



Leading in Hard Times: Leading Teams in Crisis

Leading teams through times of crisis can be a catalyst to incredible results. Like athletes in the last few seconds of a nail-biting game, stress can be a positive force that leads to remarkable breakthroughs. But often, teams freeze in a crisis and miss this opportunity. Decision making stalls, and team members feel inefficient, unproductive, and ineffective, with chronic stress and paralysis as the end result. I would like to share some evidence-based information and techniques that will help teams capitalize on the challenges of a crisis, so they can emerge more successful and stronger than before.

As the entire world deals with unprecedented upheaval caused by COVID-19, it is my conclusion that the role of the team leader is to simplify complexity and inspire creative action. Recently, my day started with conversations with two clients, each responsible for leading healthcare teams which are simultaneously weathering the current storm and facing an uncertain future.

The first conversation, with a physician team leader, started in much the same way as many of our pre-COVID discussions. Rebecca and I have been working for two years trying to bring her team to a higher level of effectiveness. She explained that they were weary from the constant challenge of delivering quality healthcare in a large system that was financially stressed even before the chaos the virus is causing. She reiterated how much pressure was on her team, and it was clear as always that they were feeling up against it. But then her voice changed—it was full of excitement as she said “Good news. You can’t imagine what has happened within our team!”

Rebecca knew that the way her team was providing surgical after-care was inefficient and expensive. She had told me many times that this was creating extreme frustration and despondency. Her team had a general sense that even if they came up with a creative solution, “We can’t do it,” and they’d been stuck until the COVID crisis presented an opportunity.

Faced with a critical need to reduce elective stays and get surgical patients out of the hospital as quickly as possible so they weren’t possibly exposed to the virus, she said: “We had an honest conversation with each other about what we’d all been feeling, as well as what we needed and wanted from each other.” She went on to explain that they decided to implement an online tool that allowed them to safely manage after-care for many patients at home. They had been wanting to do this for some time, but had run up against institutional and personal obstacles to change. Rebecca went on:

For two years we have been trying to wrestle to the ground how we can better mobilize surgical after-care, and in two days, we solved it. After we had that authentic and vulnerable conversation with each other, we put together a small team. We built a purpose statement that we all signed our names to so we would be “all in” on this together. We then built a plan with an Agenda For Change Roadmap—not in words, but rather an actual diagram that we can follow. Once people saw the awesome possibilities, we defined each of our roles and responsibilities. Amazingly, we didn’t have to ask for volunteers. It was a natural cadence. A number of times, people simply stepped up on the difficult roadblocks on the map and each volunteered to take on a responsibility of clearing the way. There was mutual accountability, and this was a discussion like never before.

Later that same morning I received a second call with a very different story. Another healthcare leader from a different part of the U.S. explained that he was feeling grief and worry. He’d been exposed to COVID-19 and had spent two weeks quarantined away from his family. He’d finally been cleared to return home, but rather than expressing relief, he



sounded sad and frozen. He said: “I feel abandonment from my team as I’ve decided to work from home.” It felt unnatural to be away from his team, and this stress left him feeling directionless, disengaged, and not important—something many leaders may face as they’re forced to work remotely for the foreseeable future.

About stress

Both stories are about teams under stress. Research tells us that in a crisis, stress can be either a positive force, or a negative inhibitor. Positive stress is what psychologists refer to as acute stress, and it can be a powerful motivator, helping teams create clear paths to winning. This kind of success most often starts with a conversation where team members face up to the truth, even if it’s painful or seems dire. What people remember from these kinds of conversations is the unusual candor, the courage to create clarity, and the resolve to make real commitments.

Rebecca is sure that the amazing new energy among her team will now set the pace for how they will work together going forward. Getting stuff done usually starts with cleaning things up. It is the recipe for creating calm in a storm. Sometimes small wins pave the way to go after big, audacious goals.

On the other hand, negative stress, called chronic stress, is the enemy in times of crisis. It depletes energy and causes anxiety. On my call with Sam, it was clear his stress had become chronic. Teams experiencing this kind of chronic stress can become frozen, and start to feel like a group of “Debbie Downers.” Chronic stress spreads. The problem with unfreezing a team suffering from chronic stress is that you can’t push people out of stress. It doesn’t work, and can lead to meltdowns.

What does work is what happened with Rebecca’s team. Turning a crisis into an opportunity gives a team permission to move. Rebecca used the acute stress of the COVID crisis as a catalyst to let go of past baggage and jump start her team with a new sense of conviction and direction. There is nothing like having a clear purpose with an actionable plan that is achievable.

Jim Loehner speaks to this in *Stress for Success*. He spent much of his career working with premier athletes, helping them do the unbelievable by teaching them to unleash the power of acute stress. He talks about bringing team members together to create positive stress, connecting their emotional and psychological wherewithal with the physical requirements of elite athletic competition. In crisis situations, business teams have to learn to overcome chronic stress and work together like great sports teams do when there are only two minutes left in the game.

There is a useful tool called ABT, which stands for **Achievability**, **Believability**, and **Transferability**. Leadership teams in crisis need to take the time to clearly define **Achievable** results, with a plan. In order to create positive stress within the team, the plan must be truly **Believable** to each team member. **Transferability** occurs when team members believe so deeply in the plan that their confidence projects to others, creating an energy force with unstoppable momentum. High impact teams don’t hear “no.” They stop using “but” and replace it with “and.” No one wants to say they are having fun in a crisis-- but there can be quiet joy in working together, achieving results, and feeling like you are making a difference. This will inspire and motivate teams to support each other and keep going—even if they are physically apart from one another and working from home. It looks beyond social distance and replaces it with becoming even more interconnected and interdependent.

Many years back, during an economic crisis, Keane, Inc., a young public company, was facing financial peril, and its future was uncertain. John Keane, founder and CEO, was aware that his team was suffering from chronic stress. He decided to face it head on. He knew the difference between positive and negative stress. He called a meeting and said, “We need to face the future with eyes wide open.” He invited the team to work with him to develop a pathway to



achieve a better future. Then he said, “Let’s talk about the worst possible case.” He acknowledged what they were all fearing: the company could go under. Then, at the right moment, he steered the team to a pathway to actualize their stress in a positive way. He said: “This is the time we have been waiting for. Although we have issues, when the tide is out, we can see the rocks. We can use this time to prepare the company to do the things we have always wanted to do. This is like being in a sailboat race when there’s no wind. The boat that will win in the end will be the one that catches the wind first—that will be us.” It was like what Rebecca did—he used the crisis they were facing to inspire action by his team. Together they decided to break into sub teams to attack issues and opportunities-- they became a *team of teams*. The company went on to become one of the fastest growing companies and the top performing company on the American Stock Exchange for three years. Forty years later, the story of that meeting is still Keane history.

What is a *team of teams*?

Stanley McChrystal, a retired four-star general in the U.S. Army and now a partner and founder of the McChrystal Group, wrote the book on the *team of teams* concept based on his experience in Iraq heading up the Joint Special Operations Task Force. In the mid 2000s, he faced a physical enemy that, something like COVID-19, was relentless and unpredictable. His mission was to disrupt and disable Al-Qaeda, but the Task Force troops were suffering intolerable casualties. McChrystal realized that traditional rules of engagement did not apply. It was time to innovate.

McChrystal believed in empowering small teams. With more than 100,000 troops in place from multiple countries, he understood that the mission would only succeed through interconnected teams. He called this approach the *team of teams*.

His key innovation was the realization that the traditional chain of command would not work. He used the acute stress he was facing to create a web of inclusion, with tightly connected communication channels working together with the following principles:

- A common purpose
- Fostering shared consciousness
- Empowered execution
- Clear trust

McChrystal’s immediate motivation was his unique situational awareness. I think that his greatest strength was more about situational permission—faced with a crisis, he gave his teams permission to do things in a new way.

Leading teams in crisis requires bold tactics that increase the chance of being a more efficient, effective, productive, and innovative *team of teams*. This requires careful planning and enormous focus on remaining agile in both designing strategy and implementing with operational excellence.

Here are key action steps for creating your own *team of teams* strategy:

1. If you are the leader, do a self-examination of your own stress. Assess both your positive stress drivers and opportunities, as well as things that create negative stress. Remember you cannot unleash the power of purpose if you are feeling chronic stress symptoms.
2. Assess all team members as in action step 1.
3. Set daily and weekly priorities that will then be assigned to a team leader.
4. In order to get the right people involved with maximum return, assign each team member to one of these four boxes. From this you will be able to get people to maximize their gifts and expertise, which automatically will produce positive stress and ensure balanced teams. People feel more positive stress when they are working on problems and projects that fit their strengths



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| Innovators | Drivers |
| Motivators | Simplifiers |

5. In attacking problems, projects, and opportunities, use the ABT Tool to ensure that every team has an achievable purpose that can be translated into a believable plan and then transferred and communicated with others so there is shared consciousness.
6. Consistently assess, measure, and evaluate progress and stress levels. When you see team members starting to freeze, get them involved with an achievable goal that will refocus and produce positive stress.

Leading in hard times is both an art and a science. The art is keeping everyone on the team inspired and motivated. Stay religiously focused on frequent communication. The science is following the disciplined action steps above. Ensure that everyone on the team is doing his or her share to create positive stress so they can stay at the top of their game.

Keep in the back of your mind that teams can thrive during times of crisis and the people on these teams will share stories on how they did it for generations to come.

For more information please feel free to reach out to Phil Harkins at phil@prossimoglobal.com or for Mark Servodidio at mark@prossimoglobal.com

For more information on Prossimo Global Partners please visit our website at www.prossimoglobal.com