



# Four Lessons on Leadership with a COVID Twist

The transition back to life and work after the COVID-19 pandemic is going to be a tricky one. People are scared. Folks have gotten used to working from home. School schedules remain inconsistent which means childcare problems persist. And many of us are still in mourning, grappling with losses of the past year. Not to mention the “COVID Mullet” — business casual on top and pajamas on the bottom — is going to be hard to shake.

Moments like these demand strong and thoughtful leadership, along with careful change management. So I thought I'd share my four leadership rules to live by, with a COVID twist. And in no particular order.

1. Good leaders ask questions. I learned early on that the best answer to a question from a subordinate is “what do you think?” When our employees and/or staff come to us with questions or problems, it's safe to assume before they brought the challenge to us they chewed on it some themselves. When working on back to office/school plans, start with a question. “What do you need to get back to the office?” or “How is going back to school going to impact your life and/or, how's your life going to impact going back to school?” Logistical questions are key so reports and employees don't feel like their needs aren't an issue. Questions about how they feel are equally important. “How are you feeling about getting back to campus” and “What if any concerns do you have?” message to our reports, our employees, that we care about them and their lives — and see them as people.

2. Intentions matter. But they only matter if you share them. Explaining to your reports and those in the organization your rationale, what's behind the decisions you make,

will go a long way to establishing buy-in. An old friend and colleague used to say, "Don't hide the ball." Transparency and honesty doesn't mean you have to share everything you're thinking about, working on or considering with your entire staff. But when you do see a change coming, and going back to the office/school/etc. certainly qualifies as a change, share your whys. When we lead and want others to follow, being clear about why we're asking people to do things is the best approach.

3. Say please and thank you. But mostly, just be nice. Kindness, generosity, and an understanding that people live lives outside of work will ultimately make you a more successful and effective leader. Leadership is most often measured by the performance of subordinates – a leader's job is to create the conditions for her team to be successful. Showing a staff that you appreciate them, not with occasional gifts but rather with a consistently pleasant affect and approachability will garner you a lot of goodwill and respect. When we feel valued, when we feel honored and important, we perform at our best. I like to encourage managers to think about the ratio of corrections to affirmations. For every correction an individual needs seven or nine or even more affirmations which establish a foundation of trust people need in order to really listen to something critical, and not feel criticized. Take a couple days and conduct an affirmation experiment — how much do you offer to your team?

4. Model — be the change you wish to see. When we ask our reports to do things or work in ways we don't want to ourselves, our leadership is compromised. That means if you're asking people to work overtime, make sure you're putting in that extra time yourself. If you're sending out a communication, make sure it's polished. Sloppy emails, unclear policies, and processes that haven't been well considered are all examples of behaviors supervisors and managers consider unacceptable by their reports but are often guilty of themselves. And that goes for attitudes as well as behaviors. If you want your team to support each other, collaborate and trust one another; it starts with you. If you expect professionalism and an attention to detail, you are the best example of what that looks like for your team. So model it. Model commitment and dedication. Model professionalism and accountability. And model compassion and empathy. We

all want our work to challenge us as well as support us. If your hope is to be able to lean on people in a pinch, start by doing that for others.

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