

COVID-19 Response: Leadership, Planning, and Communication/Collaboration

Dr. Bob Milligan¹

I have been visiting with clients and colleagues and thinking about how to respond to our COVID-19 crisis. My wife and I are hunkered down as we are among the vulnerable and are in position to isolate.

This issue is a series of short articles focused around what I think are the three keys to navigating this crisis. They are:

- Leadership
- Planning
- Communication and Collaboration

Fear and Loss

Essentially every American has some level of fear and is experiencing loss/losses – loss of the normal if nothing else. From the work of Kubler-Ross in developing the Grief Cycle and subsequent research, we understand much about how we humans respond to loss.

All of us are in one or more of the first three stages of loss. A characteristic of these three stages is that we are at least to some degree decision-making challenged. The three stages and the decision-making challenge are:

- **Shock and Denial:** Need for decision making often not recognized.
- **Anger:** Emotional drain makes decision making very difficult.
- **Depression and Detachment:** Hard to find the energy to make decisions.

Please keep this loss of decision-making capacity in mind as you read the following articles.

Leadership in a Crisis

My favorite description of leadership comes from Marcus Buckingham: “Great leaders rally people to a better future.” I have typically used this in discussing vision and strategy, where the future is distant. In the current crisis, we need to think of the better future as referring to any future – 1 minute, 1 hour, 1 day, 1 week, 1 month, 1 year, 1 decade, 1 career. In other words, rallying people to a better future is your constant responsibility and never more so than in our current COVID-19 crisis.

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One of the most difficult responsibility of leaders is that their outward persona often must be very different from their inner feelings. Think of the manager of a baseball team in a ten-game losing streak. He is frustrated, tense, maybe even scared for his job. His responsibility as the leader, however, is to be encouraging and upbeat to keep his team focused to end the losing streak.

In this crisis, you are in a similar position. You are responsible for rallying people to a better future by being encouraging, hopeful and providing direction. I am not suggesting that you be unemotional. It is certainly OK and likely helpful to share that you are stressed, even scared, but help your staff to move beyond your and their emotions.

I dare you to try to overcommunicate

In one of Ken Blanchard's books that used a story to convey the importance of purpose/mission/vision, the business owner used a daily phone message to all his employees to develop that common purpose and an engaging business culture. The importance of constant, consistent communication (the President and probably every Governor are having daily news conferences) cannot be overemphasized. The communication needs to be empathic, hopeful, and send clear messages.

Today, we have an even better method of conveying these messages – group texts. I encourage you to consider sending a daily short group text. The text can say something inspiration, share an update, or just have reassuring words. The goal is to reassure and engage everyone in your business and show that you care about your employees. If your business has multiple owners or key leaders, I encourage you to rotate. This will show unity of leadership.

Workforce needs

With everyone stressed, the last thing your workforce needs is additional stress due to a shortage of workers. That is always a danger on the livestock side and especially as we approach planning on the crop side.

Added to the usual dangers of being short staffed are 1) workers we have been counting on not now available because of travel restrictions or other employment opportunities (yes, some businesses are hiring), and 2) current employees sick with or confined due to COVID-19. The greatest danger is an outbreak at your farm. Minimizing the likelihood must be paramount in your COVID-19 farm plan.

My recommendation is that you make certain you have access to more labor than in a normal year. You may need to be creative in finding this additional staff.

The hiring opportunity is that there are now many (too many!!) people unemployed. They likely will not have the exact skills and experience you are looking for, but let's be creative:

- For livestock work, like milking, restaurant employees, especially those in the kitchen, have dexterous hands and are used to routine and precision.
- For crop work, there may be those available with experience working with large, complex machines.

It is time to step up our recruitment and selection game.

Collaboration

We live in Minnesota. The collaboration to address this crisis has been amazing, perhaps the best in the country. Even though we have the only divided legislature in the country, they have been worked together with the Governor to move forward quickly. The government and medical industry are working together to get everything necessary so the state can handle medical cases as we relax our stay in place order. The Governor's office worked with University of Minnesota faculty working in shifts around the clock to develop analytical tools to provide information to make better decisions.

Not only are you decision-making deprived, the uncertainty requires varying skills and perceptions and piggybacking on ideas to make and revise plans.

Collaboration is required.

Take care of yourself

My wife and I are both very much in the high-risk category. We have a very young new grandson. I am talking to my clients who are struggling in this crisis. It is very easy for me to get uptight. I now take a 2.4 mile walk every day. It is amazing how much calmer I am when I return and the ideas I have generated. Most of this newsletter was developed in my head while on those walks.

You can't take care of your workforce unless you take care of yourself. You don't need to walk 2.4 miles but find a time everyday to do something to relax, think, and focus.