

THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTES FOR BUILDING TRUST IN COMPANIES ARE TREATING EMPLOYEES WELL, OFFERING HIGH QUALITY PRODUCTS, AND LISTENING TO CUSTOMERS. EMPLOYEES ARE VIEWED AS THE MOST CREDIBLE SPOKESPEOPLE FOR BUSINESS, AS TRUST IN THE C-SUITE AND BOARDROOM CONTINUES TO DECLINE.

Australian Institute of
Company Directors



Leading in a Crisis: Lessons in Leadership

written by Karen van Geelen

This is the first in a series of articles that explores the challenges and successes experienced by public sector leaders as they lead through crisis and pivot their teams to new ways of working.

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COVID-19 has proven to be the ultimate disruption that brought the future of work crashing into our living rooms with neither invitation nor warning. It has tested the skills of even the most experienced leaders, demanding they become overnight experts in managing remote and flexible teams, and redefined what it means to be an agile workforce. I often find that when I introduce the topic of managing flexible work arrangements and remote teams, the most pressing concern is how to manage performance, or trust a person to do their job when you can't see what they're doing.

COVID-19 made virtual work teams an imperative and with these mechanisms at play, I sought to better understand the impacts of remote work arrangements on public sector workplaces.

Trust and compassion

I asked one senior executive who leads a branch responsible for delivering corporate functions in a Commonwealth government agency what they had done to overcome this challenge. They described their agency as having a traditional approach to work arrangements. Flexible work arrangements were an option, but they were frequently regarded with suspicion and bias around how performance would be managed. The transition to remote working arrangements challenged all of those assumptions. Trust is an important tenant of their leadership style and this experience has reinforced that when leaders demonstrate trust by giving employees autonomy to do their jobs, they are sending a strong message that people are valued. They found that not only was underperformance a non-issue but productivity increased; the question is no longer why, but why not work remotely?

Fiona Scotney is an Associate Director for the Australian National University's (ANU) Sir Roland Wilson Foundation[1]. Fiona describes her role as being responsible for creating the conditions to allow the team to rise to their best selves. These conditions have been challenged multiple times this year; in January smoke from the ACT's Ororral Valley fires, and then a severe hailstorm led to the closure of the ANU campus on two occasions and required workers to work remotely. By the time COVID-19 impacted, Fiona felt that her team had already had a taster of what was to come.

Compassion is not religious business, it is human business, it is not luxury, it is essential for our own peace and mental stability, it is essential for human survival.

Dalai Lama

[1] The Sir Roland Wilson Foundation builds public policy capability and leadership through postgraduate scholarships, professional development and networking opportunities.

[2] Title page: Trust in Crisis, 2017, The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer, Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Fiona reflects that she had to change her leadership style when her team transitioned to remote and flexible working arrangements. She aspires to lead with integrity, honesty and compassion but in the midst of these disasters compassion became the most important factor.

She reflects that she had to be intentional (clear and purposeful) and encourage compassion within the team, because everyone was faced with different challenges. To accommodate family commitments, flexibility also became an important element of the transition as workers were given the autonomy to complete their work when they were available to do so, rather than during traditional core hours. Fiona observed that although the team has had to adjust to a change in pace, people have generally been more productive at home.

Trust and compassion align with Interaction's commitment to authentic leadership and our leadership programs build capability in leaders so they have the courage to lead with confidence and self-belief. When posed with a question such as how do you manage performance when you can't see what a person is doing? I encourage leaders to reflect on their role in enabling people to work to their best potential; the leadership they role model today will be reflected in the leaders of tomorrow.

Contact us if you want more information

If you would like to learn more about leading in crisis the team at Interaction have extensive expertise in leadership development, wellbeing, facilitation, coaching and consulting. Contact us on us on 02 6282 9111 or email icg@interactionconsulting.com.au or visit www.interactionconsulting.com.au.



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