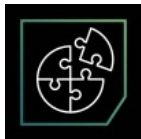




Harry Feuerstein, President of Merryck & Co.



## Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

# "In Crises, You've Got to Learn to Pivot, Not Panic, and See the Opportunities."

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Adam Bryant [in](#)

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

*[Note: This article was published as part of our original "Leadership Moments" series. The series has since been changed to "Leading in the B-Suite" for a new focus on conversations about race in corporate America. The first interview in that series is [here](#).]*

*As the pandemic intensifies, leaders are facing challenges for which there are no playbooks. But as [Harry Feuerstein](#), our president at [The ExCo Group](#), reminds us in our conversation below, there are opportunities in every crisis. Drawing on his deep experience in sports, the military and business, he also shares important lessons about the need for heightened communication and compassion in times of crisis.*

**Q. From all your years of experience in sports, the military and business, what are the leadership lessons that come to mind at a time like this?**

A. Number one, you've really got to check on your people during a crisis because you never know how people react. You can be surprised sometimes by the people who rise to the occasion, and also by the people who you thought were going to be bold but who freeze. This is different than 9/11, because that was about getting back to normal, and saying that we're not going to let them defeat us.

Now we're talking about resetting to a new normal, and so you've got to check on your people to make sure they're okay and occasionally ask, "How are you doing?" You've got people sitting at home, and you

can't actually see how they're doing beyond meetings on video or phone calls. So you have to be intentional to say, "Everything all right for you? Are you getting into some routine? Are you working out?" It doesn't take much, but that matters.

When I was a lacrosse coach, whenever we'd be down a man because of a penalty, I would always say to my players, "We need to have a heightened sense of communication" And in moments like this, communication is everything. It's easy to feel frozen in place in a crisis. We should always be communicating, but we really need to ramp it up during a crisis.

And communication doesn't just mean being more transparent about the challenges, and it can't always be alarming. As a leader, if the only thing you're communicating about is the crisis and you're not projecting anything else, then you're going to just add to the bunker mentality.

**Q. Companies are having to throw out their strategies. What's your advice for them?**

A. In crises, you've got to learn to pivot, not panic, and see the opportunities. Some of the best ideas can come up in a pivot. You've got to be bold and make some really calculated decisions. When I was at Siemens during 9/11, my colleagues did a phenomenal job when the government was looking for a solution at the airports. How do you get more equipment to screen people and who can service all of this equipment? Siemens made medical equipment, which utilized similar

technology that many of the security companies used. That led to the team finding a partner – in this case, Boeing – and to winning a very big contract, which in turn enabled the company to build a sustained, separate business.

**Q. As a leader, how do you help figure out what bold means in these moments?**

A. You've got to learn from your past. We've all been in circumstances, in business and in our personal lives, that we can extrapolate to the current situation to spark some new thinking. We know that a recession is coming at some point, and this is where leaders need to show courage and look for opportunities to grow rather than just panic and start making cuts. We spend so much time, when we evaluate people, talking about the importance of adaptability and agility. We do that to prepare for moments like this.

So what can we do differently? It's about changing the tone of communication so that it is not just about the crisis, but also about celebrating small wins. You have to stop giving what feels like a pall-bearer speech. Even when you want to tell everybody to be calm, so many leaders tell people to be calm in a way that actually creates a sense of crisis, rather than saying, "This is a new normal and there are some opportunities in here. We've got each other's back, we're going to get through this, and here's how."

That heightened level of communication will also help establish a new normal. You have to create a regular cadence of meetings. In the

military, you spend a lot of time getting ready for the next big challenge, so you practice and you say, “We’re going to check in here, we’re going to do this, we’re going to do that.”

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People crave that. In this particular crisis, you can't just say, “Go work at home and just do your job.” You've got to help people create a structure, and that's not just the CEO's job. In times of crisis, everyone can have their own leadership moment, regardless of their title. Every leader can demonstrate courage in times of crisis and it starts with doing the right thing for your people and your customers.

After 9/11, the country was scared and it took a lot of leaders to set the right tone for everybody to get back to normal, which was the best thing this country could do at that moment. Today, we are seeing manufacturing lines being switched to provide desperately needed personal protection equipment, and it's not as if they just flip a switch to do that.

Companies have reached far down in their ranks to find solutions, and in many cases, have collaborated with other companies to make this happen. This is about reaching out to any organization to find a solution. It's also about the top leaders making the right decision that's best for their people and ultimately, in this case, for the country.

This absolutely is the time when you've got to rely on your people for solutions. And engaging them to help them come up with the best answers will also help answer the questions that are top of mind for them in such moments. How do I feel a sense of community? How do I keep not only doing my job, but how do I become part of the solution? And if the solution is a pivot, how am I part of that pivot?

**Q. What's your sense of what's going to change and what's going to be the same on the other side of this?**

A. It's hard to predict. I tend to be optimistic so think a lot will go back to normal. When I use the term new normal, it's the "new interim normal." Perhaps like after 9/11, we will be better prepared for pandemics, just like we are better prepared for terrorism. We don't know how long it will take to come out of this current period of uncertainty. Then again, the leader's job now is to get people comfortable with the shorter-term new normal.

Try to stop people from worrying about an uncertain future, and get them to focus on the idea that if we do the right things, if we run the business correctly, if we engage our people, if we figure out a way to pivot, then we'll put ourselves in the best position possible to come out stronger from this crisis.

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Your company didn't get to where it is today without adversity and pivots. Most teams that win championships have been through adversity. There's a lesson there. Look around you. Your colleagues have faced adversity before. Don't get caught up in thinking that we've never experienced this before.

There are companies today that have transformed to serve very different kinds of customers, and there was probably a crisis that caused that pivot. Yes, maybe not as dramatic a crisis as COVID-19, but the muscle memory is there from learning how to pivot a company from X to Y. So rather than panic, learn to pivot again. Don't get caught up in thinking that we've never done this. Actually, we've done all kinds of things we can learn from.