

COVID,
cash flow,
and humanity
at work:

A guide for
purpose-driven
leaders

by Adam Schorr & John Wallis



Like all of us, you're probably busy now trying to keep your head above water in your personal and professional life. The last thing you need is yet one more article with mundane tips for working at home or breathless predictions about how the future of absolutely everything is going to change forever.

You won't get any of that here.

Instead, we'd like to offer a reminder of some timeless ideas—ways of thinking and leading that have always mattered, that were becoming more of a focus before COVID, and that will continue to occupy a place at the top of your leadership agenda long after this crisis is over.

The journey toward purpose-led organizations

If you're like most leaders, your company has been on a journey over the past few years to bring purpose and values to the fore in how you lead, in how you operate your company, in the culture you shape internally, and in the way you engage your external stakeholders.

The world has been pushing all of us in this direction. At an individual level, people are increasingly saying that they prefer to buy from and work for companies whose purpose and values they share. And at a societal level we're seeing increased activism demanding that companies declare what they stand for, take a stand on important social issues, and, even more, live these ideals themselves.

There is a growing awareness that every business—and perhaps even capitalism itself—must change; that we must reconsider the relationships we have with all of our stakeholders and reinvent our financial and operating models to create more positive impact across our ecosystems.

We believe that in a post-COVID world, having and living a purpose and values that go beyond just making money will be mandatory.

Legislative and regulatory bodies will continue to pressure companies to be better members of society. The pressure

from within the business community may be swifter and more decisive.

Approximately 10 years ago, public companies and many large private businesses started requiring their suppliers and partners to demonstrate a commitment to environmental responsibility. It is now the norm to be asked about this in an RFP.

More recently, many companies started requiring their suppliers and partners to have made a commitment to diversity and inclusion. In just a few years, it has become the norm for this to be included in RFPs.

We believe that soon, companies will be asked by prospective partners and customers to talk about their purpose and values—and how they live them internally in their culture and externally in the world.

Now it must be said that many leaders and organizations have approached purpose and values as an exercise in marketing communication or advertising. They've written beautiful words, made beautiful posters and videos, and declared to the world what they stand for—as if saying it makes it true.

Those leaders and organizations have long been headed for a day of reckoning.

The public has fast been losing tolerance for organizations that cynically declare lofty aims but don't take the concrete steps required to bring their stated ideals to life in behavior.

COVID has accelerated that day of reckoning. It is here now.

We are not naively suggesting that any of this has solved, or even will solve, all problems. We are saying that the trend toward more responsible, sustainable, and moral business is real, that it is creating meaningful change, that it is accelerating, and that it will not be optional.

If you've been on this journey, you've likely found it hard work requiring tremendous resolve, but also exhilarating and profoundly meaningful. You're probably proud of the progress your company made and eager to go further.

What about now?

Today's reality is forcing you to take actions that break your heart and make you wonder how you can continue to lead your organization from a place of purpose.

The demands placed on you as a leader have become more complex and more intense. You have to continue operating the company, managing financial risk, balancing accounts payable and receivable, leading your team, caring for your workforce—those who are still working and those who have been furloughed, and providing whatever reassurance you can about the future in the face of crippling uncertainty and fear.

You might even be in a battle for the survival of your business—grappling with how to respond to this crisis in a way that keeps the business alive while respecting your values; conserving cash while preserving human dignity.

And you've probably been forced to make tough, painful choices about people—laying off, furloughing, or cutting compensation for valued members of your team.

You're likely doing this while overworked and exhausted, worried about your own health and the health, safety, and happiness of your family, and trying to navigate the many complexities, absurdities, and annoyances of quarantine life. Few people fully appreciate the stress you're under and you probably aren't being thanked enough for your work as you navigate what is likely the biggest challenge of your career.

Undoubtedly, COVID will leave an altered landscape in its wake. In some cases, the crisis has revealed financial, strategic, and operational flaws that we were not aware of and will now need to address. In many cases, it has simply shined the harsh light of reality on problems we already knew about and will now need to prioritize.

But as much as the work ahead is about what's new—reinventing, rebuilding, and reimagining—it is also about what is timeless—reminding ourselves of what truly matters and recommitting to our most fundamental human values.

We're seeing examples of that every day. We're seeing leaders

make gut-wrenching choices in a way that manifests the higher ideals of humanity—putting others before themselves, finding innovative ways to give back to their internal and external communities, and demonstrating that even—perhaps especially—when taking actions that cause pain for people, there’s a way to do it with empathy, respect, and love.

So, as we look ahead to what will be new, let’s stay grounded in and draw strength from what has always been true.

Here are three leadership imperatives we hope you’ll find helpful:

- 1. Be kind to yourself**
- 2. Put humanity at the center of the employee relationship**
- 3. Take comfort and guidance from purpose and values**

1.

Be kind to yourself

As a leader, many people are looking to you for guidance. They’re expecting you to have all of the answers and you don’t want to let them down. But if you’re not at your best—well, let’s be real for now, if you’re not holding onto some sanity—you cannot be helpful to others. Times are crazy! If you’re managing to put pants on *before* your video calls, you’re doing okay and deserve a cookie.

So figure out what you need in order to stay in a good (enough) place—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. That’s probably going to involve some exercise, fresh air, sunshine, and authentic human connection. Maybe start meditating a bit—it’s not weird, really! There are a million websites and apps out there with all the information you need. Find what works for you and give it a try.

And occasionally, if what you need is a stiff drink before 5pm, go ahead, we’re not judging.

Also, keep this in mind: It might feel like you're alone. You're not. Every leader is going through this. Reach out to your friends, peers, and mentors to stay connected and grounded.

2.

Put humanity at the center of the employee relationship

The employer-employee relationship is too often thought of and managed as a financial and legal relationship. Sure, there is money at stake. If you don't pay people, they tend not to show up. And yes, there are specific legal definitions and requirements for full-time versus part-time employees, and employees versus contractors.

But the employer-employee relationship is first and foremost a *human* relationship. Work relationships are no less driven by human nature and interpersonal dynamics than personal relationships. More simply said: work relationships are personal relationships. If you're not thinking and engaging that way, you're doing yourself and the people you work with a great disservice.

Putting humanity at the center of your relationships with people at work is not just about being nice. It's about recognizing that relationships with people at work are relationships with people—and that even when someone is being paid, they still have hopes, dreams, fears, quirks, neuroses, and flaws.

Great leaders understand this. They understand that what makes a relationship truly human is that it is rooted in empathy, it values the emotional experience more than the practical reality, it demands authenticity, and it becomes more precious and more meaningful the more vulnerable we allow ourselves to be.

What could that look like for you as you lead your organization through this crisis? We'll expand on this more in a future article but here are a few tips.

Practice empathy

To have a human relationship requires that you see the other person as a human—that you understand what they're experiencing, how it affects them, and how they feel about it. The only way you can do this is to ask people and spend time listening to their stories.

The people you work with—especially those who have been laid off or furloughed—are probably on an emotional roller coaster now. Check out any of your social media feeds and you'll likely see a lot of people working through similar situations and having similar reactions. These might include:

- Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, uselessness
- A loss of purpose
- Massive financial stress
- No sense of time—every hour and every day feeling the same
- Crazy late-night binge watching
- Messed up daily rhythms and sleep schedules
- Uncontrollable mood swings
- Inability to focus
- Trouble being productive
- A bit more drinking than normal
Who are we kidding? A lot more drinking than normal!
- Parenting routines and methods obliterated
- Kids bouncing off the walls

How are you reaching out and communicating with those working at home who are stressed about methods of work they were not prepared for and conditions at home that don't lend themselves well to productivity or focus?

How are you reaching out and communicating with those furloughed at home stressed about their future?

Realize that many trusted and loyal employees are already circulating their CV due to the uncertainty of today's world.

Lead the person, not the employee

Organizations often inadvertently send out signals that are dehumanizing. Ironically, the department that shapes the relationship organizations have with people, refers to people—in the very name of their own department—as “resources”. And don’t get us started on “FTE” or “headcount”—profoundly dehumanizing terms which reduce human beings to raw material for an industrialized corporate machine.

Think about the words you use. Many communications have been referring to workers as “essential” or “non-essential.” Imagine how it feels to be referred to as “non-essential” by a company you’ve been a part of for 20 years. Or even six months.

People need to be treated as people—especially those who have been laid off, furloughed, or otherwise had their work and compensation reduced or eliminated due to this crisis.

In any human relationship there will be tough times and difficult moments. We can’t always change the facts or address the substantive issues. But we can change the way we show up in an effort to touch someone’s heart.

Right now, you probably don’t have the budget to bring your workforce back to full employment; but caring, kindness, and the human touch are free. The *what* may be out of your control, but the *how* is yours to choose.

This idea is summed up best by a famous saying attributed to Maya Angelou: “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

People need to be treated as people—especially those who have been laid off, furloughed, or otherwise had their work and compensation reduced or eliminated due to this crisis.

Communicate authentically

One of the toughest challenges of having a truly human relationship in a work environment is that, well...you have to be human.

People want to know that you understand them. Not because you read a pulse survey but because you are in it together with them, experiencing what they are experiencing. That sense of camaraderie, of knowing we're not alone can make all the difference.

Let people know how you're feeling and what you're going through. Don't be afraid to share your fears and vulnerabilities along with your hopes. And share the mundane details like how you're finding it difficult to manage your time or how being around your loved ones 24/7 is driving you bananas.

Be mindful of privilege here. Whining about how difficult it has been for you to get foie gras or how your Japanese garden is going untended might not be the most endearing move you can make now. Actually, it never was.

Showing up authentically will earn you much-needed trust as you communicate some of the tough decisions you have to make. And when you do have to communicate about sensitive topics, hiding behind boilerplate PR or legal-speak doesn't cut it.

Be truthful. Be honest. Be real. You don't have to have all the answers. You can't solve all the problems. You don't have to say everything perfectly. But you do have to be human.

On a lighter, but no less important note, if amidst all of this crazy you are managing to have a good hair day on every video conference, people are going to want to punch you in the face. And you'll deserve it! Don't go out of your way to show your signs of stress—that would be inauthentic—but also don't go out of your way to hide them. Real people show some wear and tear when they're under stress. Be a real people!

People want to know that you understand them. Not because you read a pulse survey, but because you are in it together with them, experiencing what they are experiencing.

3.

Take comfort and guidance from purpose and values

Recognizing that work relationships are human relationships is an important first step.

But it isn't sufficient.

There are many ways to be a human and to have a human relationship. Your goal is to be a particular kind of human. Distinctive. Unique.

As the leader of an organization, in addition to staying rooted in your own identity, you also represent the character, beliefs, and ideals of your organization.

So, as you face this crisis with all of its uncertainty, lean on your organization's purpose and values. You'll find that they're not just there for the good times; in fact, they are far more helpful—and necessary—when times are tough. Consider purpose and values a compass when you're lost in chaos. Or some other really nice metaphor.

If you've approached purpose and values as an exercise in behavior—not just communication—then you are way ahead of the curve. You have already wrestled with what your purpose and values truly mean. You've already recognized that purpose and values are a framework not a panacea for all problems nor a simple solution to complex decisions. You understand that there are times when you have to take action that you know will cause pain to loved ones; and you know that purpose and values can help you take those actions in the wisest, most authentic, and most profoundly human way.

This isn't to say that any of this will be easy. Leadership never is. Not in the best of circumstances and certainly not in the midst of this unprecedented breakdown of our organizational and societal systems.



Thomas Paine wrote* :

⚔ These are the times that try people's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but those that stand by it now, deserve the love and thanks of man and woman.

**Actually, he wrote a more gendered version, so we took the liberty to make it more inclusive. We trust Tom would have approved.*

Don't shrink from your purpose and values. Stand by them. If that means challenging a long-held assumption, norm, or even rule about how your industry operates or what "employment" means, then challenge it. Your finances are constrained; your imagination and humanity are not.

We do not want to trivialize the current tragedy; and, notwithstanding the rousing Thomas Paine quote, we also don't want to romanticize this moment and the leadership opportunity it presents. There will be ample time in the future to write the beautiful prose and poetry in recognition of the leaders that got us through these difficult times.

We are hoping you will be one of those leaders.

The world needs you to be.

Authors
Adam Schorr
Founder
adam@ruleno1.co

John Wallis
Principal
john@ruleno1.co

Design
Valerie Seijas
Creative Director
valerie@ruleno1.co

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April–May 2020

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About Rule No. 1

Rule No. 1 (“be yourself”) is a consultancy that works with leaders to define, articulate, and truly live their purpose and values—in their personal behavior, in their culture, and in the world. We are driven by the deep belief that when each of us and all of us engage as our fullest, most authentic selves, we have more fulfilling lives as individuals, spread more meaning and joy to our families, friends, and communities, build more valuable, sustainable businesses, and make the world a better place.

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