

MARSHALL GOLDSMITH



LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF CRISIS

THE WAY FORWARD IN A CHANGED WORLD

COMPILED BY MARSHALL GOLDSMITH & SCOTT OSMAN

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Dedicated to the workers who are showing up every day during
the crisis, demonstrating leadership and commitment.

Leadership in a Time of Crisis

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100
COACHES

FIVE COMMITMENTS OF PURPOSEFUL LEADERSHIP

Jennifer McCollum

It was shaping up to be a very good year for our business, where we would reap benefits across the organization after nearly two years of investment in a significant transformation. Our strategic plan was working, and we had the people, products, and processes to thrive. On February 20, 2020, our head of operations walked into my office to alert me to a minor supply chain problem. We were having trouble getting some needed supplies out of China for imminent client deliveries. I chuckled, surprised that this so-called “China Coronavirus problem” was having an impact on our company. We quickly sourced a local supplier, and I assumed the problem had been solved.

Of course, that was only the beginning. As the news of COVID-19 escalated and fears grew globally, we each looked to our leaders for answers. At the macro level, we sought guidance from heads of state and health experts. Should we get on an airplane? Wear a mask? Make our own hand sanitizer? In our communities, we relied on local government to learn about the safety of our schools and gathering places. And in our organizations, we looked to the CEO and managers. Should we work from home? How do we respond to customers if services are disrupted or contractual terms need revising? Is *my* job at risk?

Even in the best of times, leadership is hard work; only 14 percent of over one million leaders in our Linkage database are rated by their managers, peers, or direct reports as *effective* when it comes to their impact on the people, culture, and business. However, we have identified a class of companies that consistently outperform expectations because they focus relentlessly on their leadership capability and capacity. Simply put, they prioritize their *people* in a way that has material impact on their business. These organizations can elevate the performance of their leaders and their workforce while building a great culture, even in dire times.

This has never been more relevant than it is today. In a crisis, when the path forward is unclear, leading is even harder. As CEO of Linkage, I am experiencing these challenges firsthand alongside leaders globally. And while none of us has all the answers, I do know one thing for sure: *every* one of us is doing our best to navigate this uncharted territory. Each day, I learn critical lessons and insights that help me connect with and communicate effectively with our employees, clients, partners, suppliers, and investors. It is times of crisis that have been the most important periods of growth in my career, accelerating my evolution as a leader.

In a crisis, ensure your purpose is your guiding light.

In fact, there is no more important time for each of us to reflect on our own sense of purpose. What is your calling? What is the unique value that you offer? What value does your team bring? What does your organization offer the world at a time when all our collective contributions are needed? I've found that grounding myself in answers to these questions has brought me important perspective in a time when it can be difficult to keep grounded in both our short- and long-term goals.

At Linkage, our purpose is clear: we exist to change the face of leadership, by accelerating all leaders to be more effective and by advancing women and other underrepresented populations. In challenging times, this mission becomes even more critical, as we help leaders operate more purposefully and inclusively, and emerge from this crisis even stronger.

It is in exactly this type of dynamic, uncertain environment that the most effective leaders stand apart from the rest. In fact, our research from more than 100,000 leadership assessments uncovered five common commitments that the most effective leaders make, which enables them to perform at higher levels and drive differential results.

Five Commitments of Purposeful Leadership®

1. Inspire. Leaders must provide hope and inspiration for the future, by directing energy toward a clear and bold vision. In a crisis, leaders still need to draw in others through their communication. Set shorter-term goals that can help rally and focus the team. Ask yourself: what can we accomplish this day, this week, or this month? And celebrate the successes, no matter how small.

2. Engage. This is a time to bring people together and ensure they have a chance to contribute to their fullest potential. With many decisions to be made and no road map to guide the way, inviting diverse perspectives will give you better outcomes. Open yourself up to others for their contributions.

We recently implemented a dynamic new process for cross-company collaboration, based on the Business Review Plan process I learned from Alan Mulally, former CEO of Boeing Commercial Airplanes and Ford Motor Company during the crises of 9/11 and the Great Recession. Every week, we convene eighteen leaders from every function and business unit to share information, identify immediate needs, and organize cross-functional teams to resolve them. Topics covered range from business continuity plans to employee communication and product innovation.

3. Innovate. Trying times demand accelerated change and reimagination of the business, given the realities of daily shifts in the external environment. To stay competitive and emerge stronger from a crisis, leaders need to drive new thinking.

COVID-19 is prompting massive innovation in health care, technology, education, and distribution. Suddenly, we are adjusting to a global

remote workforce and school system. Scientists and regulatory agencies are collaborating at an unprecedented pace, testing new diagnostics, treatments, and vaccines. And demand for at-home delivery has outpaced supply, as evidenced by the lack of toilet paper on grocery store shelves. We are learning every day, focusing on what works, and staying agile.

4. Achieve. Successful leaders accomplish aspirational goals by creating appropriate clarity, structure, and process. In a crisis, loosening controls may be necessary, and a different structure may be required to allow rapid execution. For example, the Federal Drug Administration and other global regulators have lifted lengthy standard testing and approval processes, paving the way for faster solutions.

5. Become. Above all, in times of uncertainty, leaders must be emotionally present and resilient. We are called upon to put the good of the group ahead of ourselves. We need to be self-aware, courageous, and committed to being purposeful. It requires being calm and positive—standing strong in our plan, until we can develop an even better plan. It requires telling the truth and communicating openly about information and decisions as soon as we can. It requires resilience.

In addition to these commitments, our most recent Linkage research revealed another critical finding. Those who lead from a place of inclusion will quickly differentiate themselves, especially in a crisis where different perspectives and experiences are needed most.

We identified sixteen specific behaviors in our 360° assessments that map to inclusive leadership. For example, how well does the leader “encourage a culture where people speak up, regardless of experience or background.” When we examined data from 19,000 assessments evaluating 1,200 leaders, we found that *the most effective leaders are also the most inclusive*.¹ In short, inclusive leaders will be instrumental in our ability to navigate a crisis and emerge from it successfully.

1. <https://www.linkageinc.com/leadership-insights/linkages-latest-research-proves-the-most-effective-leaders-are-the-most-inclusive-leaders/>

Upholding the commitments of Purposeful Leadership may require more of us than is reasonable during a crisis, and we can't do it alone. Ensure you have a support system with your peers or with a coach. Share your struggles, your hopes, and your fears, and ask for help. I benefit from weekly consultation from members of my personal Advisory Board.

One month into the crisis, the board, executive team, and I realized that the severe business impact of COVID-19 required us to lay off a portion of our staff so we could manage our cash. It is the most difficult decision a CEO must make, owing to the significant impact on culture and people. Using all the commitments of Purposeful Leadership, I dedicated myself and our leadership team to managing the difficult decision-making process with compassion and grace. We gathered the remaining staff to explain how our 2020 aspiration had been compromised, but outlined our plan to move forward, and invited them to ask questions and offer their perspectives and feelings. We thanked each departing employee individually and committed to helping them however we could in securing employment. I was moved by the emails I received from remaining staff, but even more moved from the public communication from departing staff, see examples below:

Head of Client Partnerships: "Yesterday was such a sad day. My head and heart ached for everyone at Linkage. You and the leadership team demonstrated such courageous leadership, with grace and humanity. Please know you are appreciated and inspiring. I am relentlessly committed to finding the opportunity in this massive disruption to help our firm innovate and thrive. We have incredible people and loyal clients, and together we will forge a path to a brighter tomorrow. Take care, and know that scaling to the summit remains the vision and my goal."

Project and Content Manager: "I wanted to thank you for the kindness you had during this terrible time. I know that the decisions made were not easy and that you are having a heartbreaking time as well. From last Tuesday until now I have felt Linkage's support. You all were so wonderful with giving the news and offering any help that was needed."

In the midst of crisis, may it be our collective goal to fulfill the commitments of Purposeful Leadership, and emerge stronger because of it.

Jennifer McCollum is CEO of Linkage, where she oversees the strategic direction and global operations of the Boston-based leadership development firm. For more than thirty years, Linkage has been changing the face of leadership. Through work with more than one million leaders, Linkage empowers leading organizations to develop effective, purposeful leaders; advance women leaders; and create cultures of inclusion. McCollum has twenty years of experience building and leading businesses in the leadership space. She has a master's degree in communications from the University of Stirling in Stirling, Scotland, and an undergraduate degree from Wake Forest University.

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