

# Digital leadership under pressure: How COVID-19 is redefining your role

By Andrew Upah,  
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New workplace realities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic pose unprecedented challenges for leaders. The pace and severity of change have caught everyone off-guard—even agile organizations, which thrive amidst chaos. Economic volatility is high. The future is uncertain.

And leaders are under extreme pressure as they manage their companies through. Perhaps most challenging is the fact that they must accomplish this remotely. With the sudden and indefinite shift to distributed work models, how can leaders maintain teamwide performance and morale as they navigate this unfamiliar landscape?

## Finding True North in Uncharted Waters

Even as we reach an inflection point in the pandemic, the future remains unclear. Digital collaboration and teaming are new for many—as are the dynamics of leading these freshly distributed teams. Logical as it may be to control decision making and the flow of information, flip your instincts. Instead, embrace an agile culture of trust and collaboration. But first, take a deep breath.



### BEFORE YOU ACT, STOP AND ASSESS:

1. **Review your leadership style:** Consider what former tactics no longer serve you in a remote environment. How will you unify and empower your teams from afar?
2. **Adopt 'enduring and emerging' behaviors:** COVID-19 is a humanitarian crisis. Acknowledge that your team will be anxious about loved ones and give them support. Ensure that compassion and empathy trickle down to all levels of your organization.
3. **Apply digital fluency:** Time-honored leadership attributes like trust and integrity are still an important part of your leadership toolbox. But they now need to translate to remote. Rethink how you collaborate. Be transparent, empathetic, and go out of your way to over-communicate.
4. **Identify your immediate challenges:** Support your team so they stay safe and healthy throughout the pandemic. Mental health is a key concern as employees worry about friends and relatives and adapt to home working and strict quarantines. Encourage self-care: exercise, eat well and be strict about boundaries. Implement new [crisis-driven processes](#) to aid communication and ensure everyone has the tools they need to do their job.
5. **Tackle blind spots:** We all have weaknesses. However, failing to address them when under fire can mean missing solutions that might be right under your nose. Challenge your assumptions about strategy, your skillset, and accepted organizational behaviors.
6. **Eliminate redundant behaviors:** During a crisis, speed can be the difference between survival or going under. Adopt new behaviors, but be aware that suddenly switching gears—and going remote—can impact relationships and shake morale. Double down on communication and ask your team for help.

## How to Lead, Not Put Out Fires

Even under ‘normal’ conditions, the most innovative leaders accept that they don’t have all the answers. Instead, they build powerful communities and teams of curious, committed, and creative people capable of finding the answers—even remotely. As you switch to a more agile style of working, the skills you learn now will put you at an advantage in the future.

- **Embrace new behaviors:** For most, the [leadership challenges presented by COVID-19](#) are unprecedented. So, swiftly implementing a process for decision making is essential. Establish accountability across the board. Then lead with high degrees of transparency, authenticity, and empathy to enable you and your team to learn quickly from mistakes and redirect without overreacting.
- **Trust your team:** You have the right people in place—now trust them to do their job. Avoid micromanaging and be sure to set expectations about what you want and when you want it.
- **Communicate and then some:** When you’re face-to-face, it’s easy to read people or situations and respond quickly. Without those cues, managing a remote team requires you to pay extra attention to interpersonal communications. More widely, [company crisis communications are often perceived as tone-deaf](#) as leaders attempt to gloss over concerns and ramp up positivity. Communicate clearly, honestly, and concisely at all times.

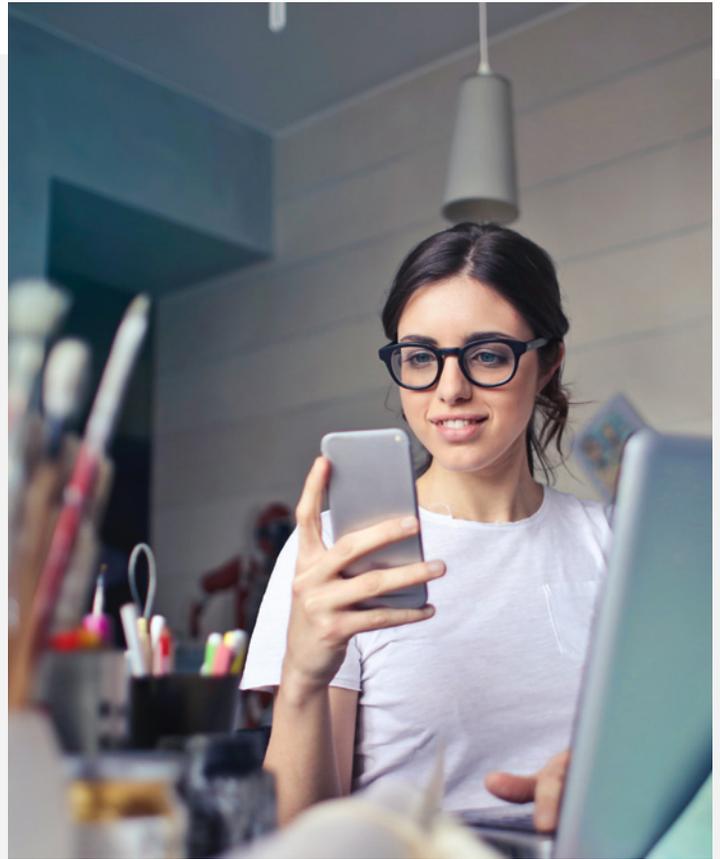
- **Be transparent:** Never be afraid to show vulnerability and compassion. These are intense, scary times. If you’re not open and authentic, it will breed concern—perhaps fear over secret measures to mitigate economic impacts. That can lead to rumors, resentment, and even greater stress. Set clear expectations, including over downtime. Laptops may be accessible at all times, but encourage your team to be disciplined about clocking off.



Leadership author and former Navy SEAL, Jocko Willink, suggests creating an ‘execution checklist.’ Tell your team what you want to accomplish and let them come up with a checklist, complete with timelines. Make sure tasks are small enough to track. And if employees fail to meet a commitment? Offer support and help them get back on course.

## Stay Calm, Be Open-Minded, and Trust Your People

There's no question that the coronavirus outbreak is testing the mettle of business leaders around the globe. The fallout is likely to be protracted and the consequences far-reaching. In this unique environment, experience suddenly counts for less and character has become our best hope. It will be those leaders and organizations that are quick to adapt, model behaviors of trust and collaboration, and support their people that will emerge on the other side—stronger than ever.



Theorem is an innovation and engineering company that advises and partners with clients on product strategy, engineering, design, and culture to build and launch technology-driven solutions for their most complex problems.

Theorem designs and builds effective frameworks for innovation that transform the way businesses think about and solve problems from the inside out.

Recently named one of the [top-40 fastest-growing remote companies](#), Theorem is a 100% remote organization.



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Andrew leads Theorem's marketing efforts as it ushers in a new era of consulting and redefines what it means to serve as an innovation partner to the world's biggest companies. He's worked remotely his entire career and is an avid supporter of distributed work models.

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