



Building Exceptional Leaders in Uncertain Times

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During uncertain times, both organizations and people look to their leaders to be signposts. In my career, I've seen that periods of change can be especially daunting for people in leadership positions as they require leaders to reassure, motivate, and focus people in the midst of uncertainty, stress, and burnout.

As leaders help their teams move through challenges, they encounter opportunities to recognize their own potential and develop mindsets and skill sets that make them exceptional leaders. When times get

tough, leaders who take a proactive approach with their people, who engage their teams, and who drive collective action around high-priority goals can become more effective in their roles and continue to achieve breakthrough results for their organizations.

This guide explores four critical behaviors leaders can cultivate to improve their personal effectiveness and their team's collective impact while navigating a difficult organizational chapter.

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Behavior 1: Lead Proactively

Being proactive—as an individual and as a leader—is about more than taking initiative.



Whether you're facing economic uncertainty or another organizational challenge, when things get challenging at work, it can feel like a lot is beyond your control as a leader. While that may be true, there are always things you can influence. **Being proactive**—as an individual and as a leader—is about more than taking initiative.

The first step to being proactive is knowing your stressors and recognizing how they impact your **leadership**. When you're conscious of how your behavior affects others, you can make more mindful choices about how to respond and where to focus your energy. As you build character and competence and grow as a leader, your credibility also grows—a necessary element of building a culture of trust with your people. Proactively modeling behaviors that encourage and increase trust can help get people on board with difficult changes in a stressful time.



The second step to being proactive is working on the things you can do something about, and rallying your team around what they can work on together. Here are some actions you can take to set your team up for success:

- Acknowledge the difficulty of the challenge.
- Be clear and transparent on the why behind the challenge.
- Talk straight about what you do and don't know.
- Maintain a we-will-get-through-this mentality.
- Be clear about what's possible, what isn't, and why regarding a solution.
- Treat others with empathy and respect.
- Set realistic expectations for how you will progress through the challenge.
- Make space and time for human emotion.

It isn't that the difficult situation goes away—that it isn't hard—but exceptional leaders use a proactive approach to help their teams face difficulties with resilience.



Behavior 2: Engage Your Team

Change can majorly disrupt the status quo within your organization. As a result, leading effectively through periods of major change requires an intentional approach. To help teams work through challenges such as budget cuts, hiring freezes, scrapped initiatives, or even great opportunities like unexpected growth, leaders need to [engage their people](#) around the changes at hand.

Start by tapping into what makes your people feel excited, engaged, and motivated. For many organizations, this starts with creating a shared vision and strategy for the future. An exceptional leader comes prepared with a strategic direction but asks for help in refining that direction in order to get the best ideas on the table—because every person has their own genius to contribute. When leaders work collaboratively with their teams to create a plan of action, people will be more involved and invested in the success of new initiatives than if they passively receive directives without giving input.



Engaging teams is critical, but it's also important to remember that leaders can't force their people to accept change.



Engaging teams is critical, but it's also important to remember that leaders can't force changes in mindset. Even if your organization has built a culture that values flexibility, resilience, and agility, each team member is a unique person with their own perspectives, motivations, and values. Sometimes, engaging your

team means meeting individuals where they are on the change spectrum by building trust and bringing them along with you. When you dialogue and don't dictate, listening empathetically, your people will be more likely to embrace a new normal, even if they're unsure of what it might hold.



Behavior 3: Drive Collective Action

Once you have people on board with the plan for navigating through a change, it's more important than ever to refocus everyone's efforts on your organization's most important goals. When resources are limited and the pressure is on, it's critical to have everyone rowing in the same direction to [multiply your collective impact](#).

This starts with setting clear expectations. Communicate the desired outcomes—what key results you want to achieve—and why these outcomes matter to your organization's immediate and long-term success. Doing this helps people see how they can add value to a winning team. People want to contribute to something meaningful, and they want to know what actions will help them succeed. When these expectations are connected to your organizational goals, you've got alignment.

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As leaders unite their teams with purpose, they also ignite each person's intelligence and ability to achieve that purpose together. Setting up your team to [get results](#) means planning goals with them rather than for them. Bringing in team members' voices leads to more investment in decisions because they understand how the goal connects to outcomes you all strive to achieve.

Driving collective action also means coaching individuals on how to increase their capacity to [achieve goals and solve problems](#), a critical undertaking when individuals take on new roles in a challenging time. When an exceptional leader builds leadership in others, they turn potential into capacity and empower their people to discover solutions themselves. And that helps every person take action decisively, creating even more impact for your organization.



Behavior 4: Facilitate Breakthrough Results

In times of uncertainty, your organization's goals may shift. As a leader, however, you still have the opportunity to help your teams achieve consistent, impactful results that help your organization weather immediate storms and get back on track with long-term plans.

One way you can help your team deliver consistently is to support [project execution](#) from a strategic perspective. While individual team members may be doing the day-to-day work on a project, leaders can use their cross-functional knowledge to encourage alignment across different teams and build relationships with stakeholders to smooth the way. Encouraging people to work together and give their best is where real breakthrough results happen. Leaders can also ensure every project is set up to deliver organizational value by defining clear outcomes during the input phase and monitoring progress as the project advances to ensure those outcomes are achieved.



Getting people to work together and give their best is where real breakthrough results happen.



Another way leaders can help their teams achieve breakthrough results is by implementing [frameworks](#) that measure progress and hold individuals and teams accountable. When people can track their personal efforts and see how they contribute to a team-driven whole, they're engaged in ways that allow them to make a lasting impact.

Perhaps most importantly, leaders can remember that no matter the situation, organizations are made up of people. The empathy and encouragement

leaders extend to their team members drive strong results because it supports the whole person—body, mind, heart, and spirit—rather than focusing solely on work output. By [seeking to understand what your people feel](#) in a time of uncertainty, leaders can uncover differences in perception and use these differences to help everyone contribute uniquely to your organization's success. When leaders choose an empathetic mindset, people feel seen, heard, and encouraged as they work together to achieve what matters most.



Reframing Challenges as Opportunities for Growth

For exceptional leaders and their people, changes are more than obstacles to overcome—they're opportunities to grow and develop. As leaders adopt and internalize the principles of human effectiveness, they build character and competence, develop emotional resilience and agility, and connect their purpose with key business goals. In turn, they're able to proactively engage others around change, continuously engage their people, spur teams into collective action, and clear the path so everyone can do their best work while making the greatest impact. This is the kind of leader we all aspire to be—one that delivers great results, no matter what difficulties they face.



Build Exceptional Leaders in Your Organization

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