



## Leadership and Trust During Covid-19



The current COVID-19 pandemic is presenting business leaders with some very difficult decisions.

At times like these, there is an even greater spotlight on the actions and behaviours of those leading businesses. Here, we look at the key issues leaders need to keep in mind to avoid damaging their reputation and losing trust.

Do your employees trust you? What is your reputation with customers? Shockingly, in recent research I had carried out of 2,100 employees in the UK, 69% said they didn't fully trust their CEOs.

This survey was carried out just before the current crisis, which has put a spotlight on the ethics and morality of leaders more than ever before. People are dying so there is a heightened emotional response to the actions of leaders.

You will have seen some terrible examples of leaders getting it wrong;

- Britannia Hotels sacked employees without notice and made them homeless on the same day.
- Tim Martin of Wetherspoons threatened not to pay his staff,
- Mike Ashley of Sports Direct tried to go against the Government's advice to keep their shops open.

I didn't have to search to find these examples, all of them are imprinted on my memory and will negatively impact on customers returning to them.

As a small company owner, you will also be making decisions that will have long term repercussions for the success of your business.

I have even heard of small companies trying to access Government money by committing fraud (e.g. putting employees on furlough, then expecting them to 'volunteer' for a related consultancy business).

It is a stressful time but sacrificing the trust of your team, or the reputation of your business, is not worth doing for temporary financial gains.

What are the issues you need to consider at this extraordinary time?

## **1. Don't ignore your reputation**

When the survival of the business is at stake, it is easy to forget the long-term reputation of the business. However, what you do now, how you act during this time of crisis, will shape the way your employees and customers think of you once things are back to normal.

Leaders who treat staff with respect and help their communities during this challenging time will be remembered. Employees will feel more loyal to them and customers will return. This is temporary, business will return to normal. The damage to your reputation of a harsh decision may be permanent.

## 2. Work hard at communication

The ability to use technology to communicate with teams has been the saviour for many businesses. However, the absence of face to face contact is a major loss for effective communication.

Conferencing technology does help, but you still need to pay attention to the emotional connection you will be missing.

One to one calls with team members are needed as is close attention to what is being said. Who is struggling, who needs additional support, what are they not saying? Sat alone in front of a screen, without being able to quickly off load small issues, can mean that employees' worries grow and fester.

## 3. Manage the pressure

The crisis has produced a period of instability in business never experienced before. It is hoped that there is a huge surge in demand once life goes back to normal. However, for most businesses, the key to survival right now is to focus on stabilising the company and not piling on the pressure.

If you're feeling additional pressure, try not to pass that on to your team. Find and use a mentor.

## 4. Treat people with compassion

The people in your business are living in a harrowing time. They and the people they love are being threatened by a potentially fatal illness and some will lose family or friends and not even be allowed to attend their funerals. You will need to manage that sensitively. Lives come first.

In addition, working from home will present different people with different challenges. Some will be struggling with managing children and those who are single may be struggling with loneliness. If you don't show that you recognise their humanity, your people will mentally or physically leave you.

## 5. Think differently

At a time of crisis, whether that's a war or a recession, people are most likely to innovate. We're already seeing that with the current crisis. Business leaders are finding new ways to deliver their services and in many cases these will represent additional revenue streams when life returns to normal. There may also be opportunities for improving your reputation by helping your community that will deliver longer term rewards.

Don't be afraid of asking your team for help with this innovation. You may find an ingenious way for improving your cash flow and your team will feel proud to work for you if they can see that you're giving back at this difficult time.

## 6. Review your strategy

These are unique times. It is unlikely that your business strategy included a plan for such an event. You should therefore review your organisational resilience and long-term financial performance against the current circumstances.

Where do you want to be in a year's time post Covid-19 crisis? Adapt your business plan and make sure you involve and communicate this with employees. Even knowing you have a new plan and can see the road ahead still, will inspire your employees to trust you as a leader.

### About the author

This article has been written exclusively for ByteStart by Geoff Hudson-Searle, a serial business advisor, CSuite Executive and Non-Executive Director to growth-phase tech companies. Geoff has over 28 years of experience in the international business and management arena. [Purposeful Discussions](#) is book 5 in his popular business series.

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