



THE AGE BLOG



6 THINGS I'VE LEARNED ABOUT LEADING IN A PANDEMIC

The holidays are upon us, typically a time for reflection. Writing this message, I realized that almost half my leadership at AGE Inc. has been during a pandemic. I have seen staff go from initial shock, to fear, to resilience and strength. There is not another team I would want to lead right now. They are professionals and passionate about the work we do in the dementia context. We've learned much about each other during this crisis and we've built trust. Thinking about the team got me thinking about what I had learned as its leader.

There are no books we can reach for as leaders to help guide teams in this pandemic. As a Licensed Crucial Conversations® practitioner and cognitive coach, it has helped to use my skills for communicating when stakes are high and emotions run strong. However, there is nothing like personal experience as teacher. During this crisis, some significant things have become clear to me on how to lead well. I thought I'd share them with you in this blog ...

1. Put people before anything else: While many people spend more time at work than with their own families, the reality is that they have lives outside of the organization that are important. Team members are individuals with individual needs. Make the emotional, psychological and



"I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong."

— Jacinda Ardern, 40th Prime Minister of New Zealand

social needs of your employees a priority. Productivity is important to maintaining your business, but without healthy people you have nothing.

2. Take a personal approach: As leaders, we must recognize that dramatic changes in daily routines and physical isolation from their team, from other colleagues, friends and family can be more challenging for some staff than others. As the pandemic continues, more team members may start to feel its isolating effects. I make it a priority to talk to team members individually, as well as in group meetings. I want to know how they are coping. I try to ask about their families.

Find out if there is anything that you or anyone else in the organization can do to help make life easier for your staff. It might mean altering their work hours to accommodate school-age children, ill spouses or partners, aging parents, or providing access to mental health supports. Be open and honest. If you don't have answers to questions ask someone who does. I believe that a personal approach helps us build stronger, more resilient, cohesive and innovative teams.

3. Allow yourself to be vulnerable and recognize your blind spots: Staff look to us for information, guidance and support. This is part of our role at any time, but during a crisis we are often completely focused on the emotional turmoil of those reporting to us. It is equally important for us to take care of ourselves too. Not one of us has been through a pandemic. A crisis like this can have a big impact on our own needs, emotions and behaviours. Although we may not be conscious of it, our behaviour also sends messages to others. What do we want those messages to say to our teams? Yes, you're the team leader, but you're also a team member. Don't feel that a stiff upper lip is always in order. Share your own concerns once in a while. Get your team's feedback. My experience is that people are far more likely to share their own feelings when they see others — including their leaders — sharing too.

4. Be ready and willing to adapt, innovate and trust your team: As leaders, we champion adaptation and innovation in the workplace and it's been particularly important this year. One of AGE's biggest challenges has been adapting our training programs to meet physical, distancing protocols. Our GPA Certified Coach Workshops and GPA Basics education sessions are facilitated by GPA Certified Coaches in a traditional classroom setup. The learning includes physical self-protection techniques, one-on-one or in small groups. We had to move quickly to create virtual (online) alternatives. It's been a team effort where individual skills, group initiative and collective innovation have made great things happen. I trusted my team. They trusted my leadership *and* my faith in them. We encouraged input from our partners and stakeholders which was incredibly valuable to the outcomes. Perhaps one of the most important things we realized (*even though at heart we remain a group of perfectionists* 😊) is that during a crisis, you can't always wait to *perfect* things. We learned to adapt and innovate on the fly.



"I learned to always take on things I'd never done before. Growth and comfort do not coexist."

— Ginni Rometty
Executive Chairman, IBM

5. Consistently and positively communicate with your team. Make sure each member of your team always understands what they need to do and why. Address concerns directly. Communication is key from a business and social perspective. Right now, the world is more virtual than ever — fewer lunchrooms or water coolers around which to chat. The AGE staff work from home now, so we schedule regular Zoom working meetings, as well as opportunities just to chat. We make a point of recognizing staff achievements, celebrating milestones and acknowledging the personal stuff (e.g., birthdays) and we try to share positive stories and funny moments. Celebrations and humour lift our spirits.

6. Envision (with confidence) the post-pandemic workplace. With the arrival of vaccines, things finally look brighter. We can expect the "new normal" — new workplace processes, strategies and culture — to emerge. Adjusting will take time, but as a leaders it will be our job to help our teams recover, heal and adjust.

Once the most immediate and challenging aspects of the crisis are under control, the AGE team will think about the kinds of crises we could experience in the future. How can we prepare? We will take time for retrospection and reflection. What went well for us during the pandemic? What didn't? What would we do differently? We will talk about how we feel about the future.

I began my blog by saying I would like to share a few insights from my own experience leading during the pandemic. I'd love to hear from you too. What are you doing to help your team through this challenging time? What unique insights can you share? We are in a sector, particularly long-term care, that has been shattered by this pandemic. We need to rethink and rebuild that part of the sector. One of the ways we can do this is by sharing what we've learned. A better, brighter, more equitable future for the sector demands thoughtful contributions based on our collective experiences. Let's get together and share — if not now, then in the near future. Use the comments section of the blog or send me an email april@ageinc.ca.

I wish you and your teams the best for 2021. Stay safe, strong and healthy.



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