



Exceptional Leadership in Times of Change: Enabling the Organization
Gratitude Network Think Piece, Part III of III

In today's unpredictable pandemic world, we have a choice as leaders: to survive and get through it, or to thrive and position ourselves and our organizations for the opportunities that exist in the "next normal." Leaders at every level will require a new worldview and set of tactics to thrive in these uncertain times—and beyond.

The Gratitude Network is a globally recognized leadership development organization that works with growth-stage companies and global social entrepreneurs to enhance CEO skills and strengthen their leadership teams. We have two central programs. The **GOLD** program works with leaders at mid-sized, growth-stage companies. Our year-long **Fellowship** targets social entrepreneurs around the world who are working with children. Our organization has worked with nearly 150 CEOs in the past five years, and our team has hundreds of years of collective experience working with organizational leaders.

In the Spring of 2020, we interviewed and observed several dozen CEOs and HR leaders of growth-stage organizations (both for-profit and not-for-profit). We have learned:

- What great leadership will look like as we emerge from this economic and health crisis.
- What elements are vital for excellent leadership through and after this crisis.
- What leaders need to do to create their best possible future.
- How leaders can best prepare themselves and their organizations for success in this new reality.
- How leaders can create organizations that *thrive* rather than survive.

We hope that in reading this series of three pieces that you will: gain some insight into leadership issues and strategies to manage them in the pandemic and post-pandemic world, find the work of The Gratitude Network interesting and deep and reach out to Gratitude Network to explore customized solutions to your leadership development needs.

Great leaders have a keen awareness of their own personal leadership strengths and limitations. They recognize the team dynamics within their leadership ranks, as well as the managerial and executive leadership challenges of their organizations. This series of white papers addresses each topic in turn. **This paper, Part III of III, covers Organizational Leadership.**

In these unprecedented times, leadership has been and will continue to be affected on three levels: personal, team, and organizational.

- **Personal**
 - How leaders behave now will not only affect their legacies as individual leaders but will also have ripple effects for their employees, company, and stakeholders.
 - Most of us are accustomed to change but don't have all the tools required to adapt to the change.
- **Team**
 - Communication is crucial; leaders must make recognition an integral practice to capture the attention of the team, the organization and senior leadership.
 - Decision models are being disrupted by virtual work.
 - When individuals feel disconnected from the team, it is difficult to work collaboratively and remain motivated.
- **Organizational**
 - **Organizational leadership is not just about *readiness*; it is also about *building the future that the organization wants*.**
 - **Leaders should be clear about where their organizations are going but flexible in how they get there.**
 - **Leaders need to build the capacity for *resilience* into their organization so that it continues to function in the face of change.**

These points are addressed in more detail throughout this piece.



ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

An organization's vision, strategy, and work environment may be forever changed by COVID-19. In times of immense change, great leaders set a vision and strategic goals that enable the organization to capture opportunities and manage challenges as quickly as possible. How leaders engage, motivate, and proactively lead their organizations in the present with a vigilant eye to the future is perhaps the

most significant leadership element of all. We found that great leaders are proactive and intentional during a crisis. This begins with repeated and focused communication.

Proactive Planning and Intentional Leadership During a Crisis

Leaders we spoke with are paying attention to their organizations and were quick to recognize and call into discussion new opportunities and challenges brought about by the COVID-19 crisis. They recognize that managing in a crisis and managing remotely require new levels of patience and engagement with teams and departments throughout their organizations. These leaders also recognize the need to be prepared to manage transitions to new work environments. They are learning how to manage employees' issues, fears, needs, and eagerness or reluctance to work in the "next normal."

The strongest leaders are proactive and intentional about embracing new ways of assessing productivity and accountability of teams, setting new or different performance standards for the organization, addressing concerns, and creating supportive options for Zoom fatigue or the need to balance childcare/school responsibilities with work. They also recognize increased needs for infrastructure (tools and platforms) to connect teams across the organization.

Great leaders are the anchors of positive corporate culture and seek to support that culture as it adapts to change. They understand that the tools and rules that are applied in new scenarios must work with and *within* the culture of the organization. At all times, strong leaders recognize the importance of organization culture.

Through our interviews, we've identified six factors that great leaders use to keep their corporate culture alive. These factors are not exclusive to organizational leadership but permeate personal and team leadership as well.

PLANNING & READINESS: Organizational leadership is not just about *being prepared*, it is about *building the future* that the organization needs. So much has changed during this health and economic crisis; enhanced planning will serve the organization as it develops new business models and employee engagement.

INCLUSION: Inclusion is especially challenging for virtual teams. During these times, our differences may become more apparent: those with childcare concerns vs. those without young children, introverts vs. extroverts, those who are tech-savvy vs. those who prefer in-person communication. There are different ways to view a problem and its solution, and different teams within a company may observe or experience things differently. All of this creates a unique opportunity to enhance inclusivity

on multiple levels in an organization. Great leaders include multiple perspectives and input when imagining the future. When diverse viewpoints and voices are included as the change happens, that change will be better received. Successful leaders will focus on their own change-management skills and seek partners and coaches to drive positive change while building an inclusive environment in the organization.

EMPATHY: Great leaders understand that organizations are made up of people; empathy is the new leadership superpower. This goes beyond recognizing stress triggers and anxieties. Great leaders create trust and confidence by watching, listening, and taking time to understand. They know there is a reciprocity of trust in true communication. Great leaders lead with heart, mind, and experience. Of all these corporate culture factors, empathy especially plays a key role in all three leadership levels: personal, team, and organizational.

CURIOSITY: Great leaders encourage and develop curiosity within the organization. This ensures the best aspects of past and current environments will be considered in future work planning. Successful leaders create positive change by looking at what is currently working, seeking employee feedback, and taking deep dives into everything from work practices, to work balance, to performance.

FLEXIBILITY: Great leaders are clear about where their organization is going but flexible in how they get there. They understand that a variety of skills and strategies is needed to embrace change. Great leaders are vulnerable and able to admit they may not have all the answers to questions about the future and, therefore, can encourage their team to raise concerns and consider multiple constructive solutions.

RESILIENCE: Great leaders create an environment of resilience for themselves, the individuals in the organization, and the teams that drive the work. This is a matter of considering possibilities and imagining a great future while removing boundaries to new ways of working and thinking. At the same time, leaders remain mindful that not everything goes as planned. Getting mired in what we wanted or what *should* be is never healthy.

CASE STUDY: One Silicon Valley company, already investing heavily in their leaders through a leadership development program led by the Gratitude Network, has used the current crisis as an opportunity to ramp up its leadership development even further and, in doing so, has created additional growth opportunities for leaders throughout the organization. They have pivoted the existing program to include significantly more connections and interactions in peer groups, providing more interaction across teams, and greater support for emerging-level leadership.

Strong Communication and Clarity in Times of Change

The COVID-19 world produces a magnitude of uncertainty: How long will recovery take? Will we recover economically and socially? What will the supply chain look like? When will customers come back? Are our services still viable? Will employees have what they need to be successful? A mantra of “*resist certainty; embrace clarity*” is a valuable addition to a leader’s toolkit.

In uncertain times, great leaders share their vision of the post COVID-19 future with both confidence and vulnerability. Clarity of vision, messaging, and action will enable others to focus on that future. Successful leaders consistently and clearly speak about what is important to ensure and facilitate the action of employees and teammates. In the midst of a crisis, these leaders articulate key points in a change message that tells the story of the future of the organization.

While there is a desire to naively say, “We are open for business. We are back to business as usual,” that would be risky and may prove to be a missed opportunity to seek new and better ways of doing business. The key to creating a viable and successful future is in focusing a company's core mission, values, goals, products, and services on what is important for the organization. Great leaders are competent in strategic and scenario planning, and they utilize their team to participate in these processes.

Being inspirational while discussing objectives and operational oversight in a virtual world is challenging. Leaders must lean into empathy, encouraging and respecting boundaries while learning to convey priorities via a virtual world. As such, they need to manage the frequency and duration of calls for optimum results. Because the feedback loop has changed, leaders need to share and clarify messages about the future to check for understanding and to seek agreement. Being clear about what is important will ensure action in others.

CASE STUDY: The Gratitude Network’s recent work with the CEO of a large builder/contractor led to a discussion about the “cadence” of communication, the “style” of communication, and the “clarity” of communication. During the past several months, beginning with the COVID-19 crisis, this CEO (from his home) has changed the cadence of his team meetings from once a week to every morning, and he also added short fifteen-minute “scrub” calls on critical topics for sub-teams. The Chief People Officer suggested that this CEO end each week with a video to the entire company in which he transparently and succinctly describes the current situation for the company, the strategies to be deployed, and examples of employees who are in alignment with the company’s focus. This openness has helped to calm the nervousness of employees while recognizing those who are contributing to the “clarity” of the mission. Recently, one of the CEO’s mid-level managers mentioned that the transparency of the weekly “state of the union” message has cast the CEO as a more human and down-to-earth leader.

Leaders are the preachers in this time when fragility is around every corner; they must maintain purposeful connections.

TAKEAWAYS

Great leaders earn the trust and confidence of their employees. There is no better way to do this than to show empathy, true concern, and a bit of vulnerability. How leaders behave in times of change or crisis will impact the long-term success of their employees, their teams, and the company. Personal awareness, understanding of one's EQ, and the ability to listen and be empathetic are key in ensuring tomorrow's success.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a unique opportunity for deep leadership self-reflection: How can I proactively take ownership of my own leadership style and balance? What can I do to impact and lead my team? How does the quality of my teams' collective leadership decisions affect the culture, communication, and focus of my entire organization? The pandemic has given us, as leaders, a "glass half full/glass half empty" moment. Do we as leaders bemoan the loss of the way it used to be and fight against what it is now? Or do we use it as an opportunity to rebuild ourselves, our teams, and our organizations to emerge stronger, more empathetic, more agile, and more prepared for the next storm that hits?

Ultimately, our leadership decisions impact the success or failure of our organization—our people, products, customers, culture, and so much more. Top leaders need to be more visible to all levels of the organization for transparency of messages, priorities, and goals. In challenging times, over-communication is the name of the game for building trust for the future. A leader's presence and responses must exhibit their empathy for and interest in the employees, the situation, and the customers.

Leaders will need to understand that it is not a trade-off between productivity and caring for employees. Being present for employees in many different ways—from frequent company communications to ad hoc video Q&A sessions—will build the confidence of employees.

This is a moment to examine personal, team, and **organizational** leadership in the context of a next normal. It is an opportunity to examine current methods and assess the potential for enhancement, expansion, and a departure from past strategies in order to thrive in our "new reality." Your employees will observe carefully and remember how you behaved as a leader during challenging times.

With Gratitude ... to the authors of this piece:

Laura Traxler - Board Member, Gratitude Network

Ann Singer - Director, Programs, Gratitude Network

Randy Haykin - Founder, Gratitude Network

Why did the Gratitude Network author this piece?

The Gratitude Network is a global leadership development organization that works with CEOs, Chief People Officers, founders, and emerging leaders and teams.

The Gratitude Network is poised to support leaders in organizations as they navigate their own course and build their own “next normal.”

We have successfully piloted a new paradigm of organizational leadership development called GOLD (Gratitude Organizational Learning & Development) that is results-driven and includes team learning and informative interactions, 1:1 leadership coaching, and cross-functional communication. We are currently working with several companies that feel *now*, more than ever, the need to support their leaders as they lay new organizational foundations.

Gratitude GOLD creates the leaders that your organization needs now and in the future. Our fully customizable program is focused on your organizations’ leadership, working across silos, team dynamics, accountability and personal leadership. The program can include as few as six key leaders or dozens; we can work with these leaders for six weeks, six months, a year, or longer. We work with senior management to determine your company’s needs and produce a one-of-a-kind experience to transform your leadership.

The Gratitude Network and its team of coaches help grow leaders and enable them and their organizations to thrive. It doesn’t matter who they are, what they do, where they are or how big or small they are.

If you would like to be one of these forward-thinking organizations and would like to learn more about our GOLD program, contact:

Ann Singer
The Gratitude Network
415-876-9718 / ann@gratitude-network.org