

Leadership Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic

By [Brenda Fields](#), Founder, Fields & Company | June 07, 2020

Leadership Matters

In navigating an unprecedented and epochal global crisis, each country, city, county, and province has had its own unique challenges and afflictions as well as experiencing common hardships with other countries and nations. Approaches varied. Some worked. Some didn't. But with them all, there was a steep learning curve that, at this writing of 90 days into the pandemic, has not even come close to plateauing.

In observing what was effective, it became apparent that leadership was the core component in how a country or a nation fared, regardless of where it was in the pandemic cycle. The actions and performances of government officials, health care experts, and business leaders in the United States has served as a Master Class in leadership, not only on what great leadership IS but what it is not.

Particularly top of mind was Arne Sorenson, President and CEO of Marriott International. Almost overnight, as travel came to a screeching halt worldwide, leaders were faced with the excruciating decisions to mitigate their financial losses. Closing hotels would leave employees without incomes and job prospects were bleak.

Mr. Sorenson was one of the very first industry leaders to take a stand. In a video to the employees of Marriott's 7,000 properties in 131 countries, he shared his heartfelt message. At the same time, Mr. Sorenson has his own personal crisis to deal with as he is under treatment for pancreatic cancer. But he fulfilled his responsibilities as a leader by identifying many issues affecting the lives of the Marriott employees.

It served as an example to the industry on the merits of quickly dealing with a crisis in a decisive and compassionate manner. It is no surprise that Marriott was recently awarded the designation of most trusted hotel brand by The Hotel Trust Index.

But the Gold Medal in Leadership goes to the Governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo. He held daily briefings on COVID-19 that were televised nationally in the United States. To many, they became the most trusted and educational briefings held and were part of many people's daily schedule!

Here are some observations on why Governor Cuomo gets the Gold Medal and what good leadership looks like:

Inspires Trust

Inspiring trust is, without doubt, the most important component of effective leadership, especially when lives are at stake. As with this health crisis, most of us do not have an understanding of the complexity of viruses or of government bureaucracy or how the healthcare system works. We, therefore, depend on leadership to guide us with facts and empathy. Without that, there is no amount of hyperbole or persuasion that can influence people and industries.

To develop trust, words and actions have to line up. And there are no shortcuts to earning trust. In observing Governor Cuomo, he was calm, compassionate, and consistent. He had a plan that he artfully articulated. The plan evolved over time as more information came to light. The public bought into it, not just because of his words, but because he communicated complex issues clearly and simply and consistently reinforced how outcomes are the result of today's behaviors. He gave real life examples that were relatable and gave everyone the benefit of his and his team's, thinking.

Altruism and integrity are important components to developing trust. Used as a leader's guiding principal to do the right thing resonates with others and helps break through the clutter, keeping decision-making selfless, authentic, and honest.

And let's not underestimate the power of compassion in inspiring trust. Governor Cuomo's earnest stories of his fellow New Yorkers and his concerns for his own mother and decisions he had to make to keep her safe, provided a strong point of reference to which others could relate and apply to their own situations.

Teaches

Knowledge is power. A now defunct discounted designer store in New York City, created the slogan, "An educated consumer is our best customer". That sentiment certainly applies to every situation when the "consumer" is confident and armed with knowledge in order to make the best decisions.

In Governor Cuomo's daily briefings, he went into great detail to provide information that no one even knew he or she needed! For example, there was much publicity regarding the problems in hospitals which created anxiety with the public. But Cuomo broke the problem down into three elements i.e. beds, staff, and supplies. That simple outline provided a platform for greater understanding. He also explained, very simply, how the hospital system in New York State is set up. That information was important to help the public accept the plan that hospitals would reorganize to work as one unit in order to facilitate equipment, supplies, and staff. Without that knowledge, there would be frustration and resistance.

It is more effective to rally support with a public that has an understanding of the issues. As days progressed and different issues arose, Cuomo addressed those issues in a timely and forthright manner. He even provided a simple civics lesson from the Constitution by clarifying State vs Federal roles in disaster relief which had been debated.

There are a million applications and examples of the power of teaching from the top to the bottom and across all spectrums of an organization or general public. One tiny example is with customer service. The best customer service experiences are provided by knowledgeable staff who are taught the "whys" behind the policies instead of just being taught the policies.

Develops a Team

Every championship team will attest to the fact that "You play the way you practice". Quality practice develops the following: a trust and understanding among team mates; skills; muscle memory; and great instincts, all of which are needed when adrenaline kicks in during "real" games.

A team that brings its A-game is always prepared to jump into action and is one that performs with excellence. The organization that has clear roles and responsibilities; accountability; mutual trust; and a system of working together, will be up to the task in a crisis when every moment counts.

That teamwork was on display during Governor Cuomo's daily televised briefings.

As there was no roadmap for reporting a multifaceted crisis of this nature, the daily briefings were detailed and comprehensive, with up-to-the minute reporting, even including photographs of New Yorkers who had lost their lives to the disease. As of this writing, there have been 81 consecutive daily briefings!

Based on the timeliness and quality of information presented, one can assume that the behind-the scenes team as well as the team that was televised, was working at breakneck speed to present accurate and meaningful information, every day. Details were addressed. The New York State website remained up-to-date, an incredible feat on its own as information was constantly changing, all a tribute to a team that knows how to perform.

Gives Hope

A good leader, as exemplified by Governor Cuomo as well as by Arne Sorensen, exhibits high "emotional intelligence" and that translates to a feeling of hope and unity. Emotional intelligence per the journal, Psychology Today, refers to "the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others". Cuomo's unflappable demeanor coupled with empathy, offered a sense of security even during great uncertainty.

Cuomo provided a language for hope. He defined New Yorkers as "compassionate and tough". And he defined "tough", not as one would assume of hiding emotions, but as of showing emotions, especially love. It has become his rallying cry.

Language is powerful, but words without heartfelt emotion and honesty, fall flat. Cuomo used phrases such as "beautiful cooperation" and "God bless them. God bless them. God bless them." when referring to healthcare workers, transient workers, delivery workers and all others putting themselves at risk by working in the public during the pandemic. Authenticity is important as it touches and inspires others, thereby giving hope.

Experienced

And for great leadership in a crisis, experience matters. To quote Governor Cuomo during one of his daily televised briefings during the pandemic, "Now is not the time to learn on the job". Certainly a "Tool Kit" can provide a structure for dealing with a crisis but as the top athletes and their coaches know, there is power in experience as they consistently and diligently practice in order to excel and to "play the way they practice".

Great leaders not only exhibit the above traits but work each day like it's a championship game, always at the ready! And they understand that excellence achieved is far greater than one person.



Ms. Fields

Brenda Fields is an industry leader, named by HSMAI (Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International) as a "Top 25 Extraordinary Mind in Sales & Marketing" and is a member of the exclusive International Society of Hospitality Consultants (ISHC), a by-invitation only, 200-member professional society. Ms. Fields served in senior marketing positions before establishing her successful consulting practice. Her clients comprise a wide range of hotels, resorts, and hotel companies around the world, including five-star, luxury boutique properties, 2,000 room hotels and conference centers, as well as some of the largest real estate development companies in the U.S. At the onset of her career, Ms. Fields joined the then, hospitality industry visionary, Dunfey Hotels at the renowned Ambassador East in Chicago, IL and moved up the ladder quickly. The systems Dunfey Hotels had pioneered provided a basis on which any problem can be resolved regardless of market conditions or product type. Ms. Fields can be contacted at +1 518-789-0117 or brenda@fieldsandcompany.net

[Extended Biography](#)

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