

How to Lead When Nothing is Normal

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What began as a major disruption has become a way of life. Not permanently, but for an open-ended and unknown duration of time.

COVID-19 has changed our world.

- Remember when shaking someone's hand was normal?
- Remember when sitting in a packed movie theater or crowded concert was a fun night out?
- Remember when masks were only worn by bank robbers and superheroes?

That was only five months ago! There's a lot of talk about the "new normal," and yet few can define it or describe it because it keeps changing faster than we can adapt.

I don't believe leaders fear change. However, when change can't be led, we can experience a destabilizing effect. When we're not leading change, because it is leading us, we naturally desire to get back out in front and lead again.

That doesn't mean we "can't" lead; it means that leadership as we have known it has been challenged. What was predictable is no longer predictable. It does mean that we can and should always start our leadership at a foundational level based on hope, encouragement, faith, and simply taking the next step.

As leaders, we don't have to have all the answers; we just need to know the next step and have the courage to take it. This is not the time to give up, your business needs you more than ever, *but as a leader, you do get to be human.*

5 Ways to Help You Lead When Nothing Is Normal:

1) Desiring "normal" is human, expecting it will get you in trouble.

What is normal? We typically consider normal as a relatively set pattern of living that, for the most part, we enjoy. It's not without its ups and downs and problems to solve, but there's enough predictability that life feels stable.

To *desire* that is normal. To *expect* that is not going to help you or those you lead. Expecting normal right now is like seeing a tidal wave coming at you and thinking you'll go surfing. That may be a bit over-dramatic, but it's a good picture.

You get to pray for the life you desire, but you must lead through the life you have. I pray every day that God will shut down the coronavirus and heal the sick. But I must lead in the reality of the virus. The big idea is that your leadership will help you create that better reality for those you lead and for you too.

2) Don't merely surrender to a new normal; help create it.

Let's take this idea of desiring normal, even a new normal, a little further. It's important, to be honest about what you want, but you must get real about what you can have. You can have *almost anything* you want, but you can't have *everything* you want. That's instructive in how we lead, pray, and live our lives.

That requires insight and discernment to know how to make the right decisions. There is no value in surrendering to circumstances; if you do, you abandon hope. Here's a better direction. See your vision for a better life within the reality we live in, then do your best to shape a new reality. You can't do it all, but you can make a difference.

Here's how I think it works. If enough Christian business leaders consistently make biblical decisions that honor God and are in the best interest of others, eventually, that wins. Every leader counts.

Think of it this way; what we are doing *is* normal. We are leading change, solving problems, and helping people. That's what leaders have always done. We are just doing it in arguably the most complex times we've known in the last fifty to seventy-five years or more. We should not surrender to a new normal; instead, we get to help shape it.

3) Get focused and fierce about what you *can* do.

There is much you can't change, so focus on what you can change. You can't surf a tidal wave, but you can get in the water and make some waves that bring momentum. Here are three practical ways to help you and your team do what you can do.

A) Concentrate on mission-centered small wins.

Again, start your leadership thinking and conversation with what you can do. Make a shortlist. Among those options, what is God blessing? What's working? What could you do to push it across the goal line with a concentrated leadership effort?

Do that! And make sure you tell your employees! Thank God and celebrate the win. Don't worry if it's a small win; celebrate it!

B) Practice option thinking.

I'm still fond of a leadership expression that says, "No plan B." I like the spirit of that idea, but I don't like its lack of reality. Options thinking, sometimes called contingency thinking, is not the same as selling out. It's not "hedging your bet." It's smart leadership.

Options thinking is like playing chess instead of checkers. It's about thinking ahead.

C) Focus on the next step.

When leading in times of disruption, making detailed plans that span a couple of years or so is a waste of time.

Your *vision* should span three to five years or longer, but in this season, your plan is best implemented by knowing a few possible smart next moves, (like chess), and pick the next best step you can make. Then quickly evaluate the results, make any needed adjustments, and make your next best move.

4) Paddle harder.

When you're on vacation and out on a calm lake in a canoe, you can paddle casually. When the water gets rough, you paddle harder to gain forward motion. There is nothing casual about leading right now. Some leaders feel paralyzed because they think there is nothing they can do, so they lead casual or passively. That not only won't realize any progress, but that approach actually loses ground.

Similar to when you're on the lake, and the water gets really rough, it won't help if you panic. Desperate leaders often make poor decisions. Paddling harder is still about thinking strategically, not paddling frantically.

5) Remember what you believe.

When you experience stress, pressure, and challenges greater than you know what to do with, remember what you believe. That will help you get through any difficult season.

Here's what I mean; in fact, this is what I practice. When things are really tough, I take extra time to reflect on and gain strength from:

A) My belief in my calling.

There are some seasons in leadership when everything seems uphill. In those times, I remember that God called me to do what I'm doing, and He specifically placed me where I'm serving. That gives me tremendous confidence.

B) My belief in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Knowing that God is with me, not just loves me, and I'm going to heaven, but He is actually *with me* in this, reminds me that His power is available. Intellectually, you know God's presence and power is within you, but it doesn't *always* feel that way, right? Or you maybe sense God is with you, but the results seem meager.

I read scripture, pray, and soak on the truth of the Holy Spirit's power. Then lead knowing that power is available and activated by my faith.

C) My belief that I'm not alone.

Even with my calling and God's power, I'm human. And I'm relationally oriented. (Most of us are.) The thought of doing this alone is, well, not fathomable.

How about you? You may be in a small business or a large business, and you can still feel alone. The good news is that you only need one person to lock eyes with you and say, "I'm in this with you; let's do this." If you have 3, 5, 17, or 40 employees with you, you are blessed! Thank God for them.

If you truly feel alone in your leadership, there are two things you can do.

- Ask God to guide you to one leader.
- Ask for their help.

I'm confident one leader will rise up to help you, and never underestimate the impact of one more leader.