



# High-Performance Leadership in Times of Crisis

By Robert Grossman

**A**S ORGANIZATIONS PREPARE TO SURVIVE AND thrive during this COVID-19 pandemic, high-performance leadership is more critical than ever.

Being a great leader means having a positive influence on those around you. It does not matter if you lead a team of two or a large, multi-national corporation, the principles of high-performance leadership are still the same.

As members of the professional community, understanding the importance of engaged and empowering leadership in a time of crisis is critical.

## Leaders Need to Stay on Their 'A' Game Even During A Crisis

As a leader, your employees will look to you for cues on how to react to crises and sudden change.

According to Daniel Goleman, the author of the book *Emotional Intelligence*, if managers and leaders are not in control of their emotions, they may communicate stress and helplessness that may lead to a trickle-down effect and impact the entire organization.

The ability to manage one's feelings is called emotional intelligence, which is defined as the awareness that emotions

drive behavior and impact people, both positively and negatively.

According to the Harvard Business School, 90 percent of what sets high-performance leaders apart from their peers with similar technical skills is a high degree of emotional intelligence, which gives them the ability to manage interactions to improve relationships, build trust, and create a teamwork culture.

Leaders need to recognize how to manage their emotions, and those of their employees, especially in times of crisis, significant change, and severe pressure.

To help leaders improve their emotional intelligence, there is an effective model called The Response Chain, which begins with a Key Moment—a triggering event or situation that presents a challenge and elicits or demands a response.

When a Key Moment occurs, people make a choice consciously or unconsciously about how they will respond. In no small measure, their effectiveness as leaders, the quality of their lives, and their well-being are determined by how they handle such key moments.

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People who respond positively to their key moments grow in self-confidence and the assurance that they can maintain their 'A' game even in stressful situations.

High-Performance leaders become masters at practicing emotional intelligence every day. That enables them to offer encouragement and emotional support to their employees in times of crisis, sudden change, and during other exceptional times.

When leaders utilize their emotional intelligence, they can effectively encourage and support their employees by:

- Acknowledging the stress their workers are experiencing.
- Listening to their apprehensions and concerns.
- Empathizing with their anxieties.
- Inquiring how working remotely might work for them.
- Listening carefully to their responses.
- Reaffirming their feedback to demonstrate an understanding of their feelings.
- Allowing their concerns, not yours, to be the focus of the conversation.

According to recent research conducted by Yale University, emotionally intelligent leaders—senior-level lawyers, for example—are skilled at reading the emotions of their team members and identifying when someone is apprehensive or concerned.

Not only are they able to identify the core issue, they also readily acknowledge it and help their employees channel their emotions towards a positive solution aligned with the goals of the practice.

As a result, those attorneys inspire loyalty and enthusiasm among their fellow practitioners and staff. They are optimistic, empathetic, good communicators, and model effective leadership skills.

### **Crisis Leadership Demands Mutual Trust**

It is common knowledge that COVID-19 is having a tremendous impact on businesses across the globe.

For some companies, having a remote workforce is how they do business already, while others are learning how to improve training and infrastructure to shoulder through this global crisis remotely.

Successful leaders must actively work to establish mutual trust with their team members and to communicate effectively by modeling trustworthy behavior—by following through on promises made, including being available during set times, reporting on milestones reached throughout the length of a project, and communicating when changes arise.

Leaders must also trust that their workforce possesses the skills and tools to accomplish the work at hand, the

personal discipline to do so within the timeline required, and the flexibility to handle each task efficiently.

Effective remote leaders have an 'open-door' policy. They are available via phone, video conference, or other communication tools at set times and are flexible and responsive to changes and emergencies. They provide constant feedback, support and encouragement, reward success and share best practices with the entire team.

Remote leaders also use procedures like daily or weekly check-ins, monthly reports, team calls, and clear goals—not to micromanage or stymie flexibility, but to encourage productive remote work by tracking and supporting individual and team progress.

### **The Role of Trust**

Leaders need to be able to trust their offsite employees to do their jobs without direct supervision. Knowing that they are trusted to do their jobs is a great motivator and gives build the confidence and initiative they need to effectively and efficiently work on their own.

Employees also need to trust their managers and be able to count on them to be treated as professionals.

### **How To Establish Mutual Trust**

Leaders and employees earn one another's trust by showing they can be counted on. They must be honest, truthful and open with one another, behave with integrity and consistency, and follow through on their commitments.

Leaders can best earn their employees trust by:

- Being trustworthy.
- Trusting them to do the work. Instead of micro-managing, administer by objective. Hold employees accountable for meeting goals and focus on results.
- Being an enabler. Provide the support, feedback, and offsite encouragement employees need to accomplish their goals.
- Keeping actions consistent. It is not very easy to trust someone who does one thing one day and something else the next.
- Having an open-door policy. Be available or designate a substitute to be on-site should employees have questions or need help.
- Establishing a check-in policy. Work with employees to set up a reporting or check-in procedure.
- Communicating clearly and often.
- Be aware of the tone uses in verbal and written communications.
- Avoiding making it personal when things go wrong. Focus on the problem, not the individual involved.

## Isolation During the COVID-19 Crisis

Those who are working remotely in response to COVID-19 are feeling disconnected and isolated from their colleagues.

These feelings of loneliness and disconnection can result in decreased productivity and engagement. Influential leaders understand that their new normal is not the same as before—that people are adapting, teams are restructuring, and work output is being recalibrated.

Good leaders trust their workforce and, during times of crisis, need to increase the number of touchpoints they have with individual employees to assure they have the tools and resources they need to do their work.

According to a study outlined in the *Harvard Business Journal*, 46 percent of remote workers said the best managers were those who “checked in frequently and regularly.”

Innovative leaders are creating what are called virtual water coolers, where employees can meet to share their quarantine stories and challenges in a way to recreate the camaraderie found in a normal office environment.

Those leaders are setting clear goals and, at the same time, managing expectations in response to extraordinary in different ways. They are flexible, adaptable, emotionally intelligent, and trusting; they communicate, clearly advertising when they are—and are not—available by setting clear boundaries for work and home life.

A 2019 survey by *Buffer*, the social network management application, showed 99 percent of workers were amenable to remote work options. Even before the explosion of remote work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the practice was increasing in interest and practice.

Recent studies have shown that that productivity actually has increased significantly with the advent of remote work.

A Stanford University study, for example, showed a 50 percent decrease in attrition and reduced sick time among employees working remotely, and that, in the aftermath of the current global emergency, the option of remote work will continue to grow in significance.

Ultimately, leaders who can lead remotely will be more successful in their industries.

While the abrupt implementation of remote work in response to COVID-19 might cause immediate operational speed-bumps, it is essential to learn from past mistakes, intelligently build trusting, psychologically safe work environments with high-performancen flexible and responsive leadership.

As we begin to understand the full financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy, there has never been a better opportunity to lead with vision in a time of transformational adversity to a time of future, long-term success. 

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# Member Focus



Without its individual members no organization can function. Each of the San Fernando Valley Bar Association's 2,000-plus members is a critical component that makes the Bar one of the most highly respected professional legal groups in the state. Every month, we will introduce various members of the Bar and help put a face on our organization.

## Susan J. Wolf



**Law School:** Suffolk Law School, Boston MA

**Area(s) of Practice:** Family Law, Wills Trust, Bankruptcy

**Years in Practice:** 20 years

**Firm:** Law Offices of Susan J. Wolf, Canoga Park

**What is your least favorite kind of music?** “Country.”

### Of what personal accomplishment are you the most proud?

“Professionally, running my own practice for twenty years and helping the community. Personally, my two kids. They are fantastic!”

**What is your favorite vacation spot? Why?** “Tahiti. There is nothing else like it. You are away from everything.”

**What is your favorite work of art?** “Georgia O’Keeffe’s Jimson Weed, White Flower No. 1.”

Wolf grew up in Calabasas and has resided in the San Fernando Valley for all of her childhood years.

She graduated from San Diego State University and moved across country to attend Suffolk Law School in Boston, Massachusetts. “My Uncle, Father and I all graduated from Suffolk Law School and kept the family tradition going. Realizing my roots, family, and heart were in Southern California, I completed my third year at Pepperdine Law School, with an internship for Honorable Judge McCoy of the Los Angeles Superior Court.”

Wolf opened her own practice in Canoga Park twenty years ago and she “has never looked back. Since then, I have been practicing law with a focus on family law inclusive of divorce, paternity, child custody, visitation, wills, trust, and bankruptcy law.”

She “enjoys working with families and assisting them in a resolution to their issues during their difficult life-altering times. It is important for the clients to see the bigger picture on their issues and to not get caught up in the minutia.”

When she’s not working, Wolf enjoys family time with her twin girls and husband, skiing and playing golf and tennis.