

Scaling Mount Kilimanjaro Through the Fog

There is a thick dense fog clouding my vision. As I step on uneven ground, unsure of my footing, I wonder how I am supposed to scale Mount Kilimanjaro while leading other hikers safely and successfully. In the distance, I hear the faint sound of muffled footsteps. The other hikers are following. I take a deep breath, and think about what others have done during challenging times.

Putting People First

Prioritizing people over profits is essential to responding effectively in a crisis. In March of 2020, Uruguay's President Luis Lacalle, his ministers, directors, and legislators took a 20% pay cut so that this money could be used to finance the medical treatment of COVID-19 patients and medical supplies.¹ Furthermore, public officials who earn over \$1,780 USD a month had their salaries and pensions decreased between 5-10% over a period of two months.¹ President Luis Lacalle also proclaimed that the most vulnerable families receive food baskets.¹ In this case, members of the Uruguayan governmental institution made a personal and monetary sacrifice in different ways for the good of the Uruguayan people.

Canva, the Australian graphic design platform helmed by CEO and co-founder Melanie Perkins, quickly acted at the beginning of the pandemic to have everyone work from home even before the government recommended people do so.² In May of 2020, Perkins stated that they'll eventually allow people back into the office if they wish but it won't be mandatory potentially for the entire year so her employees "can have that flexibility if they need it."² She emphasized that "safety and well-being is the number one and most important thing at all times."² Perkins described Canva's fortunate situation in terms of the smooth transition to working online since they had already been doing that but that Canva and she felt an enormous sense of responsibility to aid teachers and students now working from home as well as small business owners.² Moreover, all of Canva's contractors were guaranteed to be paid throughout the pandemic.² Through her words and actions, it is clear Perkins cares about her employees in terms of their mental, physical, and financial well-being as well as the wider community Canva affects.

Even when difficult decisions needed to be made, the CEO of Panera, Niren Chaudhary, acted with compassion. Chaudhary had to release about 35,000 employees in 2020 due to the pandemic.³ In wanting to maintain the dignity of his employees and ensure their livelihood, he made a deal with Walmart and CVS who were looking to hire new employees to hire Panera's 35,000 and then return them to Panera once the COVID-19 pandemic was over.³ Not only that, but one day a week furloughed employees were invited to eat at Panera for free.⁴ Chaudhary also had Panera feed doctors and nurses 50,000 meals a week for a certain time period, feed school children in partnership with the U.S. government, and in partnership with Feed America provide food to 500,000 families.³ A year after releasing 35,000 employees, Chaudhary was able to rehire them and starting to employ new workers since Panera became profitable again.⁵ The

¹ teleSUR 2020.

² National Public Radio 2020.

³ Harvard Business Review 2021.

⁴ Harvard Business School 2020.

⁵ Associated Press News 2021.

CEO and Panera ultimately not only provided the employees assurances in the short-term regarding employment and free food, but also hope in the long term that they will return to the company because they are valued and necessary. Panera's message was loud and clear: people are not expendable. Feeding the community further underscored how people in general outside of the company's employees are valued at Panera.

Unfortunately, far too often institutions prioritize profit over people when it is, in fact, people that are at the heart of the institution. Yet during the pandemic there have been shining examples of humanity and compassion. Both the Uruguayan President and members of the Uruguayan government as well as the CEO of Canva and CEO of Panera created psychological safety so that the people they are in charge of were cared for and felt valued. Within their respective spheres of influence, creating such safe spaces also allowed Uruguay, Canva, and Panera to offer their people hope in a time of great need.

Agility, Innovation, and Reimagining What's Possible

Peter Drucker remarked, "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence, it is to act with yesterday's logic."

Agility, innovation, and reimagining what's possible at an institution as well as reimagining the work environment are vital to responding effectively during a crisis. Canva has seen phenomenal growth during the pandemic and responded accordingly.⁶ An increase in use of the document presentations and the addition of features like presenter video recording tools demonstrate Canva's agility and ability to innovate even during a crisis.⁶

Panera decided to innovate and reimagine what it can do while still staying true to the core of who they are and what they do. In immediate response to the pandemic, Panera swiftly set up curbside service for half of its 2,300 locations within a matter of days and started selling basic grocery items like flour and eggs.⁵ Panera also saw that the demand and consumption of craveable products increased during the pandemic so it made flatbread pizza, a product that is in line with its healthy and tasty menu offerings.³ After looking at Netflix and Amazon subscription models, Panera was inspired to become the "Netflix of coffee" and created a coffee subscription program.³ In analyzing its off-premise business which was at 40% prior to the pandemic and then seeing it rise to 85% during the pandemic, Panera created drive-through lanes, new services such as catering virtual institutional events, and using and partnering with delivery companies.^{3,5}

Ed Catmull, the recently retired CEO and co-founder of Pixar Animation Studio, decided to aid Pixar's company culture during the pandemic as a retirement project.⁷ Pixar employees were concerned that the company culture would disintegrate without any in person interaction so Catmull took it upon himself to collect stories from employees demonstrating Pixar at its best. Reading these stories and analyzing them allowed Catmull and Pixar overall to see if what the employees talked about is different than what Pixar discusses in terms of company culture and whether they need to rethink their values.⁷ Catmull not only acknowledged that Pixar employees were worried about the company culture, but also acted upon this information in a way that

⁶ Forbes 2021.

⁷ Politics and Prose 2021.

allowed Pixar's employees to continue contributing to the company culture remotely. When Catmull had the employees actively shape the company culture by using their stories to rethink Pixar's values, this allowed Pixar to grow and change with its employees.

The Singaporean government leapt into action at the beginning of the pandemic by finding new ways to employ their people as well as strengthen their healthcare system through decentralization and reimagining healthcare spaces. In preparation for the rising number of COVID-19 patients and proactively preventing a surge in capacity which would overwhelm the hospitals, the government decentralized testing, monitoring, and treatment. Volunteers were recruited and airline flight attendants were redeployed to do COVID-19 swabbing and testing at community swabbing facilities.⁸ Those who were young, asymptomatic, had mild symptoms, and/or lacked preexisting conditions were directed to field hospitals or community isolation facilities where their oxygen levels are monitored.⁸ Private and public hospitals in the meantime which had the resources and personnel to treat those severely ill from COVID-19 could concentrate on providing treatment instead of having to divert resources to attend to milder cases. Possible overflow was accounted for through tertiary hospitals which helped healthcare workers and hospital administrators have some peace of mind that a contingency plan was in place. Indeed, tertiary hospitals went through training to successfully deal with potential COVID-19 outbreaks and prepare for an incremental increase in isolation capacity.⁸

The Singaporean government as well as Catmull at Pixar had innovative and collaborative approaches to the pandemic. The Singaporean government reimagined the work space for airline flight attendants and coordinated a collaborative decentralized healthcare space so that the existing healthcare systems could operate efficiently and effectively to take care of their patients. Catmull also worked together with Pixar employees to help the company culture and improve upon it. Drucker himself believed in collaboration, decentralization, and flexibility/agility.⁹ While the type of institution, opportunity and resources it has on hand may not allow for decentralization, it is worth noting how successful and imaginative the Singaporean's decentralization plan was in responding to the pandemic. In these cases, collaboration was also crucial.

Staying stagnant and not responding to the turbulent pandemic was never an option for Canva, Panera, Pixar, and the Singaporean government. Instead, these companies and institutions looked at how they could improve, innovate, and respond to the crisis at hand which ultimately allowed them to thrive.

Clear and Constant Communication

According to Drucker, "The spirit of an organization is created from the top. And so if it decays, it does so because the top rots. As the proverb has it: trees die from the top."¹⁰

With this mind, it is important to note that clear and constant communication is key to managing a crisis. Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern, the Chancellor of Germany Angela

⁸ UCLA Fielding School of Public Health 2020.

⁹ Business News Daily 2021.

¹⁰ Drucker 1973.

Merkel, and the CEO of Cisco Chuck Robbins all have different communication styles but all exemplify stellar communication skills as well as the necessity of frequent and crystal clear communication.

Prime Minister Ardern frequently and succinctly communicated with the people of New Zealand through daily briefings, podcasts, parliamentary statements, and Facebook Live broadcasts.¹¹ Aside from more formal methods of communication, her use of informal methods like Facebook Live broadcasts allowed her to connect with New Zealanders when she was at home. Her warmth and concise explanations about the pandemic and lockdown restrictions as well as the rationale behind the New Zealand government's decisions further instilled trust and confidence in her decision making.^{11, 12} Connecting with everyone through her compassion and authenticity such as by wearing an informal sweatshirt and explaining she just put her toddler to bed as well as the importance of avoiding playgrounds demonstrated that she, too, is a parent and shares many of same concerns that New Zealanders had.¹²

Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel clearly and constantly communicated with the people of Germany calmly, sensibly and rationally.¹³ With her background as a scientist, she guided Germany through the pandemic and was humble and transparent about what was known and unknown.¹³ She also conveyed the seriousness of the challenge that lay before the German people, even going so far as to mention World War II as the last time Germany had been seriously tested prior to the pandemic.¹³

The CEO of Cisco Chuck Robbins already had quarterly session meetings with leaders of employee resource groups and with his leadership team prior to 2020, but when the pandemic occurred he created 30,000 to 40,000 employee check-ins every week.¹⁴ Additional time was purposefully built in during those check-ins to discuss social justice issues and so doctors could address questions about the pandemic.¹⁴ Despite everyone working from home, Robbins disclosed that he feels "closer than we ever have been" and that "we're having fun as a company and employees feel connected."¹⁴ Early on in the pandemic Robbins tried to surprise and entertain his employees by bringing in a special celebrity guest about every week during online meetings such as football player Peyton Manning or Chris Martin from Coldplay.¹⁴ It is no accident that Cisco reached the top of the list for two consecutive years on *Fortune's* list of world's best workplaces.¹⁴ Robbins himself attributes Cisco's success in being the number one place to work in the world due to frequent direct communication and openness discussing issues including social justice and social responsibilities.¹⁴

Prime Minister Ardern, Chancellor Merkel, and CEO Robbins all varied in how they communicated but ensured that what they communicated was clear and constant. They metabolized all the information that was given to them concerning the pandemic and their own institution and then digested it and distilled what was necessary to tell the people they care for only the essential details. In referring back to Drucker's previous quote, with each of them in charge of the spirit of their own organization they all have a top-down effect in how their

¹¹ Human Resource Development International 2020.

¹² The Atlantic, June 2020.

¹³ The Atlantic, May 2020.

¹⁴ Harvard Business Review 2020.

organization or tree dies or thrives. These three ensured that their tree thrived.

Putting people first. Being agile, innovative, and reimagining what's possible. Clear and constant communication. These were all crucial to responding effectively in a crisis.

I take another deep breath and call out to my fellow hikers. Hearing them was heartening. I check on them, relieved that they are all okay. And somehow it seemed like the sound of our voices thinned the fog. We started to gather together. There was much to discuss with plenty of short-term planning and emergency contingency plans needed in case the weather turned worse.

We also begin to discuss what to do in case our trip takes too long and our resources become too scarce. Little by little, the fog cleared. I start to see velvet moss, a few tender ferns, and delicate orchids.

As we rest, the sky darkens, giving way to a black canvas brilliantly studded with stars. I feel at peace. Even if the fog returns, I know that together we can scale Mount Kilimanjaro.

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