

Two Mantras to Lead Through a Crisis



“Leaders who follow these two mantras closely stand the best chance of emerging from the current crisis with their conscience – and their organization – intact.” – Harry M.

Kraemer

Harry Kraemer is the former chairman and CEO of the \$12 billion global healthcare company Baxter International. He is a clinical professor of leadership at Kellogg (where I was fortunate enough to get my MBA). Kramer is also an executive partner with the private equity firm Madison Dearborn – one of the largest private equity firms in the United States - where he consults with CEOs and senior executives.

Kraemer has led through crises and helped others do the same. He recently published an article on how he advises the CEOs and leaders in his counsel to lead through a crisis. “Almost every crisis is different. So, there is not a game plan for solving the crisis. However, there is a game plan, in my mind, for how you should approach the crisis,” he says.

Kraemer’s advice is to focus on believing and acting on two mantras.

Mantra One – “You’re going to do the right thing and you’re going to do the best you can do.”

Mantra Two – “You’re going to tell people what you know, what you don’t know and when you’ll get back to them to discuss what you didn’t know before.”

Mantra One

Kraemer says the worry, fear, anxiety, pressure and stress can completely overwhelm leaders. That overwhelm can incapacitate them.

By repeating to yourself mantra one, you can begin to unlock your mental log jam and move forward. Kraemer’s mantra is deceptively simple, so he suggests you say it to yourself over and over again. “You’re going to do the right thing. You’re going to do the best you can do.”

But how will you know what the right thing to do is? You don’t have to figure it out on your own. No one is smart enough for that.

Instead, surround yourself with people you trust and whose values align with yours. Collectively, you will determine the right thing and do your best to act on it. As always, ego is the enemy. Don’t be concerned about being right, focus on

doing the right thing. Changing course is encouraged if you and your team determine you are no longer on the best path.

Mantra Two

“You’re going to tell people what you know, what you don’t know and when you’ll get back to them to discuss what you didn’t know before.”

Telling people what you know is simple. Do it even if people will not like what you have to say.

Part two is harder for many of us, but necessary to gain the credibility and trust needed to lead well. We must let people know what we do not know. Then we can make a promise to follow up with them at a specific time. Why a specific time? I believe silence can be deafening during a crisis.

Five minutes of waiting can seem like an eternity wondering when the next update will be. Do not do that to your people. Let them know when you will be communicating with them again and keep that promise. You may not have anything new to share, but your team will know they can depend on you to do what you say you are going to do.

Kraemer says several industries and companies are handling this crisis in a

way that will reflect well on them in the future. He cites the airlines bending over backward to allow people to change or cancel flights. Major League Baseball clubs pledging \$30 million to the thousands of ballpark employees who will lose income while the league is not playing is another great example.

“It may hurt your profitability in the short term, but the long-term impact is going to be very, very positive because they did the right thing,” says Kraemer.

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Curt Fowler is President of [Fowler & Company](#) and Director at [Fowler, Holley, Rambo & Stalvey](#). He is dedicated to helping leaders build great businesses and better lives for themselves and the people they lead.

Curt is a syndicated business writer, keynote speaker and business advisor. He has an MBA in Strategy and Entrepreneurship from the Kellogg School, is a CPA, and a pretty good guy as defined by his wife and four children.