

MANAGEMENT

Which management skills are needed when coping with the coronavirus crisis?

Leading employees empathetically and effectively is an important managerial competence not only during the coronavirus crisis.

Almost overnight managers have been faced with enormous challenges by the Covid-19 pandemic. Often thrown into a purely digital way of communication, they had and still have to find and develop solutions for complex problems in a very uncertain environment. Moreover they should strengthen their employees both individually and as part of the team and develop positive perspectives for the future. In addition, they have to cope with any possible own uncertainties and lows.

It is not possible yet to estimate what the full effects of the coronavirus are going to be. One thing, however, is already clear: the enforced temporary shut-down of large parts of society and of the economy makes senior executives face highly demanding management situations. Hardly ever before have such extreme situations converged in such a concentrated way. In the initial stage of the crisis this included the abrupt change from face-to-face interaction to purely digital communication for practically everyone involved. It was also necessary to solve lots of acute issues quickly and to make fast decisions - and to do

all of that at a time when - due to many incalculable factors and uncertainties - it was and still is impossible to see far ahead, while the economic situation for many players was becoming increasingly tense.

At the same time managers have now in particular an important role to play in terms of integration and leading by example. People are looking to them more than ever. Employees are looking for an active, transparent and responsible style of leadership, giving them certainty, guidance and confidence. But what skills do managers need during change processes such as these in particular? Which skills will increasingly be the ones that count, including the time after the pandemic? And to what extent is it possible to develop them?

Empathetic and appreciative communication is required

We are currently seeing once again just how important it is during troubled times for managers to have not only good professional knowledge, but strengths in terms of their personality, too.

One important management skill in this regard is a clear commu-

nication that shows empathy and appreciation. Empathy - the ability to put yourself in other people's personal situations - has a stabilising and motivating effect. At the same time, appreciative recognition of individual employees with their own strengths and skills and their involvement in changing processes leads to stronger identification with the company. The ability to communicate clearly and to lead teams with members of different roles and characters in an effective way also strengthens each individual's commitment and the coherence within the team.

If the managers' attitude is shaped by self-trust, confidence and honesty, it will increase employees' willingness to support and shape necessary changes. The management skills mentioned are important particularly in situations of change, which inherently bring with them uncertainty. Having to implement changes via digital channels of communication - without the possibility of a face-to-face meeting - is an extra challenge. This is especially applies for managers who have gained little or no prior experience in managing remote teams.

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Equally important: Refocussing on one's own abilities

What managers need for themselves right now is a high tolerance of ambiguity. This refers to the ability to consciously engage with the ambiguity and ambivalence of situations and to deal with them in both a constructive and balanced way.

In a world that is becoming increasingly complex this ability is more and more required and more than ever a precondition for a good leadership. To the same extent a high analytical capability is essential in order to draw meaningful conclusions from constantly new and sometimes contradictory findings and pieces of information. Evaluating these conclusions and developing and implementing the correct corporate strategy requires strategic thinking coupled with courage and vision.

Sound self-confidence, meaning i.e. having confidence in one's own strengths, coupled with a (positive) basic attitude of being able to cope with difficult situations are very important here. Crises that already have been successfully overcome can be a strengthening resource. This resource can be consciously integrated and internalised. Another thing paying off more than ever is great resilience, in other words well-developed mental toughness - both in order to overcome crises to lasting effect and to consciously grow from the experience. Reflecting on one's own behaviour and at the same time ensuring that one's behaviour is recognised and, where necessary, questioned in order to personally develop further. The ability to network with other people finally ensures that you are able to effectively interact with new partners or colleagues from an existing network and remain open to new insights and ideas.

Developing skills through self-reflection

It is quite clear: all the qualities mentioned here will continue to play a key role in the future, too. The rapidly changing markets and technologies will continue to call

for managers who have the requisite tools. They, however, cannot be developed overnight. Up to a certain degree it is possible for everyone - managers, staff and teams - to learn quite quickly how to manage digitally. Techniques to develop new ideas and solutions can also be trained.

Much more time is needed, on the other hand, for the fundamental development of leadership needed in transformation processes and crisis situations. That's because changes in personality cannot be ordered or trained but must always evolve and mature from within. The necessary starting points for this can be provided by forms of professional feedback, such as an external management potential analysis, or an internal 360-degree feedback.

The actual 'personal development work' then comes about through intensive and repeated self-reflection and personal interaction with internal or external mentors or professional business coaches.



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