



Sharon Daniels, CEO of Arria NLG



Art of Leading

Powerful insights from top leaders.

"This Crisis Is Like A Reset If You Take The Opportunity To Look At Things That Way."

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For companies that have not been decimated by the pandemic,

*the disruption can create powerful moments of focus. **Sharon Daniels**, the CEO of Arria NLG, shared smart insights about leading in the crisis, and building high-performance teams.*

Q. What leadership lessons have you learned in the last couple of months?

A. When the severity of the crisis became clear, you immediately focus on mitigating risk. What do we have to do to make sure everybody's okay? Our concern was "people first," because your people are going to carry you through this. Communication has become critical and it became more personal. It's about the little things, like making sure you meet every day and making sure everybody knows the company's okay.

They're also looking for leadership, and we have to be solid. I've been making sure I get enough rest. I talk to my chief operating officer, Jay DeWalt, every morning to make sure we are aligned and that we are both okay, because how we show up to the broader team matters. It's easy in business to sometimes think, "I just need to be focused on the work." But you've got to stop and focus on the people.

When we meet with the broader team, the message and the theme is focus — I always ask, "What's our focus today?" When there's a crisis, there are so many distractions, particularly for everyone who's working at home. I've also been saying, "Let's focus on where the opportunities are, and let's envision coming out of this almost like it accelerated us forward. We're going to come out whole and ahead." This crisis is like

a reset if you take the opportunity to look at things that way – for the work we do and in our personal lives.

"Let's envision coming out of this almost like it accelerated us forward."

We also are taking pressure off people who might want to try to do everything or too much. In the first week of the crisis, I said, "We're not going to try to do everything. We're going to focus on the areas where we know we're going to have an impact, and it's okay that some of the other initiatives are going to take a backseat." As it turns out, everything's moving forward. But it took the mental pressure off of people.

Q. What other lessons have you learned about communication in this crisis?

A. This is a time when we need to be really tuned into the words we choose as leaders. For example, somebody asked whether we are in a hiring freeze. And I said, "No, we have put a pause on hiring." You have to be aware of the ripple effect that words can have, especially as a leader.

If I say, "Yes, there's a hiring freeze," people might, whether they are conscious of it or not, interpret that as a bigger signal that things aren't going well. Not everybody is privy to the healthy financial position of

the company. But it made sense to put a pause on the hiring, because we had an aggressive hiring initiative in place. So I just said, “Let’s put a pause on that.”

Another example came up when somebody was presenting a timeline during one of our meetings, and said that a particular initiative was now “at risk.” And I said, “Let’s explore a different word besides ‘risk.’ Is that really at risk? Why don’t we just say, ‘It’s delayed?’ There’s enough risk around us. Just say ‘delayed’ because that’s what it is.”

But overall, people are coming together more. The work becomes more personal, and you get glimpses of people’s spaces at home on video calls. You’re looking out for each other. You have common goals in being safe and getting the job done.

*"Without disruption, there is
no motion."*

People really mean it when they are asking each other, “How are you? How are you feeling?” If someone hears a cough from someone, they’ll say, “Are you okay? Get some rest. You cannot burn out. We need you.” It’s just turned up that dial of humanity.

It’s an important process that we are able to go through as human beings. There’s disruption, and it causes motion of some sort. But then we figure out how to level out and find that comfort zone again, which is one of the beautiful things about the human spirit. But without

disruption, there is no motion. So people need to focus on the idea that, “This disruption is causing motion, and I want to make sure it’s bringing us forward.”

Q. One of the greatest challenges for leaders is making sure their top team operates right like a true team. How do you do that?

A. I’m always looking to get the best out of everybody by allowing them to do their best and by giving them the space to do that. I had a conversation with all the leaders on my C-suite team. They are a very powerful group, and I brought them together and said, “Look, I don’t want to hold back your power. I’ve been around enough executives over my career who try to just control everything. They have to be the power. They want to take credit for everything. That’s not why I’m here. I’m here to make sure we bring this vision to fruition.”

Then I added, “I don’t want to hold back any of the power you have. Go for it. I will expect that if you have an issue with one another, you’ll pick up the phone and you’ll sort it out. If it comes to me, that will really be a shame. If you think somebody is stepping into your space, just pick up the phone or get on a video call and hash it out. Trust each other to do that.”

That’s what I’m expecting, and that’s the leadership style that I’m encouraging. And it works. It’s also selfish on my part because so much energy can go into managing personality conflicts. So you really have to stand firm on that approach.

Q. And how do you handle the conversation if you do have to get involved?

A. If a situation is not getting better, I'll pull somebody aside and say, "Here's what I'm seeing. I need you to do this for me. This is how it needs to go." You're not giving orders or demanding because it's human nature to rebel in such moments. So you allow things to work themselves out.

You honor the individuals respectfully to work it out. There are differences in styles, and you point out the differences. And when they get in the way of our focus, you just pull somebody aside and say, "I need your commitment here."

Q. What qualities are you looking for when you hire?

A. Passion, enthusiasm, conviction — those great attributes that make somebody dynamic. Skill sets are important, but what matters more is the spirit in which they do whatever they do. If you have conviction, that shows up as believability.

I recently said to someone I was interviewing, "You must be a believer. If you're not a believer through and through, you won't make it here. We want believers. You must believe in yourself, in the company, and what we're doing here." That's conviction.