

Become the leader you were born to be

Challenging times call for an overhaul of the 'self' for a leader to lead effectively.

◆ KARLIN SLOAN, AUTHOR, *INSPIRING LEADERSHIP FOR UNCERTAIN TIMES*

world.

It is in the most stressful moments that leadership is the most important. In a crisis, others look to you for answers, for a calm mind, and a strong perspective. They want to hear that they are part of something larger than themselves, that you have got their back, that we are all for one and one for all, and that we will help each other get through the crisis and potentially come stronger out it.

We are up against some significant challenges.


In the four years after the initial SARS infections in Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong discovered that over 40 per cent of SARS survivors 'had an active psychiatric illness, most commonly PTSD or depression'¹. These disturbing research findings are the tip of the iceberg of what we will begin to see as a follow-on to the global impact of Covid-19 which is ratcheting up levels of anxiety worldwide. Employee and consumer stress levels are high, which means performance is down and pressure on leadership is up.

As those of us that lead organisations have already seen increased pressure, stress, change, and challenge at work, how do we prevent our own burnout and keep others on track, even with a new pandemic of mental health issues looming?

Put on your oxygen mask first

It is an overused metaphor but a good one. Stabilise yourself first, then focus on others. This may mean taking some drastic steps to protect yourself, not just your physical health of which we are all hyperaware; but your mental well-being, your time, your energy, and your availability as demands increase.

In organisations, fear can shut down the productivity and effectiveness of a team fast. We stop thinking clearly and start operating on faulty assumptions. We miss important details and scramble to get things down rather than thinking them through properly. It sabotages our best thinking, decision making, and capacity to innovate during challenging times. So, it is important that you stay cool and calm in the face of threats.



As a leadership consultant working in financial services organisations for the past fifteen years, I have been witness to the peaks and perils of leadership in high-stress and high-change environments. What is different about the current moment? Navigating the intense pressure at work requires resilience, but this time of change is special—it also requires leaders to take a step back, to engage their most innovative and strategic thinking, and to practise a unique self-discipline that will enable them to activate their organisations for a new

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It takes more energy to engage in meetings when we are in a virtual environment, particularly when we are on video². It also takes more communication and clarification to get things done when your team is under stress. Some simple steps to preserve yourself:

- Build breaks into your schedule;
 - Rest and recuperate;
 - Set reminders on your phone to look away from the screen;
 - Hide your face from your own view when video conferencing;
 - Reduce multitasking when possible
 - Take short stretch breaks, walks, and when possible move;
- Make a 'to not do' list;
 - Delegate more;
 - Stay away from those people who drain your energy.

As author William S. Burroughs famously said, "If after having been exposed to someone's presence you feel as if you've lost a quart of plasma, avoid that presence. You need it like you need pernicious anemia."

INSPIRING LEADERSHIP FOR UNCERTAIN TIMES

KARLIN SLOAN

Start where they are, not where you are

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It means that we may make assumptions that others are as comfortable with change and ambiguity as we are. We may be faster to leap to new strategies and positive messages of the future than our people are ready for, and we may miss an opportunity to acknowledge the stress of the present moment and build the trust and alignment necessary to move forward together.

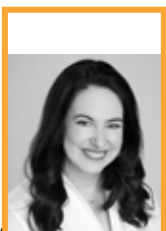
Before you pivot to a new strategy or make a leap into the future, take the time for what Google researchers into productive team outcomes term ‘ostentatious listening’⁴. Ostentatious listening means that we demonstrate that we are listening by repeating or paraphrasing what is being said and making eye contact. This demonstration that you are there to listen to others builds trust and creates buy-in for the next step, i.e., shifting into a positive future vision.

Go back to basics

Leaders throughout history have relied on deeply held virtues or character strengths to get them through challenging times. Taking the time to

take a step back and think through who you are at your best and who you wish to be will ground you in something solid and enduring.

Virtues transcend our differences and unify us in the very humanising pursuit finding what is best in ourselves⁵. They refocus us on what is most important and get us out of survival-level behaviours. It may be that you want to call on your own fortitude, moderation, kindness, or compassion as a daily practice. It is deceptively simple, but a simple daily reminder of who you are and what you represent can make the difference between mediocre performance and making a powerful and positive impact as the leader you were born to be. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karlin Sloan is a global leadership & development coach; CEO, Sloan Group International; and author, *Inspiring Leadership for Uncertain Times*. For more information, visit for more info: www.inspiringleadership.io

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