



# How leaders can maximize trust and minimize stress during the COVID-19 pandemic

March 20, 2020

Psychologists' research shows how to boost leaders' communication in times of crisis.



People look to leaders for guidance on what to do, what to expect and how to act. During uncertain and fluid times, the need for strong, calm, trustworthy leadership is more important than ever.

Psychologists' research points to several ways that leaders — whether they are government officials, business managers, educators or parents — can improve their communication skills to maximize trust and minimize stress and anxiety:

## Manage stress

People look to leaders to be calm and deliberate in their decisions and actions. Leaders who react to stressful events in highly emotional ways can add to people's stress and anxiety. Leaders can start by slowing down, taking stock of their stress and understanding what is causing an emotional reaction. Even when facing the demands of a high-profile crisis, leaders must take breaks to reset and refocus.

## Share information with empathy and optimism

In their communications, leaders should recognize the uncertainty and anxiety people are experiencing. This is especially important when leaders are communicating decisions that might add to people's stress, such as a business closure or a reduction of work hours. Recognize that people who are anxious need their leaders to give them hope and a sense of control. A loss of control can contribute to a sense of helplessness. Leaders should make it clear that there is a path to a better future and let people know how they can contribute. Providing specific steps people can take will help them manage stress and worry and build hopefulness.

## Use credibility to build trust

Credibility is a combination of expertise and dependability. Leaders gain credibility when they demonstrate that they understand the risks and ramifications of a situation. At the same time, leaders should not expect that they know all the answers. Good leaders admit when they don't know the answer to a question and defer to other experts — such as scientists or policymakers.

## Be honest and transparent

To increase trust and connection, leaders should deliver disappointing news in a clear, straightforward way and avoid giving a false perception that everything is OK. Effective leaders don't hide bad news, which rarely stays hidden. Leaders who don't share all the facts quickly become less credible, and that type of leadership can lead to more panic and overreaction.

## Provide regular communications

Good leaders establish a communication routine that people can look to with reliability. When communication stops, people are prone to imagine the worst.

## Provide a forum for feedback

People will have questions and will want to offer suggestions. Leaders gain trust when those they support feel involved and heard. While leaders can't collect and respond to everyone's feedback, they can provide reasonable, appropriate channels for questions and suggestions, such as how to support local businesses.

## Be a role model

When people aren't sure how they should behave, they look to leaders as role models. Leaders must behave consistently with what they are asking others to do. Leaders need to be the first to

embrace new policies such as cutting back on travel and practicing social distancing. People will follow the example of leaders they respect.

## Resources

- ▪ Harms, P. D., Credé, M., Tynan, M., Leon, M., & Jeung, W. (2017). Leadership and stress: A meta-analytic review. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 28, 178-194.
- ▪ Hunter, J., & Chaskalson, M. (2013). Making the Mindful Leader. *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of the Psychology of Leadership, Change, and Organizational Development*, 195-219.
- ▪ CDC: Crisis Emergency and Risk Communication Manual (<https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/resources/index.asp>)
- ▪ Judge, T. et al. (2002). Personality and Leadership (<https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2002-15406-013.html>) . *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 765-780.
- ▪ Riggio, R. E., Chaleff, I., & Lipman-Blumen, J. (Eds.). (2008). *The Warren Bennis signature series. The art of followership: How great followers create great leaders and organizations* (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2008-01030-000>) . Jossey-Bass.

---

### Find this article at:

<https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/03/covid-19-leadership>