



FEATURE

COVID-19 and the undisruptable CEO

Five attributes that can help CEOs navigate through crisis

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THE DELOITTE CHIEF EXECUTIVE PROGRAM

In the face of COVID-19, the five attributes of the undisruptable CEO become more relevant than ever in helping organizations manage through the crisis and emerge stronger on the other side.

WHEN WE FIRST published our research on *Can CEOs be un-disruptable?* in late 2017,¹ we did not imagine the world in which we are variously living, leading, working, home-schooling, caretaking, and social distancing today: a world disrupted not by the next big idea, but by a virus. This disruption provides the ultimate testing ground for undisruptable CEOs. The disruption that COVID-19 is driving is not “out there,” but keenly felt in the here and now. How CEOs *respond* to disruption² is no longer a theoretical exercise with hypothetical future results, but rather a matter that is directly impacting organizations today as they ready themselves to *recover*³ and thrive.

Under these circumstances, the five attributes of the undisruptable CEO that we have researched over the past two years may be more important than ever. Each one of these attributes can help CEOs lead their organizations through the crisis to emerge even stronger.

Ambidextrous leadership is the art of cultivating a healthy tension between operational optimization and future-focused innovation.⁴ COVID-19 is challenging every CEO to master this tension in real time, with higher stakes and within a time frame that uniquely compresses the distance between “now” and “the future.” CEOs are required to make immediate decisions to respond to the crisis while simultaneously anticipating what they’ll need to do to recover. How can you steer your organization through the exigencies of the moment while also laying the groundwork for the organization to *thrive* after the crisis?⁵

A beginner’s mindset invites CEOs to put knowledge and experience aside to gain the freedom of mind to consider new possibilities.⁶ The current world is unlike anything most of us have ever experienced. In an environment in which everything feels new, it’s much easier—and much more accepted—to adopt a beginner’s mindset. Let this mindset empower your relationships with your board, your executive team, and your employees to

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generate the makings of a powerful vision for what could be your organization's next chapter.

Disruptive jiu-jitsu challenges CEOs to harness the power of disruption for their own advantage.⁷ It's becoming increasingly clear that a "return to normal" is unlikely on the other side of the pandemic. Rather, the pages are blank. What innovations, ideas, and shifts will define the "next normal"? What influences will have risen to prominence? How do you want to shape that future? If CEOs ever needed a moment or a catalyst for change—this is it.

End-user ethnography is the skill of being able to champion and model empathy with customers and cultivate an understanding of who they are as humans, not just data points.⁸ The pandemic has many people concerned about safety, food, and resources. Under these circumstances, CEOs should be mindful and acknowledge—with great empathy and deep understanding—the human experience of both their customers and their employees. Organizations should not assume that they know how their stakeholders are experiencing the present, or what they want and need to cope. Reach out, ask, witness, and learn.

Emotional fortitude entails meta-cognition: the ability to assess and harness the power (and even

discomfort) of one's own thoughts and emotions to make better decisions in the face of great uncertainty. Being only human, after all, CEOs are experiencing fear and anxiety just like the rest of us. Rather than wish this discomfort away or try to strip it out, emotional fortitude means probing this potentially unsettling experience for the insights and information it might offer you. Examine what you already know in your head, in your heart, and in your gut, and ask yourself what else you need to resolve before you can make decisions with the conviction necessary to lead your organization into uncharted territory. This territory will likely shape the legacy you leave.

COVID-19 has launched us into a world of disruption and is simultaneously affecting most segments of global society and business ecosystems in ways that—however predictable they might appear in retrospect—are leading to unpredictable results and behaviors in the process. It can be daunting to consider that there does not appear to be any certainty around when and how the pandemic truly ends, and at what ultimate cost. For the chief executives among us, it is perhaps even more daunting to consider the certainty that the decisions and actions they take today will directly shape, influence, and generate the possibilities and challenges of tomorrow.

Endnotes

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