

Creating Calm in Trying Times

By Michele Holleran, PhD, MBA

Many leaders in aging services organizations across the country are facing challenges revolving around panic, rumors and tense nerves. Employees are scared of losing their jobs, residents are giving money to needy relatives to their own disadvantage, and organizations fret about their investments and stalled building projects.

It is a scary time and everyone is looking for answers. In truth, the best leaders don't pretend to have those answers. The best leaders are transparent, show authentic care for others and admit that they don't know exactly how the mess will be solved. Instead of having all the answers, they employ tried and true behaviors that calm everyone down so that solid thinking can prevail. How exactly do they convey calm in the midst of turmoil?

COMMUNICATE PROACTIVELY

This takes some time, but it circumvents problems down the road. Leaders who meet one-on-one with their team members, listening to their concerns and responding honestly to those concerns without sugarcoating the truth, can usually help even the most panicked individuals weather the storm successfully.

Take the example of the coworker who is overextended and faces more debt than he can handle. Just talking about this problem helps. Outlining options with another rational person who the coworker respects can be helpful in times like these. And suggesting helpful resources is even better. By opening up a frank discussion, the leader invites a two-way conversation, which can be very comforting.

Team meetings during time of turmoil can also be reassuring, as long as the meetings are positive and productive. Working on problems as a team is very gratifying and teaches people the collective power of a team versus an individual. By working together in problem identification and solving, teams feel a sense of control over their destiny, even if the control is just limited to one department.

Fighting the rumor mill is a tough job, but it can be done. Regular memos, hallway conversations, using the grapevine to spread the truth, publishing informal daily newsletters, posting notices on bulletin boards and using the payroll envelope to your advantage are all effective tools in communicating to employees what is happening and why. In one facility I know, the installation of new carpet created a rumor that the board had decided to sell the place, when, in reality, management was simply replacing a carpet that had mold and mildew throughout it. How simple would it have been to proactively inform everyone why the new carpet was going in?

As for residents, they will be much more receptive to troubling news if it is delivered in a calm, timely and matter-of-fact fashion. After all, this generation remembers the Depression. They are used to making sacrifices and accepting decisions with grace, as long as those in charge have the decency to share the truth and not hide behind closed doors.

ENCOURAGE HEALTHY BEHAVIOR

Leaders have a strong influence on their followers, especially when they have garnered the respect of those individuals. Once you have an employee's respect, a leader's example and

advice are usually heeded. If the leader demonstrates calm, it is likely the co-workers will eventually mimic that behavior. It is like a domino effect.

How does a leader get into a calm, centered place at work? By doing good things for herself when not at work—such as eating as healthy as possible, making exercise a priority and surrounding herself with positive individuals. Leaders who learn how to manage themselves are more likely to successfully manage others. By exuding a centered sense of calm, others become calm. Followers look to leaders for cues constantly. If the leader seems panicked, annoyed, worried or otherwise distracted, followers pick up on that and follow suit. Modeling a grounded approach is the single most important thing a leader can do during times of uncertainty and turbulence.

Too much caffeine, sugar, alcohol, lack of sleep or an obsession with the bad news on the evening broadcast is a recipe for jumpy behavior and anxiety-prone activity. This is not to say the leader should be out of touch with larger world events, but rather, should resist the tendency to let those events translate into foul moods. Good leaders are consistent, not moody. They stay upbeat and positive. As my late grandmother was fond of saying, it is very important to “brighten the corner where you are.” In doing so, the leader conveys hope for the future.

Overworking and over concern with tasks and problem-solving are temptations that leaders face. Choose instead to spend more time taking a Sabbath day to yourself, working on relationships, helping others sort through their fears and simply wandering the halls and offices of those you work with. Remember to offer a kind word, a helpful suggestion and a ray of sunshine through a smile to others.

CELEBRATE SMALL VICTORIES

There is a song from the Broadway Show and movie “Mame” that goes like this: “We need a little Christmas, right this very moment ...” and this sentiment is apropos to our situation right now. It is important to create space for celebration and happiness in the midst of turbulence and uncertainty. Impromptu pizza parties to acknowledge a team’s achievement of a certain goal or a co-worker’s victory over cancer go a long way in conveying a sense of normalcy.

Looking for reasons to lift others up will cause employees to want to come to work, resist the urge to pull the covers up over their heads and skip a day, and create an environment where others want to contribute to the solution, not the problem. A spirit of camaraderie and shared responsibility comes from bonding moments.

And while everyone could use the extra money right now that organizations are lacking, finding creative ways to reward the positive efforts of others makes good business sense. In my own company this year, for instance, we couldn’t give bonuses, but we were able to give folks a couple extra days off over the holidays as a way of saying thanks for a job well done this year.

REMEMBER THE MISSION

Now, more than ever, it is important to maintain focus and drive in fulfilling our organizational missions. Mission motivates many employees, especially when they understand how their particular job connects to the mission. Being a “sense maker” is the duty of leaders. Helping others to connect the dots, supporting them in their career goals and dreams (even in small ways) and providing new opportunities that move things forward can be powerful motivators at a time when doom and gloom is everywhere in the atmosphere.

The concept of living in the moment while building for the greater good is important for the leader to convey, and more importantly, to personally model. Remaining optimistic that the

mission can be achieved despite formidable obstacles is something good leaders do. Avoiding the downward spiral of learned helplessness and a victim mentality is the key to staying the course with the mission and helping others contribute to its fulfillment.

As a companion to mission, the organizational values should drive all decision-making and act as a beacon of light during dark times. Staying steadily true to mission and values help others in their search for true north and personal meaning.

LEADERSHIP IS A STATE OF BEING

Some older leadership models emphasize authoritative and transactional behavior in times of uncertainty, subscribing to the outdated notion that a leader who is firmly in charge, has all the answers and knows the exact direction to head is the leader who reassures others. That's not true in today's uncertain environment.

Employees are smart enough to know that one person cannot be their hero in troubled times. Instead, it is the collective wisdom of teams and departments that will help our aging services organizations find the answers, and that the in-the-trenches leaders are ones who have as much wisdom to offer as those at the top.

Leadership is not about position, it is about passion. Leadership is a state of being—a calm presence in the midst of turbulent seas. There will be times when leaders must take the helm and make a quick decision and this is occasionally appropriate, but more often than not, it is the leader's reassuring presence that makes followers feel like things are in good hands.

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