

Step up to Leadership in Times of War

by Stever Robbins

The war has begun. Times are scary. People are angry, frightened, uncertain, and need direction. For most people, uncertainty makes them feel afraid, anxious, and helpless. People just can't go about their lives as normal. They may put on a brave face, but they won't be concentrating, they won't be committed; they'll just be going through the motions. In the coming weeks, people will need leadership more than ever. Your opportunity will be helping employees, families, and communities keep their center and live their lives while the drama unfolds around the world.

Help manage emotions using empathy

First of all, let people vent. People need to talk about what's happening to deal with the feelings. Some people need a lot of time to process strong emotion, possibly days or weeks. Others can get up and keep going after a day or two. There's little to be gained by letting people wallow excessively in emotion, but listening to them empathetically can make a huge difference.

To listen empathetically, acknowledge the events that brought up the emotion and asking about the feelings. You aren't seeking to understand or fix; just to be there with a person in their feelings. "When you hear war has broken out, do you feel afraid?" Let them talk. If they mention their family, follow up with: "When you think about the future, are you concerned for your children?"

The key is to inquire with genuine concern, but let them direct the conversation. Keep your attention on the events and the feelings, rather than getting sucked in to analysis or attempts to comfort. **Don't take sides!** Everyone has strong feelings about the situation, and your leadership task is giving people what they need, not engaging them in political debate.

Whether their fears are grounded doesn't matter; emotion is rarely swayed by logic. Just be there, emotionally. It may take 30 seconds or three hours, but you'll see a physical shift when

your listener has had enough empathy to start moving through their feelings¹.

Provide certainty by facing the truth

Once their immediate fear is past, people need to re-establish a feeling of certainty. You can't give certainty about the world, but you can give them certainty about values, goals, and local concerns. Forget statements like, "Don't worry, it will all be over in a week." That may or may not be true, and they know it. Tell the truth, and give certainty in the form of a role model who sees the world clearly and still moves ahead with life: "We're at war. We don't know the outcome. We don't even know the timeframe of the outcome. But we can take control of our own lives, here and now."

Help people take control in their lives

After re-steadying, people will want to regain control of their lives. Find chances for them to take small, meaningful actions, maybe around work, but if not, then around home or community. If your town is like many, people may be afraid of terrorist attacks, yet towns may have few resources in place. For instance, here in Boston, a fire chief said yesterday that the fire department doesn't know how they would find out about any attacks, except by listening to the radio.

This would be a great opportunity to take a half-day off, go to Costco, and help people put together water supplies, dried fruit, etc. They could create a phone tree, and take a proactive hand in feeling safe. Just make sure you're providing opportunities for people to have control over some aspect of their situation.

1. One of the best techniques for empathetic listening I've ever found is called Non-Violent Communication, available at <http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com>. This article mentions two of the four steps of the full NVC technique.



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Shift attention to the positive future

Once the immediate fears are past, it's an ideal time to shift people's attention to the future they will be part of creating.

Start talking about future dreams. You'll know their concerns by this time, so enlist them in speculation and brainstorming about the kind of future they would be excited about and committed to achieving in the workplace (or in the world!)

Help them take steps here and now to continue living their lives in the service of that larger vision. If your company is devoted to creating intimate lifelong banking relationships with your customers, start asking people, "What does this mean in the world as it's unfolding? What can we do to make this come about?" But stay aware that this isn't a planning exercise so much as a way to direct attention towards a bright future.

Ultimately, that's the most precious thing you can offer your employees, your families, and your communities. You can't promise a specific future, but you can promise a possibility of future greatness. You can help people take control in small ways, and move on from their fear and anxiety. Because the people around us need direction. They want someone they can count on. Be that someone. Provide the stability, empathy, and direction, and use the current crisis to forge a stronger community.

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