Leadership in the time of Covid-19 with David Roberts

Issued by Mann Made   4 May 2020

Last week, SingularityU South Africa (SUSA) hosted a fully immersive virtual reality event for SUSA partners, alumni and chapter members via V-Hive - a proudly South African virtual reality platform that creates virtual environments and lifelike avatars for events, meetings and conferences.

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Over 60 event attendees from around the world were split across numerous virtual rooms where they listened to David Roberts – SingularityU faculty member and one of the world's top experts on exponential technology and business disruption – speak on the topic of leadership in the time of Covid-19. Here are some of the things David shared with the attendees.

Ask David Roberts anything

I'm so glad that we did this virtually because I remember in around 1995 in Aspen, Colorado, a friend of mine had brought me into his basement to show me what he was doing on his computer with this thing he called the 'world wide web'. It was this new computing technology I hadn't seen before and I didn't fully understand. Now in hindsight, that moment feels so special. And I think today, this moment, for many of us, will be remembered 25-30 years into the future, where we got into this little virtual world and it didn't work quite well. It was kind of awkward and strange, we had trouble with the buttons and moving around. And we'll remember this moment because for many of us it is the first time that they've done this.

What are some of the challenges around how the Covid-19 pandemic is panning out?

I think overall, individually, not in terms of governments, we've done extremely well. Things could have absolutely been much

worse. This is so different for us because, with most kinds of events, we've experienced them before and there's a playbook for leaders. But we don't know what's going to happen next, which causes things to be so challenging. Leaders are uncertain with what is involved here and we keep learning new things each week, which changes everything.

What traits should leaders practice in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic?

We're in this continuously moving problem. And in circumstances like this, being a leader that is truthful is the most critical characteristic and leadership trait. Leaders, generally, have a tendency towards making things look better or worse than they are. Regardless of the tendencies, if they are not extremely truthful, in times of uncertainty as the events unfold, people quickly realise. And so, the leaders either gain or lose confidence in the leader very quickly. I think we're seeing that around the world. It's been difficult for many leaders. But the leader in New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, has reduced government salaries by 20% during this time, which is an extraordinary leadership action. It immediately imparts a sense of sharing this problem together, equally. She didn't have to do that and I think most world leaders have chosen not to do that. It instils enormous confidence and she has gained the trust of the people in New Zealand and the respect of other leaders in the world.

Similarly, whenever people are stressed, you need to communicate with them even more. I would recommend that as leaders of companies, you should be communicating at least every two or three days, preferably every day. And sometimes say the same thing over because sometimes people need to hear it several times to register it.

Adopting the OODA Loop response to the Covid-19 pandemic

Harvard Business School recently had a session about Covid-19. One of the pivotal leaders that they mentioned was John Boyd, a famous Air Force officer in the United States, who was responsible for the strategy of dogfighting. He dealt with fighter pilots and taught pilots what to do in situations that constantly keep changing.

During the Korean War, the United States was not doing very well in dogfights and no one understood why. He studied it and gained extraordinary insights into it. And his insight was something called the OODA Loop. OODA stands for observe, orient, decide and act.

If you're a fighter pilot heading out towards enemy space and have an enemy target that shows up on your radar that's coming at you, you don't know who or what it is, nor how bad of a threat it is. The old strategy used to be to have your wingman fly as fast as they can straight into them to see what it was. And often as a result you and they might get shot down. Because they were responding to the threat, they were always behind the enemy. The enemy was acting and they were always responding.

He realised in this observe, orient, decide and act strategy that you should act right away in little increments, even with the little amount of knowledge that you already have. When you see something show up on the radar, rather than wait, rather than sending a fighter, you could start climbing. And if your threat started to climb right away, you could presume that they were coming after you. Now you would have even more information and your enemy would be responding to you.

So, the way you could do this in terms of Covid-19, is that most leaders are waiting for the next news, whatever that might be, whether it's about going into a lockdown or that you have to wear masks. They keep learning the new news and keep responding to it. Think about the countries that responded – they heard about this disease in Wuhan and started looking into it more, but they could have responded right away. And leaders can respond right away, they could have decided, let's start wearing masks now and let's keep coming to work. So, they're now responding a little bit faster than the events are unfolding. And I think that is the single most important skill set that a leader can have when they're in these environments that are changing quite rapidly.

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