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## Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

# Given the Uncertainty, the Goal Should Be to Control What You Can Control.

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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](#).]*

*With the initial shock of the pandemic behind us, companies are now moving into a new interim normal. As **Mark Gumz**, my colleague at **The ExCo Group**, reminds us, leaders need to be looking for opportunities to make the most of the current challenges. He also shared timeless leadership lessons from his CEO role during 9/11.*

**Q. We are more than a month into this crisis now. Are companies shifting into a kind of new interim normal?**

A. Companies are starting to get back to things they were talking about doing before this all happened. That is positive because it sends a signal to everybody that things are still okay, and that there's still some normalcy to what we're doing. Companies are shifting the focus to the future and investing in things now that should pay off later.

That doesn't mean we're getting back to business as usual yet, because to a certain extent there is still a feeling of being out of control. Given this uncertainty, the goal should be to control the things you can control. The leader has to convey that this is where we're going and why, this is how we're going to get there, and this is how we're going to measure progress. There will be businesses that will get even

stronger as a result if they do this, and leaders need to figure out how to convey that message to their people, and show them the path.

Another point is that, since people aren't commuting or traveling, they have more time to do things that they didn't have time to do before. So leaders should be encouraging their teams to take on some of the reading and projects that were "nice to do" beforehand but that people couldn't tackle because of time pressures. That also helps provide a sense of purpose for people, and that word is important in this environment.

**Q. As much as every day feels the same, now that we're all working at home, it does seem like we're moving through different adjustment periods of this crisis.**

A. Yes, the main concern in mid-March was making sure that employees were safe and getting them in a position to work from home, if they could. The second phase, in late March, was to make sure that the company could operate in this environment and still serve customers and deliver their products and services. That was a stabilizing phase that gave employees confidence that they would be able to continue to work, albeit differently than before.

*"Many employees may not have been in the right frame of mind until now."*

Since early April, we're now in a third phase, focused on finding ways to return to the pre-Covid-19 environment, including online "off-sites" for learning and development, as well as project work related to planning. This has helped provide more of a stabilizing effect for employees. There is now time to review certain practices and protocols and look for areas of improvement. Many employees may not have been in the right frame of mind until now. The current environment is creating opportunities to look at different possibilities, and smart companies are taking advantage of this.

**Q. As a former CEO, what have been key lessons for you on leading through a crisis?**

A. Obviously 9/11 comes to mind, because I was leading the American arm of Olympus, and we were based on Long Island. Some of our employees had relatives who were in the twin towers or who were in the fire department and went into those buildings.

There was a need for me to be as visible as I could possibly be. There were more than 900 people in our headquarters, and I walked through the hallways and talked to people in groups as large or as small as would gather, just to assure them that if they needed to leave, or if they felt that they wanted to be at home, they should go. If they wanted to stay, we were going to be there throughout the day, and we would be there for each other.

I realized that people wanted to have some assurance that there was still some continuity, because it was so unnatural for us to think about such

a terrorist act occurring so close to us. As I communicated with people that day, I wanted to be as consistent and honest as I could be. I didn't know certain things, and I was never concerned about saying that I didn't know, because leaders should say that they don't know something when they don't.

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don't know the timetable."*

As tragic as that day was, there was a desire in the weeks that followed to return to a sense of normal. With the current situation, we don't know the timetable. And this crisis is global, and it's affecting everyone. While there are differences, the leadership challenge is similar – to be present, consistent and clear about what we know and don't know. You have to communicate in a way that gives people enough information so that they're not filling the gaps on their own.

Another similarity is that there's a need that people have at a time like this to think that someone is caring about what they're going through and also considering what the future might look like. No one has the answers that perhaps we'd like to have at this point, but that's why it's so important to provide as much insight as we can while not leading people on.

**Q. Many leaders I've interviewed have echoed that point about the need to really focus on caring at a time like this.**

A. It's not just that people are adjusting to working from home; their entire family life is being disrupted. Their children also have been sent home to work on the remainder of the academic year in a very different way. There's an unusual strain in people's lives.

So leaders have to be understanding, and listen carefully, and remember that the words they choose are so critical, because people will interpret them differently at times of greater stress, and see meaning in them that you didn't intend.

**Q. Those moments of broader communication to the entire staff are trickier now for leaders, given that everything now has to be done over video.**

A. The stakes are high, and so you have to be as mindful of how you appear on screen as you would if you were addressing a group in an auditorium. Be careful about your tone, your gestures and the words you choose. Express your concerns in a way that will make them understand that you feel what they're going through, but then also express your belief for the future.

That's so important because leaders can get too hung up on the uncertainty themselves. I've seen some interesting diagrams online about moving from panic or fear, to learning and adjustment, to more aspirational thoughts. We need to travel that journey with our people.