

Organization Practice

How to demonstrate calm and optimism in a crisis

Six practices can help leaders build their self-awareness and guide their organizations through the challenges ahead.

by Jacqueline Brassey and Michiel Kruyt



The coronavirus outbreak is posing profound challenges to the way we live and work. A crisis of this scale has left many fearful that disruption—personal, financial, societal—is going to be a way of life for some time.

When the path ahead is uncertain, people turn to leaders to help them gain clarity and a grounded hope for a better future. They want someone with a positive vision, who is confident about tackling the problems we all face yet courageous enough to confront uncomfortable truths and admit what they do not know.

What's more, people seek community and safety. Business leaders can underestimate how much their employees look to them for information. To address these needs, leaders should act with deliberate calm and bounded optimism. Those who can visibly demonstrate these qualities help their organizations feel a sense of purpose, giving them hope that they can face the challenges ahead.

But that is hard to do in a crisis, since humans are biologically wired to have a stress response (fight, flight, or freeze) when confronted with volatile environments, unpredictable events, and constant stress.¹

We've written about how leaders can shift their organizations to a crisis footing, from launching nerve centers to creating networks of teams. Here we focus on leaders themselves, and how they can prepare themselves mentally, physically, and emotionally to respond to the pandemic through the months ahead.

To stay calm and optimistic while under such pressure, leaders should practice what we call integrative awareness: being aware of the changing reality in the outside world and how they

are responding emotionally and physically. This intentional practice allows leaders to shift from viewing challenges as roadblocks to seeing them as problems to be solved, and even learned from.

Leading and learning outside your comfort zone

In a crisis, leaders must continuously process large amounts of complex information, contradictory views, and strong emotions. This requires awareness of what happens in the outside world (facts on the ground) *and* in the inside world (body and mind). Concepts in neuroscience that are closely related to this are “*exteroception*” (sensitivity to stimuli originating outside of the body) and “*interoception*” (sensitivity to stimuli originating inside the body).² Effectively connecting situational awareness with self-awareness, our outer world with our inner, is what we call integrative awareness.

In a crisis of uncertainty, this process helps leaders avoid overreacting to challenges or jumping to conclusions just to stop feeling uncomfortable. Developing integrative awareness helps leaders recognize these stress responses as opportunities to pause and reflect before acting,³ giving them the tools to lead with deliberate calm and bounded optimism. When they do that, instinctive biological reactions will start working for them and not against them. Not only will this practice lead to increased effectiveness but it is also essential to managing personal health and energy over a longer period of time.⁴

Deliberate calm: how to steer into the storm

In crisis situations, leaders must make a deliberate choice to practice a calm state of mind. Then they can step back from a fraught or high-stakes situation and choose how to respond, rather than reacting instinctively. These folks become

¹ Stephen W. Porges, *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, Self-regulation*, Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology, New York, NY: W. W. Norton, April 2011; and Aaron L. DeSmet, Ethan Kross, and Walter Mischel, “Self-regulation in the service of conflict resolution,” *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006, p. 294.

² Norman Farb et al., “Interoception, contemplative practice, and health,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, June 9, 2015, Volume 6, Article 763, frontiersin.org.

³ Armita Golkar et al., “Distinct contributions of the dorsolateral prefrontal and orbitofrontal cortex during emotion regulation,” *PLoS One*, November 7, 2012, Volume 7, Number 11, journals.plos.org.

⁴ Sahib S. Khalsa et al., “Interoception and mental health: A roadmap,” *Biological Psychiatry: Cognitive Neuroscience and Neuroimaging*, Elsevier, 2018, Volume 3, Issue 6, pp. 501–13.

comfortable with discomfort and can look at adversity through a new lens. A leader who is deliberately calm realizes that fear, channeled from uncomfortable facts or emotions, offers potentially valuable information and so doesn't get unhinged by it.⁵ Reframing a threat as an opportunity for learning and innovation turns an uncertain situation into one of hope and possibility. Stress can be good if you harness and frame it constructively⁶; it keeps energy levels high and positive even in a crisis environment.

We have seen many examples of entrepreneurial and innovative responses to the coronavirus. These run the gamut from local sports clubs that started delivering meals and universities that digitalized their courses to medical innovations related to ventilators and artificial-intelligence-enabled social services for the unemployed.

Compassion and acceptance for self and others is an essential ingredient for leaders who want to be deliberately calm. It is only human to react impulsively to stressful events. And we may regret this and feel ashamed about it. In these moments it is important for leaders to emphasize self-care and self-compassion. We need to remind ourselves that we cannot change the past, but we can change how we perceive it and how we look to the future. Self-care goes beyond making sure to have a good regimen of sleep, eating, and exercise. It is also about letting up on the self-criticism or perfectionism, to be able to connect with core intentions and purpose. Practicing this yourself also enhances your capacity to be empathetic with others.

Being deliberately calm can have a multiplier effect on communities. How humans are "wired" to share emotional cues has been researched extensively. Leaders' emotions have a big impact on an organization: when a leader is impatient, fearful, or frustrated, people begin to feel the same way, and

their feelings of safety diminish. On the other hand, when a leader is hopeful and calm, the group can face challenges more creatively.

After attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019 killed more than 50 people, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern earned praise for leading her country's response to the worst mass murder in its modern history with deliberate calm and compassion. She has exhibited the same leadership attributes in the current crisis: "I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong," she has said.

Bounded optimism: How to mix confidence and hope with realism

In a crisis, people want leaders to fix things fast. However, in a complex situation like the coronavirus pandemic, familiar answers might not work and could even be counterproductive. Early on, leaders can lose credibility by displaying excessive confidence or by providing simple answers to difficult problems in spite of obviously difficult conditions. It is essential to project confidence that the organization will find its way through the crisis but also show that you recognize its severity. This is authentic confidence⁷—"cheerfulness in the face of adversity," as the British Royal Marines put it. No one wants to follow a pessimist, but they don't want to follow a blind optimist either.

Optimism that springs from authentic values and trust in people's capabilities can be the source of energy for everyone in the organization to move forward. By contrast, optimism without meaning or grounding may lead to disappointment and defeat.

Leaders with bounded optimism practice what we call "meaning making." Meaning helps everyone remember that difficult times and long hours of work serve a purpose. Think of all those healthcare workers focusing on their patients even at great risk

⁵ Steven C. Hayes, PhD, *A Liberated Mind. How to Pivot Toward What Matters*, Avery, August 2019.

⁶ Richard E. Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion* Brighton, MA: Harvard Business Review Press; October 2005.

⁷ Jacqueline Brassey et al., *Advancing Authentic Confidence through Emotional Flexibility: An evidence-based playbook of insights, practices and tools to shape your future*, LuLu, 2019, annekebrouwer.nl.

As human beings, we can practice integrative awareness before, in, and after the moment.

to themselves. Meaning builds confidence, efficacy, and endurance but can also serve as a balm if the outcome is not what was hoped for, because the striving in and of itself was honorable.

The crisis response by Mark Rutte, prime minister of the Netherlands, has won praise for being optimistic yet bounded by realism. In an address in mid-March, he told the Dutch that “My message to you this evening is not an easy one to hear. The reality is that coronavirus is with us and will remain among us for the time being. There is no easy or quick way out of this very difficult situation.” He outlined steps the country would have to take, before closing with this appeal: “With all the uncertainties out there, one thing is absolutely clear: the challenge we face is enormous, and all 17 million of us will have to work together to overcome it. Together we will get through this difficult period. Take care of each other. I’m counting on you.”

In times of crisis, a leader’s role in creating meaning only grows. Leaders should remember that they are always visible, even if they are not seen in person, and that their authentic role modeling of the organization’s purpose is essential.⁸

Leaders with bounded optimism leverage meaning and personal stories to build connections. In this crisis, when many of us are isolated at home, distress is increasing. As human beings we need to connect and engage with others in a positive way

to stay mentally and physically healthy. Employees want to hear a leader’s vision for how to respond to the crisis, and they also want to connect at a personal level. Video-enabled “town halls” offer a perfect opportunity for leaders to convey what’s on their mind to the broader organization and find out what is keeping everyone awake at night.

Putting integrative awareness into practice

As human beings, we can practice integrative awareness before, in, and after the moment. Beforehand, we can visualize the expected external event and our potential internal response. After the event, we can reflect and process the experience, let go of stress, and gain insight. In the moment, we can observe ourselves while having the experience and regulate our behavior at the same time.

Captain Chesley Sullenberger brought the process of integrative awareness alive when he landed his commercial plane in the Hudson River in 2009. After a bird strike cut both engines of his commercial flight soon after takeoff, Captain Sullenberger demonstrated the ability to stay calm while facing fear. Instead of returning to the airport as air traffic controllers were advising, he paused and assessed that he couldn’t make it, landing instead in the river and saving the lives of all on board. The balancing of emotions with a rational and deliberate thought process is something scientists call metacognition.⁹

⁸ J. Brassey-Schouten, “Leadership and diversity effectiveness in a large multinational organisation,” University of Groningen, SOM research school, 2011, rug.nl.

By practicing internal awareness on two levels (having the experience and observing it at the same time), you can catch early signals of distress, doubt, or fear without acting out a stress response. This is especially critical in times of crisis. While we can never be purely objective, we can try to reach that state as much as possible. Without objective awareness, signals of distress can trigger 'survival' behavior, and we lose the ability to pause, reflect, and decide. For a leader during crisis, this survival state can present a huge risk, and in the case of Captain Sullenberger, it would have been fatal.

In a crisis, some leaders react to complex problems with polarizing opinions, quick fixes, false promises, or overly simplistic answers, often combined with a command-and-control leadership style. They lose their ability to be in dialogue, to continuously adapt, and to look for novel solutions. In a situation where their experience falls short, but without the ability to practice integrative awareness, they may be guided by their fear and resort to habitual responses, often unconsciously biased, to unfamiliar problems.

Another risk of not being aware of our internal world is found in "sacrifice syndrome"⁹: leaders who face constant pressure do not find time to take care of themselves, leading to reduced effectiveness and exhaustion.

The Dutch minister for medical care, Bruno Bruins, showed this danger when he collapsed in Parliament in mid-March during a debate on the coronavirus. Bruins said he was suffering from exhaustion after weeks of nonstop crisis management, and later decided to quit his post.

Six steps for leaders

Here are six practices that leaders can follow to develop their integrative awareness. While they may seem straightforward and commonsensical, too often leaders don't follow them, thinking they'll worry about themselves after the crisis has passed. That won't work in the current context.

1. Adapt your personal operating model

Your priorities, your roles, your time, and your energy are all elements of the way you operate on a daily basis (exhibit). Create an operating model that can act as your compass, especially in a crisis that is expected to last for some time. As the coronavirus emerged as a threat, we saw that many leaders went into overdrive, working around the clock to respond effectively. It was only after some time had passed that most started to build more of a structure into their lives.

Ask yourself: How does your personal operating model align with the changes in your work life right now? What does this mean for how you operate with your direct leadership team? What does this mean for how you engage with your family? What are your "non-negotiables" in this model (for example, sufficient sleep, regular exercise, meditation practice, and healthy food)?

2. Set your intention

Take a few minutes at the start of the day to go through your agenda, identify high-stakes topics, and set an intention for what you want to accomplish and how you want the experience to unfold. Many people do this as a visualization exercise, like a Formula One driver imagining driving the circuit before a race. This enables you to predict "emotional hot spots" and provides a bulwark against reactive thinking.¹¹ What challenges, curveballs or brutal facts might you have to face, and what possible opportunities can you expect? How do you intend to stay focused on what matters most? How do you intend to react emotionally? What are your non-negotiables and where can you give ground? Also reflect on the outcomes and experiences for others. How will your actions affect other people?

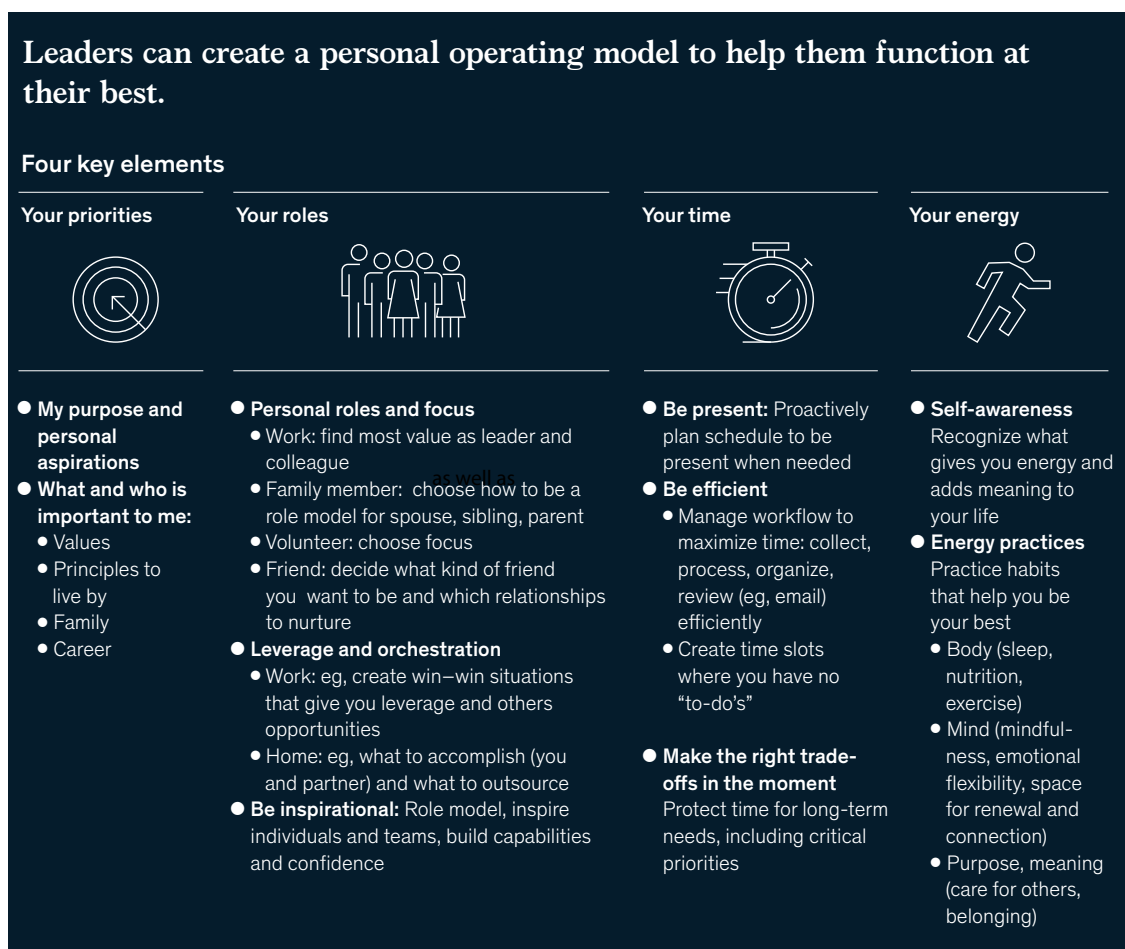
3. Regulate your reactions

While in a stressful situation during the day, observe your emotions so you can recognize the stress response, taking a pause to assess the situation and engage your "rational mind" before choosing how to respond.

⁹ Jonah Lehrer, "Sully's 'deliberate calm,'" *Los Angeles Times*, January 17, 2009, latimes.com.

¹⁰ Richard E. Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion*, Brighton, MA: Harvard Business Review Press; October 2005.

¹¹ Inge Schweiger Gallo and Peter M. Gollwitzer, "Implementation intentions: Control of fear despite cognitive load," *Psicothema*. 2007, Volume 19, Number 2, pp. 280–5, psicothema.com.



Let's say you are asked a question on a town-hall videoconference about a matter you had not prepared for. What do you do when fear takes over and your nervous system starts to react? The most natural (and counterproductive) reaction is to try to avoid the issue. But even if you pause very briefly to take in the atmosphere, you can respond effectively.

One leader recounted a situation in which she was passionately telling her top team where they needed to go but was met with confusion and resistance. Her immediate reaction was to explain again in a louder voice. Becoming aware of her irritation and shortness of breath, she took a long pause then told her team, "OK, I feel a bit desperate here—I think I know where to go but it's clear I am not effective. I need your help." Only then did the group begin to think through the problem with her.

Another executive told us about a helpful defusion technique he uses. If he is in a meeting and checks his phone to find negative voicemails or emails he can't attend to right then, he tends to become distracted and anxious. So he visualizes a parking lot (or a cupboard, or balloons in the air). Each incoming message goes into one of the parking spaces or shelves or balloons. He imagines acknowledging the messages with a plan to address them later. That way he can focus on the meeting and avoid experiencing mental and physical stress in the moment. He then returns to each topic, addressing them one by one. At that point, some urgent matters have already solved themselves, and others can be calmly addressed.

4. Practice reflection

Reflection is a way to process what happened during the day and to create space to listen to your inner world (mind and body). For example, analogous to a practice in the military called “contemplation,” you can reflect daily about critical situations. What moments were difficult and why, how did you feel, and why did you respond the way you did? Reflection helps you with the big picture and your own reactive behavior and its drivers. It’s also helpful to ask trusted colleagues to give you feedback about critical moments where you had to respond under pressure. What are your blind spots and how can you address them the next time? People have many ways to reflect. Some use meditation, some reflect while running or walking the dog. The important thing is that you make it a regular planned practice.

5. Reframe your perspective

When we’re tired from stress, we tend to see negative messages and threats more readily than opportunities and positive messages. Keeping a balance and staying realistic is not easy. Knowing this, is step one. Handling these situations effectively, is step two. When facing a difficult situation, try to redirect away from the negative explanation and toward an exploration of other possibilities that could be true. Viewing the issue through different possibilities and scenarios—from the most positive to the most negative—can help in planning responses later.

When detailed scenario planning is not an option, choose to take a *flexible perspective*: this is integrative awareness in action. When faced with a difficult situation, ask yourself: Am I jumping to conclusions too fast? What else can be true at this moment? What is important to me and my team right now? With the information on the table now, make a conscious decision about the best way to move toward what matters most. Build time to revisit decisions regularly, with an open, curious, and learning mindset, building on fresh information coming in and at different stages in the crisis.

6. Manage your energy

One of the most difficult things to do in times of crisis is to balance work needs with your own physical well-being. In a crisis atmosphere, you will need recovery time, or at some point something will give—performance or, worse, health. Top athletes know this, and they make sure they build in sufficient time for recovery when they train for top performance. Apart from recovery time, which may be different for everyone, micro practices that are in support of healthy recovery can include meditation, breathing exercises, cardio sports activities, and even power naps.

Leadership in a crisis like this is an enormous responsibility, yet it can also be seen as a great privilege. Integrative awareness keeps leaders centered in the storm, giving them the focus they need to take care of themselves and the people and organizations they lead.

¹² Norman Farb et al., “Interoception, contemplative practice, and health,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, June 9, 2015, Volume 6, Article 763, frontiersin.org.

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