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The Human Side of Crisis Journey

The World

The COVID-19 global crisis is unique in living memory, but such pandemics are expected to continue, and even increase in frequency, as we move further into the 21st century.[1] Without fundamental change and radical action – itself challenging and fraught with uncertainty – such health emergencies will combine with ongoing crises like climate change to create even greater destabilizing events.[2] In the midst of all this, how can we sustain our businesses and communities, let alone help them adapt and thrive?

While there are no simple, immediate solutions to such complex problems, atrain believes leaders must undertake a human-focused journey to equip themselves with a forward-thinking, resilient mindset and key skills. On this journey, leaders come to understand the emotional impact of stress, transform how they interpret and respond to stress, connect with others, develop effective strategies, and implement concrete actions that are authentic to themselves and helpful to their colleagues, business, and community.

Our Theory

atrain's guiding principles are rooted in the positive psychology movement and our approach to managing "the human side of crisis" builds on this foundation. During difficult times, we believe leaders and those they are leading must create, experience, and sustain the positive state that is hope. According to hope theory, we manage stress and challenges best using an aspirational *vision* defined by goals and processes which build (1) *pathways* to these goals and (2) the *agency*, or means, to enact those paths.[3,4] Purposefully creating hope enables people to

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[1] World Health Organization (2018). *Managing epidemics: key facts about major deadly diseases*. Geneva: World Health Organization. Retrieved from: https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/managing-epidemics-interactive.pdf.

[2] United Nations (2020 April 28). *Secretary-General's remarks to Petersberg Climate Dialogue*. New York: United Nations. Retrieved from: https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-28/secretary-generals-remarks-petersberg-climate-dialogue-delivered.

[3] Snyder, C. R. (1995). Conceptualizing, measuring, and nurturing hope. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 73(3), 355-360.

[4] Snyder, C. R., Rand, K. L., & Sigmon, D. R. (2002). Hope theory: A member of the positive psychology family. In C. R. Snyder, & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 257-276). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

overcome reactionary, fear-based emotions and unlock ways of thinking that reinforce positive mindsets and accelerate the creation and implementation of routes to success.[5,6] In the context of leading others, two foundational elements are also important: a feeling of *community* among those being led and *transparency* about the situation.
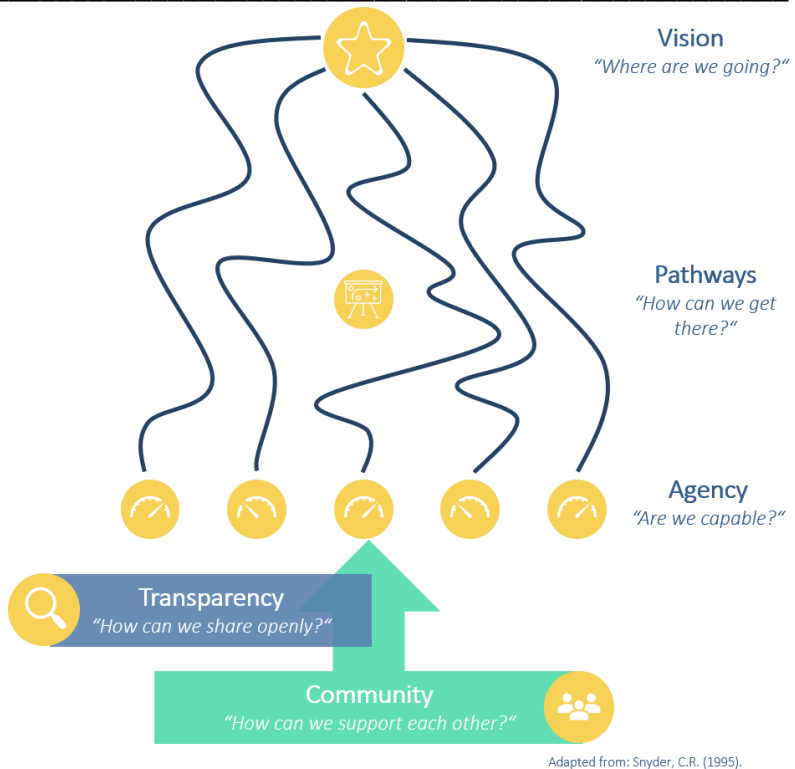

Adapted from: Snyder, C.R. (1995).

Building on this theory and our wide practical experience, we know leaders must have a hopeful mindset themselves before they can generate it in others. That is why atrain's *Leading in Times of Crisis* model puts leaders at the center. Only after acknowledging their existing mindsets, emotional triggers, and behavioral reactions can leaders deliberately rewrite these, build the groundwork for hope, and effectively lead others as a next step. Then, by using management processes drawn from hope theory, leaders co-create, prioritize, and execute strategic and operational intentions which manage the business impact of a crisis and support the wider community. As a crisis develops and changes, leaders must continually gather the most relevant facts, anticipate future changes, and revise strategic and operational management to incorporate new information, circumvent obstacles, and maintain the hopeful path.

Your Journey

Starting from these theories, you as a leader can undertake a *Human Side of Crisis Journey* which puts them into effective practice.
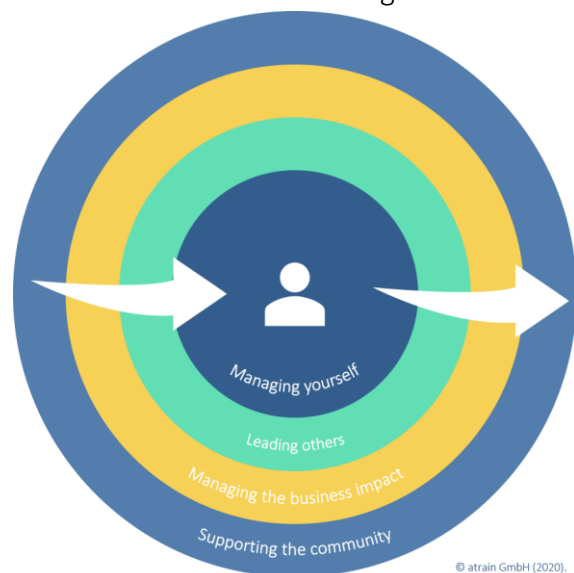
© atrain GmbH (2020).

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[5] Jarymowicz, M., & Bar-Tal, D. (2006). The dominance of fear over hope in the life of individuals and collectives. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 36*(3), 367-392.

[6] Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (1998). *On the self-regulation of behavior*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

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Leading in Times of Crisis

In times of crisis, we all experience more stress and our fears are activated. If we do not manage ourselves consciously, our fears take over and we can become paralyzed by fear and react with very narrow, survival-focused strategies. Leadership during a crisis, however, requires fast, adaptive action. Hope replaces fear-based paralysis with goal-oriented thought and actions that are collaborative and coherent. In atrain's *Leading in Times of Crisis* model, the first step on your journey is to self-reflect on your own unconscious reactions to stressful events and the relative effectiveness of your conscious mindset and behaviors when dealing with stress. Do your reactions and mindset impede your ability to act quickly and appropriately or do they facilitate it?

Stress Management and Resilience

Building on your greater understanding of mindset and behavior, the next step in your journey is to learn how to rewrite your mindset. This means deliberately transforming your emotional reactions and behaviors during times of stress so that they are driven by your core values and guided by hope, while still firmly grounded in reality. As Kelly McGonigal explains in her 2013 TedTalk, "How to make stress your friend," the experience of stress is far less important to our well-being than how we interpret and react to stress.[7] In fact, as McGonigal notes, one neuro-hormonal side effect of stress is to seek out and provide compassion.[8] Leveraging stress in this positive way helps you progress to the next step on the journey.

Leading with Vulnerability and Compassion

In her book *Brave Enough*, Olympic gold-medalist Jessie Diggins discloses how early in her career she dealt with stress in a self-destructive way.[9] Discussing the choice to share her struggles so openly, Diggins emphasizes that showing vulnerability is not a weakness, but a strength – it builds emotional bridges and replaces speculative thoughts we have about people and situations with the truth.[10] As you move into this step of your journey, being vulnerable and compassionate reinforces community and transparency. Clear information about the realities of the situation, shared in a psychologically safe environment, provides a sense of control to others. Once people begin to feel a sense of control, they pivot away from fear and rumors and take confident steps towards hope-based goals.

Human Side of Virtual Collaboration

While there are practical considerations associated with the technology we use to connect virtually during the ongoing global pandemic, what is more important is balancing the need to

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[7] https://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Diggins, J. & Smith, T. (2020). *Brave enough*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
[10] https://cleansport.libsyn.com/episode-43-jessie-diggins-gold-medallist-in-xc-skiing

achieve goals while still meeting the very human needs of the people involved. As a companion to leading with vulnerability and compassion, you must take steps to identify how dramatic changes to routine (e.g., everyone working from home, with limited in-person interactions) are affecting people. What daily rituals are they missing and what needs did those habits meet? What new rituals and shared experiences can be created? Identifying and finding ways to meet needs enables virtually collaborating teams to be engaged and agile, even if the technology does not always cooperate.

Managing Business Impact

With necessary mindsets and connections in place, you can put the key elements of hope theory into practice. At this step, you lead ongoing co-creative processes to make sense of the situation, framing it within your vision, and identify strategic goals, pathways, and resources which you prioritize and communicate. Operationally, you work in shorter, faster cycles of gathering information, analyzing it in the context of the strategic goal, deciding on and implementing actions, and combining outcomes with new information to repeat the cycle. As the situation changes, both strategic and operational management are agile, reprioritizing and finding new paths and opportunities. When food wholesalers' restaurant and hotel orders disappeared in 2020, many strategically pivoted to direct sales, quickly building new means of collecting, packaging, and distributing orders and making operational adjustments to the process along the way. Creating this new revenue stream enabled many to maintain their business and, by donating remaining excess stock to local food banks, create new relationships in their communities.[11]

Supporting the Community

Support is bidirectional. Helping your community will also help your business, its people, and you. At this final step of your journey, you meet needs and build positivity in communities struggling during a crisis by leveraging your mindset and processes to quickly create strategies and implement actions. At atrain, we created paths for local non-profit organizations to access our services free-of-charge; these initiatives support non-profits, provide atrain colleagues with unique experiences, and have long-term positive effects in our local area. By leading with hope, you can also build concrete initiatives which are aligned with your business' vision and generate hope in your community.

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[11] e.g., Shveda, K. (2020 June). How coronavirus is changing grocery shopping. *BBC Future: Follow the Food*. Retrieved from: https://www.bbc.com/future/bespoke/follow-the-food/how-covid-19-is-changing-food-shopping.html.

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The Future

Ultimately, managing this crisis and all future crises requires constructive, open cooperation and collaboration among individuals, businesses, communities, and governments.[12] Our approach and supporting models, driven by positive psychological theory, are particularly well-suited to enable individuals to quickly connect and act out of hope, instead of fear. We are looking to the future with optimism built from practical, realistic tools and our *Human Side of Crises Journey* empowers you to do the same.

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[12] World Health Organization (2018). *Managing epidemics: key facts about major deadly diseases*. Geneva: World Health Organization. Retrieved from: https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/managing-epidemics-interactive.pdf.