

The COVID-19 pandemic shows us that love has a place in business leadership

*It is time to acknowledge the power of love to transmute negative situations in the workplace into positive ones. Companionate love can boost employee performance and create workplaces with higher levels of engagement and accountability. **Burak Koyuncu** discusses examples of business leaders who followed their hearts during the COVID-19 crisis and made decisions based on love for their employees.*

The COVID-19 crisis has been a strong test for leadership. Under high levels of uncertainty and pressure, many leaders have made choices with fear of future regret.

In my conversations with more than a hundred business leaders since the beginning of this crisis, I noticed that they were all along seeking examples of other leaders who were bold enough to follow their hearts, despite opposition, and make decisions that would allow them to feel at peace – even years from now. Here are some examples of such courageous leaders.

John, a senior partner at a global accounting firm, was recently promoted to be the country leader of his business area. As soon as the crisis started, their business was hit and within a few months they started to estimate that the annual results would be far behind their targets. Despite this negative effect of the crisis, the firm was still quite profitable and not expected to have any survival issues in the near term. Yet, the regional leadership team started to pressure John to make more than 20% of his employees redundant. John resisted this pressure first and challenged his bosses for a while as he thought that they were just having a knee-jerk reaction to the crisis, and they would soon change their minds. However, as the pressure increased, he realised that he needed to make a decision. One day, he called his boss to say that he wouldn't be comfortable making such an unhealthy/short-term focused decision and if the regional leadership wanted to fire people, they would also need to let him go. A few days after that call, John was relieved to hear that his courage paid off and he was allowed to keep his team – as long as he agreed to not promote anyone or increase salaries this year.

John was very happy with the outcome; however, he cared about his team a lot and still worried about those team members who have been waiting for their promotions for a while. When the annual promotions were supposed to be announced a few weeks later, he first called Mike, one of his senior managers who was promised to be promoted to a director role two years ago and was passed twice due to “suboptimal company-level results”. John knew that Mike would possibly leave the company this time if he didn't get the promotion again. When Mike answered the call, John said: “Mike, I apologise that I am not able to confirm your promotion today. Unfortunately, this year, we are not able to promote anyone. I know you have been hearing similar excuses for the last three years and this must be disappointing for you. I want you to know that I love you and would really like you to stay in this company.” Mike was speechless after hearing this. Despite his disappointment about the news, for the first time in many years, he could really feel how much his leaders valued him and cared about him. And he decided to stay.

Mary, CEO of a European manufacturing firm, is another leader who deeply cared about her employees' wellbeing during this crisis. A few weeks after the restrictions started in most of the European countries where Mary's firm operates, Mary wanted to send an email to all her employees letting them know that the company doesn't expect them to work hard during this period when everyone must be having different challenges at home (health, childcare, etc.). However, she also knew that such a message would not be liked by the company shareholders. During the first week of the crisis, when Mary sent a company-wide email which stated that the health and safety of employees was company's first priority, shareholders welcomed the message. In the second week, similar sentiments were shared in another company-wide message, when the successful move to partially virtual operations was also celebrated. Now, after the third week, shareholders were getting anxious and wanting confirmation that despite the challenges, everyone has been working hard to achieve even more difficult targets during this pandemic. However, instead, Mary sent an email to all employees mentioning that they don't expect each employee to work 37.5 hours per week (as in their contract) during these times. She wrote "We care about you, your family, health and wellbeing. We don't want you to worry about your working hours. We will not evaluate anyone based on their availability and number of hours during these times. We will work with each other to agree on the outcomes we can possibly achieve during this crisis and focus on delivering those outcomes." Mary's email wasn't made public; however, as expected, some shareholders didn't like this message when they heard about it. Employees, on the other hand, couldn't stop talking about this email for a while as they were really touched by Mary's message and they knew that she wasn't just spouting empty words, she really meant them.

Brian, the CEO of a successful travel industry company, is a leader who faced significant challenges during this crisis. From January onwards, his company's bookings went down exponentially. By May, he concluded that he had to let some of his employees go. It wasn't a decision that came easily to Brian and to this team. They thought so much about it, considered all other cost savings options, and eventually they were faced with the reality that they would need to reduce staff. And when they decided to let people go, they did it in the most caring and loving way possible. They thought about everything someone losing their job might need (computer, outplacement services, support for finding a new job, financial aid, etc...) and offered them generously to their leaving employees. Brian's story was one of those powerful stories that also became public, and we were all lucky to hear about it. This was Brian Chesky, Airbnb's CEO.

Despite being in different contexts, these stories have much in common. Here are my key learnings from John, Mary, and Brian's actions:

As a leader, you have a responsibility for others. In [Leaders Eat Last](#), Simon Sinek shares many examples of why great leaders sacrifice their own comfort or even survival for the good of those in their care. What John did or Mary did by putting their career at risk in the service of others might be difficult to do. But isn't this what leadership is all about? Nobody wants to see an army chief who hides behind the army. We want leaders who will embrace challenges before anyone else and show courage to express their truth so that they can lead the way. In times of crisis, people need such leaders even more. What I have observed since March 2020 is that courageous leadership can transform the way an organisation deals with the crisis.

Doing the right thing pays off. Sometimes doing the right thing is not supported by the people around us and is very difficult, but it is still worth it. "If you don't do the right thing, you will regret it sooner or later and the time you spend until you come to peace with it will not be easy" said one of my clients who had a very similar situation to John's. If you do the right thing, the outcomes will eventually be positive for you: You will either set a great example and create an engaged organisation or you will move on to another place where you can be your better self.

Love has a place in business. As we see from John, Mary, and Brian's stories, love is very powerful and can transmute negative situations into positive ones. While this is not an emotion we talk a lot about in the workplace, it is time to acknowledge its power. I am not talking about romantic love here. [Companionate love](#) which is based on compassion, affection and connection has already been shown to improve [employees' performance](#). Leaders who lead with companionate love create workplaces with higher levels of engagement and accountability.

Whether we are in a crisis or not, we all want [leaders who follow their hearts](#) as much as they follow their minds. John, Mary, and Brian's stories can be good reminders for us to act with courage and love when we face difficult leadership decisions.



Notes:

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