

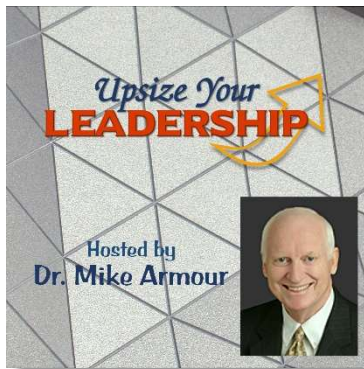
# Leading in Times of Uncertainty

## *Five Survival Tips for Leaders*

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

**Episode UYL2007**

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If there is one word to describe the American landscape at the moment, it's "uncertainty." We've just hit the two-week mark in the shutdown of the U.S. economy due to the corona virus pandemic. Questions abound. How long will the shutdown last? What businesses will fail as a result of it? How many jobs have been permanently lost? How long will it take for the country to recover?

Uncertainty is everywhere. And leaders are caught in the middle of it. They are asked to move forward when the road ahead is poorly defined, to say the least.

All of this can take a serious toll on the psyche and spirit of a leader. In today's episode I want to step into the midst of that uncertainty and offer leaders and managers five practical tips for maintaining their own psychological and emotional well-being at a time like this. Taking care of yourself is a prime priority, because these times of confusion call on you to Upsize Your Leadership.

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A few years ago, on a three-hour flight, I found myself seated beside a serial entrepreneur. He had founded several of the nation's best-known restaurant chains. I seized on this time with him to learn his secrets of success.

At one point I asked, "What's the single greatest shortfall which you see in the performance of managers?" His immediate response was, "The inability to maintain momentum in the midst of ambiguity." His comment struck me as profoundly insightful. And I've repeated it hundreds of times in trainings and coaching sessions.

For today's leader, change is coming at an unprecedented and accelerating pace. The faster that change occurs, the more unsettled things become. And the more that things are unsettled, the greater the uncertainty around decision-making.

If that's true in the ordinary pattern of business, it's doubly-true when the change is disruptive. And if the corona virus has been anything, it has been disruptive. It has disrupted travel. It has

disrupted supply chains. It has disrupted work conditions. There's hardly a facet of life that it has not touched.

Everywhere you turn, there is ambiguity. How do you build and maintain momentum, to use the entrepreneur's word, in the face of such uncertainty?

Let me offer some practical thoughts on that matter. I'm not drawing these from any pace-setting research or some epoch-making, breakthrough study. They come from my own personal experience. When I was 37, I was thrown into a leadership role which was fraught with uncertainty from day one. That year I became president of a small liberal arts college which was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

The campus had gone two years without a president. During that time, fund-raising had cratered. Adding to the financial woes, enrollment had dropped 30% in the same period. The day that I arrived on campus, the payables which were 90-days overdue came to 22% of the school's annual operating budget. Much of that balance was in the form of back salaries for faculty who had not seen a full paycheck in six months.

The only thing which was certain was that every day would bring a new cashflow crisis. Four years later, when I left in exhaustion, we had at least re-established enrollment and stabilized the finances. But fund-raising remained so precarious that the very survival of the school was in question. From beginning to end, I never escaped uncertainty.

Over the past two weeks, as I've listened to leaders, managers, and business owners, I've recognized that what I learned from that experience as a college president could be helpful to them right now. So, let me touch on five lessons which I learned during that era of my life.

First, don't lose faith in yourself. One reason that you are in your role is because you have a high sense of responsibility. Therefore, when things go wrong in your sphere of oversight, you feel personal responsible for correcting them. In times like these, however, many things are beyond correction. They are beyond repair. You merely have to plow ahead, confident that your persistence and doggedness will pay off in the end.

Still, it's hard not to question your own capability as a leader when your people are hurting and your organization is in disarray. Your self-talk turns to statements like, "We would not be in this situation if I had exercised greater foresight." Or, "If I were a better leader, I'm sure that we would be out of this predicament by now." You start wallowing in regret over past decisions. You find yourself second-guessing your current decisions. You slip into a crisis of confidence.

That's all understandable. But such fault-finding directed at self also indicates a reluctance to accept one's own humanity. Every human being, leaders included, is finite. This means that we are inherently limited in our knowledge, ability, and sagacity. If none of these limitations applied to us, we would be divine, not human.

So, don't expect yourself to exercise divine wisdom and decision-making. Sure, there may be leadership mistakes along the way. But that doesn't make you a poor leader. It makes you a wiser leader. After all, you've learned valuable lessons from those mistakes, haven't you?

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Second, in the absence of clear and decisive data, trust your instincts. Anyone can make a decision when the relevant data is abundant and points in a clear direction. Times of uncertainty rob you of that advantage. They pose scenarios which beg for a decision, but where the unknown lurks menacingly in any choice which you make.

You did not end up in a position of leadership because your instincts are poor. They've served you well in the past. Let them serve you now. Your instincts, after all, are not uninformed. They originate deep in the unconscious mind, which absorbs immensely more information every moment than the rational, conscious mind can begin to process.

Moreover, the unconscious mind is especially skilled at pattern recognition. That's why it can instantly recognize hundreds, if not thousands of different faces. Even in the midst of dilemma, ambiguity, or uncertainty, the unconscious mind sees patterns which escape the conscious mind. And from these patterns it derives courses of action based on experience with similar patterns in the past.

Instincts are born from this very kind of pattern-processing. They may not be based on reasoned, logical analysis of data. But that does not make them unreasonable. They simply spring from a thought process which is beyond the comprehension of the conscious mind with its preference for reason and logic.

Thus, if there is too much ambiguity in the data to make a definitive, rational decision, listen to your instincts. During times of crisis and uncertainty, an instinctual decision is far better than indecision. With an instinctual decision, you at least obtain feedback which you can use to make necessary mid-course corrections or even to reverse course altogether. If you opt for indecision, you get no feedback whatsoever.

And what if your instinctual decision proves wrong? You admit to the mistake, accept it as feedback, and change course. That's what feedback is for. And from this feedback, your instincts will be better informed the next time you draw on them.

Third, avoid needless delay in making a decision, especially when your people are under stress. In the face of difficulty, leaders are charged with maintaining morale and momentum. Both suffer when critical decisions are left in a state of suspension. People who are stressed look to their leaders for a sense of direction, for cues as to what attitudes to adopt, what actions to take. Decisions give them that frame of reference. Without decisions, they are left adrift. Don't let that happen to them.

Leaders who are highly introverted or introspective are particularly prone to undue delays in decision-making. Their need to think things through clearly leaves them uncomfortable with what feels like a rushed decision. Unfortunately, while they put off the decision in order to make themselves more comfortable, their people become increasingly *uncomfortable*. This is one of those places where leadership requires us to get out of our comfort zone in the best interests of our people and our organization.

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Fourth, be transparent about the struggle which goes into difficult decisions. When talking with your people, share the pros and cons of various alternatives which you have considered. Let them see, first hand, that the decision was a difficult one. In addition, don't hesitate to say that because the decision was made in such a vacuum of information, it may turn out to be wrong. Let them know that you are ready to move in a different direction if that proves to be the case.

Now, the counsel which I've just offered may seem somewhat counterintuitive. Someone might argue that in times of stress and uncertainty, people need a leader who is strong and confident; that admitting that a decision might prove wrong fails to convey confident, strong leadership. My experience has been just the opposite. I've found that when people can themselves see the complexity of a decision, they understand why the leader cannot be 100% assured that it's the right one. Further, they view the courage to be so open and straightforward as a sign of the leader's personal strength.

I chose this course of full disclosure early on with the college. As I've mentioned, payrolls had been incomplete – not just late, but incomplete – for half a year. Cash flow prospects did not improve much when, three weeks after I arrived on campus, fall enrollment was the lowest in years. Until we could turn enrollment around, payrolls would be necessarily uncertain.

Every month, therefore, I gathered the faculty and staff and gave them a full disclosure of our cash position, our anticipated income for the next 60 days, and the impact that these factors would likely have on the next two pay cycles. But I would also acknowledge that the assumptions behind these projections could be wrong and that the situation could be more adverse than I anticipated.

When I proposed this approach, my executive team argued strongly against it, fearing that it would destroy morale. Eventually it had just the opposite effect. Because faculty and staff saw our financial challenge in its full complexity, they were more patient when paychecks were a bit short or a few days late. And they became extremely conscientious and creative in helping the school control expenses.

Fifth and finally, hold true to your highest standards, no matter what. Eventually the crisis will pass. Eventually the storm will settle. Looking back afterward, you may well see things which you should have done better, wiser, sooner. I can certainly list dozens of such missteps and missed opportunities during my four years of leading the college.

And when you make this kind of retrospective review, it's hard to avoid occasional pangs of conscience – even some barbed self-criticism at times. The barbs are not so sharp, however, if your retrospective also confirms that through it all, you remained true to the nobler virtues: integrity, truthfulness, self-sacrifice, fair play, respect, compassion, and sincerity, among others.

When leading in times of uncertainty, ambiguity, and distress, your decisions may not always turn out to have been the best ones or even the right ones. But your example and character can consistently be stellar. And the decision to stay true to your standards is the single most important decision you will make in the entire ordeal.

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*Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

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