

HOW TO MAKE
— **CRUCIAL** —
DECISIONS
DURING A CRISIS

Celia  SWANSON

Put Your People First

When in doubt, putting your people first should be your top priority as you make key decisions. Your people are the heartbeat of what makes your business tick and should remain a constant priority as you navigate tough times. The best way to do this is by 'keeping your people whole'. In other words, do everything you possibly can to maintain the compensation and benefits they normally have even if you can only maintain them for a short term.

CASE STUDY

I was in a board meeting and the head of operations for the organization was prepared to let go a percentage of the staff that could no longer work full-time hours considering the COVID-19 crisis. No matter how she ran the numbers, she simply couldn't see a way out of making such a consequential decision. A few of the board members nodded in agreement toward the decision but I chose to push back and probe for more discussion.

"How can we ensure our people are kept whole throughout this process?"

Are we doing all we can to do the right thing for our people, even though this is an unprecedented situation for our business?

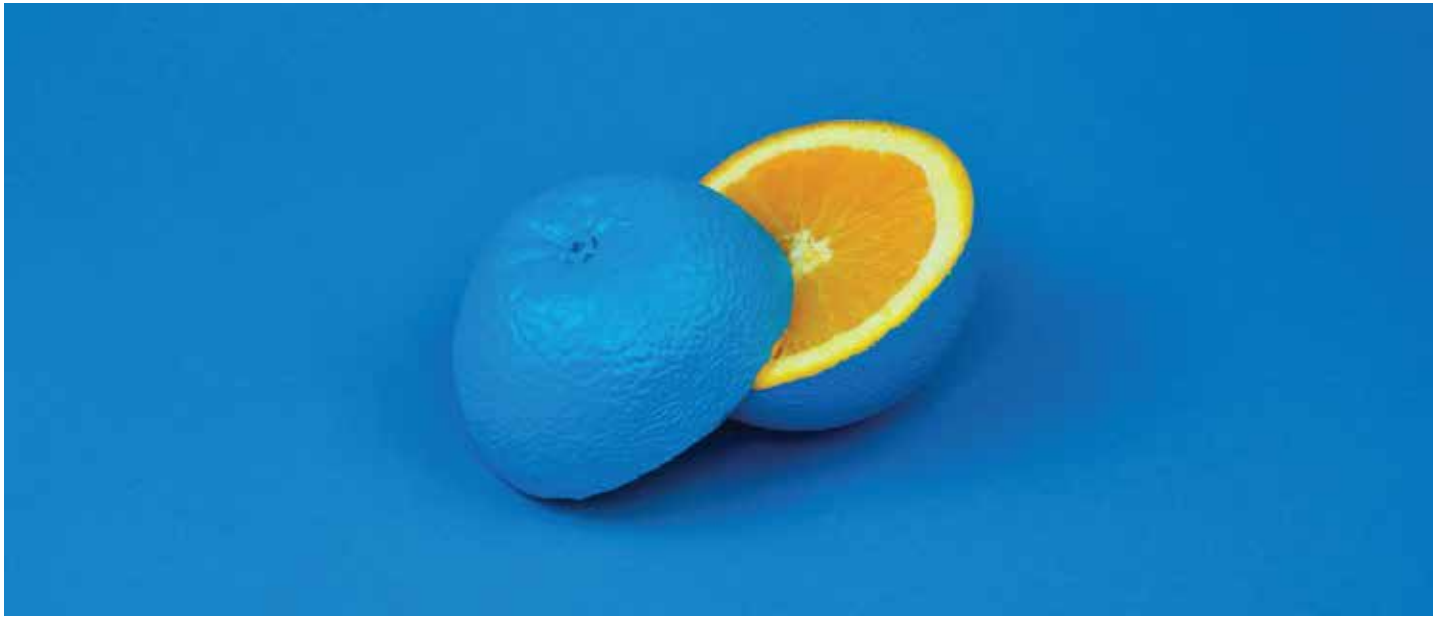
How can we keep them on payroll and maintain their benefits even if it's only for a short amount of time?"

I then went on to suggest a way to 'keep their people whole,' which ultimately meant they offered them the opportunity to do out-of-the-ordinary tasks around the building to keep their hours up and continue to elevate the building aesthetically — something there often isn't time or budget for. It felt like a win-win. These jobs included painting the building or picking up trash around the grounds even if it wasn't in their job description. It's about the human spirit of making the best in a terrible situation and showing your true colors as you identify ways to support your people — and ways you encourage your people to support others. During a crisis, people lose a sense of control in their lives and 'keeping them whole' is a way to help them regain a bit of that control.



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Challenge Your Assumptions

Remember, we are in 'unprecedented' times meaning the assumptions and decisions you made when things were normal cannot be the same as the ones you make in a time of crisis. As you navigate, be willing to challenge those assumptions in the interest of doing what is right, given seemingly impossible circumstances.

It might be easy to jump to a conclusion out of fear or panic but the reality is that you probably have more options than you think. You will be able to sleep better at night if you remember to keep your people priority, knowing you made the most calculated decision with them at the forefront. While you may be overwhelmed with uncertainty about what sort of impact the crisis may have on your organization, you want to be able to say that you explored every possibility based on the information available to you to make the best decisions. Ask yourself, 'What is the best short-term decision I can make for the most long-term value?' as you weigh your options. In other words, will the short-term decisions I make today equate to long-term trust and loyalty from our people and from our customers.

Practice Consistency

Work may change as you know it, but continuing some key actions as a leader will go a long way. Be sure to 'communicate, communicate, communicate' and remain visible and transparent with your employees. It helps for them to know you're in it with them and that you are human.

You'll also want to maintain a sense of normalcy as best you can. Simple routines such as weekly Zoom meetings, procedures, and protocols give a sense of 'business as usual' as you navigate your crisis. These small acts of normalcy can go a long way and keep everyone in a clear state of mind.



Have Courage

If history has taught us anything, it's that those with the courage to take risks and lead amidst change and uncertainty always come out stronger on the other side. Have the courage to make key decisions and own them. When you exercise the discipline of courage, you will truly know what you are made of as a leader and create better opportunities for everyone throughout your organization.

Use Your Moral Compass

When the dust settles, you want to be proud of the way you handled the situation and to know that you did the right things. There may be various considerations based on your company or the issue at hand. But, at the end of the day, morality is black and white. Don't let the gray area creep in and taint your judgment.

Use your [Bright Lines](#) to guide your thinking. Like traveling on a highway, it's important to stay in your lane of virtue — not crossing the bright yellow lines that influence your decision-making. Take a step back and look at the situation with intentionality — what will you stand for? What will you not tolerate? What are the things that really motivate and inspire you to lead well? What are your non-negotiables? Taking time to evaluate yourself and define your very core will position you for success as you navigate unexpected challenges.

Elevate Your Culture

The values of your company culture may be written on a wall or plaque, but it's in times of crisis that your culture can thrive at its fullest or lose its way. The culture of your company should shine through during good times and bad. More importantly, when you have a strong culture, you can achieve almost anything, despite the uncertainty.

CASE STUDY

When we managed our way through Hurricane Katrina at Walmart, it completely changed the perspective on how our stores led through a crisis. There was a community of people desperate for food and supplies that depended on our stores in order to feed their families and maintain their livelihood. We immediately increased our support capabilities and told the store managers that if they were able to open their stores, they should open them. But, for those whose stores couldn't quite get there, we offered to send the cavalry to help them open. These leaders did everything they could to keep their stores open. Some even lived in their stores for days — if not weeks — just to be sure the waters didn't take over their stores. This goes to show that the DNA of your culture will always reveal itself in the midst of the disruptive circumstances — good or bad.



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Lead With Grace

The very best and most trusted leaders lead with grace — which requires cultivating the heart, the mind and respect of the individual. When you lead with your heart, you have the courage to demonstrate that you care about people as individuals by understanding their perspective even when you have to resort to worst case scenarios. When you lead with the mind, you have the ability to look ahead in order to rise above the grips of your current situation. You have the ability to see the larger vision at hand despite the circumstances. Finally, when you lead with respect, you are truly present with others and take every opportunity to advocate for them and for yourself.

If you remember one thing from this content, I hope it's that you always put your people first. You'll find that the true return on investment comes from the loyalty of taking care of those who have been loyal to you. No matter the decisions you make, if you truly lead with your people as your priority — and you make sure they know it — your actions post-crisis will be the cornerstone of your organization's legacy.

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Celia Swanson is a senior executive leader who spent 25+ years at the world's largest retailer championing its culture and its people. She is notably recognized as the first female executive vice president at Walmart Inc. breaking the glass ceiling for many women to follow.

In addition to her professional career, Celia is known for her community leadership in Northwest Arkansas. She was selected by the Northwest Arkansas business community as the 2016 Athena Woman of the Year for her excellence in community service, board leadership and regional impact in Northwest Arkansas.

Celia's contributions were recognized by receiving the top two operations awards from Sam's Club and Walmart US. Her deep expertise in retail, large-scale transformation, company culture and multigenerational workforce engagement serves as the cornerstone of her career legacy.

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