-model for you? Could they advise, mentor and coach you?



- Reflect on your team’s level of hopefulness. What are their natural strengths? Where are their opportunities for growth? What actions can they take? Who is a role-model in the team who can share ideas and approaches within the team? Who could advise, mentor and coach the team? How can you recognise and reward more hopeful behaviour?
- Involve your team and share these insights about hope. Ask them to reflect on their own level of hopefulness. What are their natural strengths? Where are their opportunities for growth? What actions can they take? Who are role-models in the team who can share ideas and approaches within the team? Who could advise, mentor and coach the team? How can hope become part of your way of working together and culture? How can everyone recognise and reward more hopeful behaviour?

## Tool

### Task 1: Reflect on your own level of hopefulness.

**Rate yourself out of ten for:**

1. Goals \_\_\_\_\_
2. Pathways \_\_\_\_\_
3. Confidence \_\_\_\_\_

**What shifts do you need to make to get to an 8 / 10 for each of these?**

1. Goals \_\_\_\_\_
2. Pathways \_\_\_\_\_
3. Confidence \_\_\_\_\_

**What one action can you immediately implement?**

1. Goals \_\_\_\_\_
2. Pathways \_\_\_\_\_
3. Confidence \_\_\_\_\_

**Who can coach or buddy you through this – to challenge and keep you accountable?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**When will you reflect on your progress and re-assess next actions?**

\_\_\_\_\_

### Task 2: Reflect on your team as a whole.

**Rate your team out of ten for:**

1. Goals \_\_\_\_\_
2. Pathways \_\_\_\_\_
3. Confidence \_\_\_\_\_

**What shifts do you need to make to get to an 8 / 10 for each of these?**

1. Goals \_\_\_\_\_
2. Pathways \_\_\_\_\_
3. Confidence \_\_\_\_\_



**What one action can you immediately implement?**

- 1. Goals \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Pathways \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Confidence \_\_\_\_\_

**How can you coach your team to build their level of hope - how can you support, inspire, challenge and keep them accountable?**

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When will you reflect on your progress and re-assess next actions?

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**Finally, with these two sets of reflections, schedule a session with your team to share the importance of being hope and ask them to reflect and plan how to shift their level of hopefulness.**

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**Task 3. Team Meeting**

**Rate our team out of ten for:**

- 1. Goals \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Pathways \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Confidence \_\_\_\_\_

**What shifts do we need to make to get to an 8 / 10 for each of these?**

- 1. Goals \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Pathways \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Confidence \_\_\_\_\_

**What one action can we immediately implement?**

- 1. Goals \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Pathways \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Confidence \_\_\_\_\_



**Who are role-models and coaches who can build our collective level of hope –support, inspire, challenge and keep us accountable?**

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**How can we recognise and celebrate our progress on this journey?**

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**When will we reflect on our progress and re-assess our next actions needed?**

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### **Taking on a life of its own**

Michelle Obama noticed that ‘hope can take on a life of its own’. It becomes a virtuous cycle. It builds momentum. It imagines the better future you all want. And it takes action. It unlocks and unleashes the new beginning you’re starting to see ahead.

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### **Endnotes**

1. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>
2. <https://www.virgin.com/entrepreneur/richard-branson-four-tips-motivating-team-when-times-get-tough>
3. <https://www.thepositiveencourager.global/shane-j-lopez-on-hope/>

# Managing conflict in your team

## Navigating conflict in your team

The going has been tough. You have had to cut costs – right down to the muscle and have been focused on the survival of your business. Your team has been under real pressure. The cracks are beginning to show. You have noticed more and more flare-ups happening as the strain spills over. Watching your team interact and communicate with such tension and conflict worries you. You need them aligned and performing to build forward. It's time to get to the heart of the problem and help your team to communicate assertively and co-operatively. That way you can move forward together.

## Getting to the heart of the problem

As time passes and the pressure continues, it is not unexpected to see people at their worst. Psychologists talk about the 'dark side' of people that emerges in times like these – with behaviour possibly seeming more extreme and even toxic. You might be seeing tempers flare, volatile responses, over-reaction, moodiness and withdrawal. All of these are signals that the team is under pressure and running into trouble. Spend time with each team member exploring the tactics we've explore in other articles on grounding and taking care of themselves.

Next, you'll have to address the conflict that is spilling over between team members.

Conflict is usually a warning of bigger challenges at play in the organisational system. It might signal

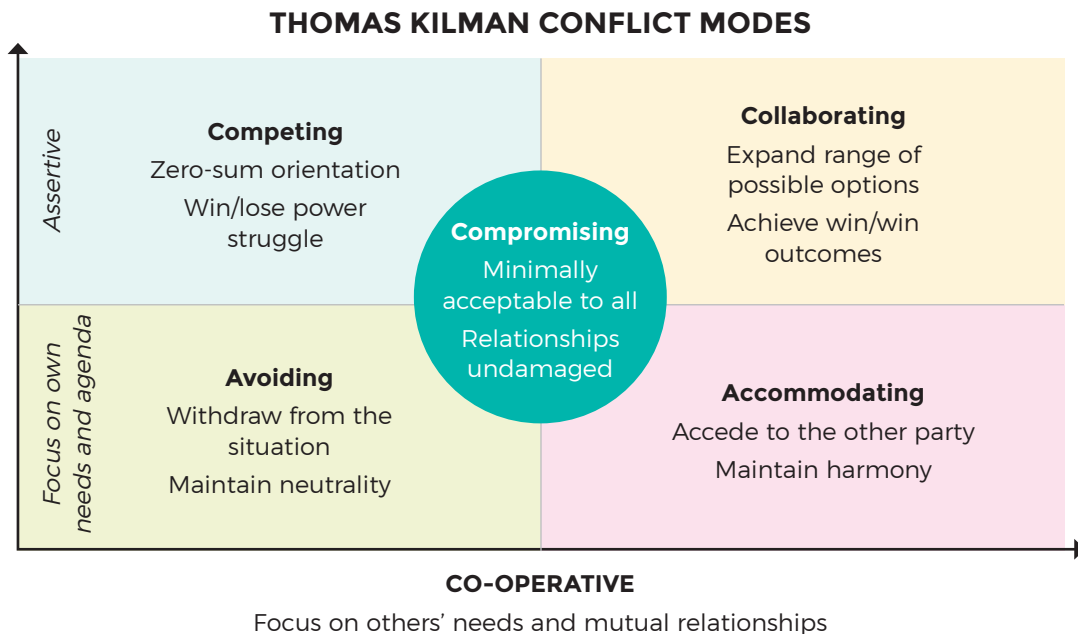
1. Lack of alignment between goals, beliefs, attitudes and ideas.
2. Unrealistic work loads.
3. Lack of feedback and gaps in communication<sup>1</sup>:

In the current crisis it is likely to highlight the ambiguity, uncertainty and threat that your team is experiencing as they are fighting for the survival of the business. Remember that they are experiencing cues of danger all around them and are possibly in the 'fight' zone of a 'flight or fight' response.

Talk to each of the team members individually involved in the conflict and clearly describe the behaviour that you have noticed. Be direct and ask 'what's really going on here for you?'. Stress that conflict doesn't happen in a vacuum and it is often a flag that something else in the system is not working. Discuss that a 'fight or flight' response is natural in response to the current situation. Re-iterate that everyone is having a rough time and that it's in everyone's interest to build forward. Focus on what you can all learn. If you listen – really listen – you'll be able to get to the heart of what's going on and be able to figure how to get everyone to re-set and re-align.

## Re-setting the relationship

Now that you've spent time with each team member separately, re-setting the relationship is the next step. You should have a good sense of the styles that each team member shows in conflict. These are likely to fall within a matrix of assertive (focused on their own agenda and needs) and co-operative (focused on the needs of others and relationships). You might see any of the following five key conflict modes:



You'll want to work with your team to get them into a collaborative style - where you collectively expand on the number of possible options in front of all of you and you achieve win-win outcomes. Don't settle for compromises - this is likely to be a short term solution, with no-one really satisfied at the outcome.

To drive collaboration, you'll need to build relational agility<sup>2</sup>. When faced with a conflict, it's essential that you help your team members to re-set the emotional tone and create a new, shared way of looking at the future. It is important that your team are willing to try new ways of interacting with each other. People often respond to relationship breakdowns by "digging in," sticking with their own interpretation of events and preferred solution. If, instead, you can encourage them to pause and experiment; to look for a different and creative approach to solve the problem - you are more likely to successfully repair the relationship, and may even strengthen it.

Here are some practical tips to work towards a win-win outcome.

### 1. Suggest a time out

If there has been a blow-up, you might want to set after everyone has had some time to let your emotions settle. If time is of the essence, even something like a coffee break can help ease the tension. If there is not the opportunity for a physical time-out, try a brief topic change. This can reduce the tension and promote positive emotions. For example, take a moment to check-in with each other about another project that is going well.

### 2. Commit to a shared relationship goal based on shared values and vision.

Acknowledge the tension and allow each person to express negative feelings, but it's important you also emphasise your positive feelings about the future of the relationship:

*"I know that you are not seeing eye-to-eye on this issue right now, and it is upsetting for all of us, but I'm really optimistic we can work this out."*

Rather than assigning fault or picking a side, find common ground by exploring everyone's shared values and vision. Disagreements based on differences in foundational values may not be reconcilable, but it's best to communicate openly and find that out as early as possible. Agree that your relationship is important and that you both want to restore mutual positive feelings. Remind the individuals about the positive elements of their relationship, and everyone's desire to have more positive interactions in the future. This may help to keep the current conflict from contaminating the entire relationship.

### 3. Get the individuals involved to raise the issue – assertively and clearly.

Ask individuals to freely share their perspective as a way of getting the facts and feelings from both sides. Highlight the need to be clear and specific, rather than vague or indirect. Encourage people to use 'I' rather than 'you' language and focus on specific behaviour. Ensure that the "rules" of your relationship mean everyone can express their emotions and perspectives – assertively and clearly - knowing that everyone will listen without

Rather than saying 'you always', 'you never', ask them to rephrase that using an 'I-statement'.

For example:

*'You never get the figures to me on time!'*

*'I find it really difficult working without the sales figures being regularly updated. I'm worried about the future of the business and regular sales figures help me to have a clear view of what we need to prioritise.'*

### 4. Enable empathy

After each person has shared their own view of the situation, have them try to describe what the other person's view might be. This helps both parties understand the other person's perspective and hopefully show some empathy. Get them to explore what their own role in the situation was. This exercise helps get to the root of problems while validating, building trust and creating an atmosphere where team members can take the next step forward together.

### 5. Encourage everyone to focus on the issue, not the person.

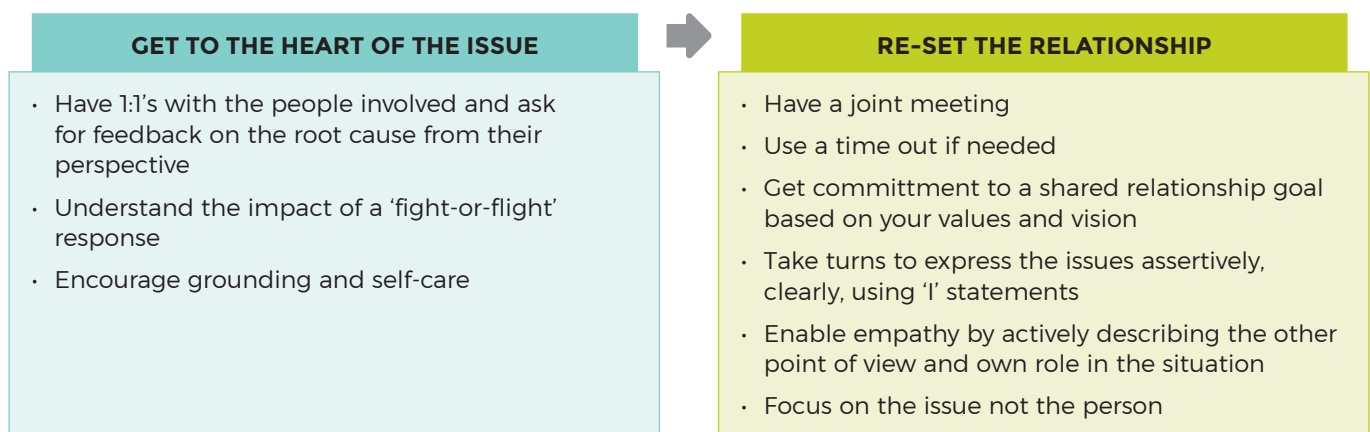
Ask the individuals involved to focus on the issue, not the person. Steer them towards outcomes and new, shared actions.

Instead of saying, "You said you would finish this by today," ask them to relook that situation in a comment like: "The project really needs to be finished today. What do we need to do to make that happen?"

If the conversation turns personal, you run the risk of turning conflict into combat. By keeping the conversation about the issue, you will reduce defensiveness.

## Tool

Navigating conflict process flow



## Conflict as a catalyst

Conflict is inevitable in these tough times. If handled with clarity, courage and compassion, it can unlock new possibilities and even strengthen relationships. See it as an opportunity – a catalyst for collaboration and win-win possibilities, rather than obstacle to be avoided. Use this as a learning lab.

## Endnotes

1. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/305129>
2. <https://hbr.org/2020/02/how-to-mend-a-work-relationship>

# Co-creating the future

You have worked tirelessly to weather the COVID-19 crisis and keep your business afloat. You have tough problems to solve as revenue shrinks, budgets get slashed and your market is in Lockdown. All eyes are on you. And you're feeling as if there is no ground beneath your feet. You have no idea what to do next.

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Although your instinct might be to find answers fast, that's precisely the opposite of what's needed. Give yourself a moment. Pause to move faster.<sup>1</sup> Pausing while remaining engaged can give the space for clear judgment; original thinking; and speedy, purposeful action. It can also open up space for you to co-create with your team. You don't need to have the answers. You need to create an environment where your team can join you in new ways of thinking about the situation. This is a time of 'two heads are better than one'.

## The Power of Saying 'I Don't Know'<sup>2</sup>

You might feel that as a founder and leader you need to have the answers. Having a solution to a challenge or a quick answer to a question is satisfying. But there are downsides to you having that immediate answer. If you are always quick to solve problems for others, you aren't enabling your teams to learn how to solve them. You aren't allowing space for new ideas, and you aren't allowing leaders at all levels to take ownership. In short, you're sucking the oxygen out of the fire that forges a culture of creativity and intelligence necessary for taking on hard challenges.

The process of changing this approach starts with a simple response. Next time you're given an inquiry, respond with, "I don't know, what do you think?" In doing so, you're helping your business and the teams around you to become more effective. You are showing them that it is okay not to know everything.

It is unrealistic to expect anyone to know the answer to anything. We all understand that in our daily lives. Yet, when questions are posed in work settings, many founders and leaders feel compelled to have immediate answers. This sets unrealistic expectations. And there is a good chance the immediate answer is wrong. Slower thinking evokes parts of our brains more able to solve complex, novel problems. (Like the ones your business is facing in the current crisis!). A firm answer also closes the door to possibilities and new angles that comes from discussing challenges, both in terms of solution quality and team alignment. Pausing and asking what others think sends the example that real leadership means knowing what you know, and what you don't know. This creates a sense of transparency and provides an opportunity for others to speak up and out.

So. Embrace your ignorance. Good, fresh ideas can come from anywhere. Particularly in the uncharted world we're currently living and leading in. Listening—and thinking—from a place of not knowing is a critical means of encouraging the discovery of original, unexpected, breakthrough ideas.

## Set direction, not destination

At the moment solutions are rarely straightforward. Instead of telling your team to move from point A to point B, join them in a journey toward an image of the future that sparks inspiration.

Lead yourself and your team with purposeful vision, not just achievements. Instead of asking "What will we achieve?" ask "How will we know that we are being successful... beyond targets and metrics?"

## Create Space for Ideation

A founder and leader who answers every question can (even unintentionally) shift their team into constant execution mode, killing new ideas before they can emerge. It can create the perspective that their ideas don't count and that they don't have a role to play in charting new territory. Pausing to open space for potential solutions and to explore ideas provides people at every level the ability to contribute and teaches them to assess multiple courses of action. Your stepping back can help the team to step forward and assess existing and new approaches using attributes like cost, feasibility, impact, and schedule to prioritise and initiate the best approach (not just the one that's familiar). Expanding the space for contribution teaches teammates how priorities and decisions are made. It empowers and grows them. It creates a multiplier effect.

## Share Ownership of Outcomes

Being collaborative in how you build solutions and co-create answers to tough problems helps you to live aspects of your organisational culture that and your values. (Think about your culture code. Does it include team work? Collaboration? Innovation? This is all of those in action). It also provides the opportunity for teammates to invest more in the process of creating solutions and outcomes. That investment spreads responsibility throughout the organisation, establishing new formal and informal leaders, and increasing the likelihood of lasting positive outcomes. This diffusion is of great benefit to the team members because they feel more in control of their future. It also helps you - who can feel that the pursuit of success is shared. You don't have to do it all alone.

## Prioritise Your Time on High Impact Items

Once you are able to distribute problem solving, you will be able to re-allocate your time on and focus on higher-impact and higher-value issues. This is not an allowance to push work off onto teammates; rather, it is a call to entrust your team members and peer leaders to do their jobs, share their insights and knowledge. And grow. Focusing on driving priorities also keeps your focus where it should be - on being the visionary, strategist, and guide for the organisation.

Reinforcing the ability of your team to solve problems and implement solutions will make you a more effective and more respected leader. You'll be able to focus on strategic and long-term impacts. And you'll be modelling the incredible power of opening yourself up to knowledge and insight through a simple admission of not knowing every answer.

## Test your solutions - and yourself

This is the time to use the insights and ideas from your team and make a number of small, experimental bets. Quick, cheap failures can avert major, costly disasters. This fundamental Silicon Valley tenet is as true for you as it is for your company. Thinking of yourself as a living laboratory helps make the task of leading an agile, ever-shifting company exciting instead of terrifying.

## Tool

Observe yourself. How often do you jump in with a fast and certain answer? What impact does this have - on you? On the team? Notice how they react. Notice how it feels for you.

Experiment with:

- Pausing. Slowing your thinking.
- Saying I don't know. What do you think?
- Creating space for ideation in all meetings.
- Focusing on setting direction, not destination.
- Listening deeply to all ideas. Not rushing to dismiss them. Playing around with possibilities.
- Linking a more collaborative approach to your values and your culture code.
- Noticing the impact on shared ownership.
- Noticing the impact when you focus on higher value priorities.

Share your observations with a 'buddy' coach. Rate your progress on a scale out of ten. Ask them to stretch and challenge you to do more of what's working; and to explore how you could do this better. Set a goal to grow this ability to collaborate and co-create with your team.

## We're not alone. We were never meant to be.

You'll start seeing that you're not alone in this. You were never meant to be. These challenging times have catapulted you into a world of 'not knowing'. Embrace your ignorance. It will open up a universe of new possibilities.

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### Endnotes

1. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-organization-blog/leaders-its-ok-to-not-know-everything>
2. <https://www.govloop.com/community/blog/the-most-effective-leaders-embrace-the-power-of-not-knowing/>





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