

Leading the legal way: Carrying on in a crisis

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Between 2009 and 2020 I was the Managing Partner of Browne Jacobson, a leadership experience bookended by crises. I have since qualified as an executive coach and have reflected on the lessons I learned and those I wish I had!

Below is some practical guidance to consider before the next unexpected challenge hits...

Is your governance clear

Do the boards/committees/key office holders understand and respect the scope of their roles. In a crisis you do not have time for turf wars or duplication – make sure terms of reference are agreed, understood and respected. A lot of the interference will be well-meaning, but it is still interference. This could come about through a lack of communication, so make sure you communicate clearly whenever you can to keep the organisation up to speed.

Leave space for innovation

There is so much noise in a crisis that it is not always easy to know where to start. Ensure you take the time to work out what genuinely needs attention and what can wait.

It is easy though for innovation to get lost in a time of crisis, despite many of the best ideas being generated at times like this, so put in place a structure to capture those ideas. Identify someone with capacity to consider those ideas and who is close enough to leadership to know what might work now. This will enable the best ideas to be brought forward and implemented and those which are good but not for now to at least be captured.

Consider a coaching approach to leadership

Coaching means believing in potential, developing trust and making the 'coachee' an empowered and resourceful team member. You need this from the team around you, to make sure they share the responsibility, and they need it in turn from their team.

This does not require everyone to go on coaching courses. Coaching is about having a really good in-depth conversation, where you really listen properly. Perhaps have fewer line-management meetings and instead make sure that there is space and time to have key conversations, giving them the attention they deserve. Let your 'coachee' set the agenda and focus on what and how something is being said -and make sure you are not distracted by whatever meeting is next or offering up your own solutions. Wrap up the discussion by asking your 'coachee' to summarise next steps– the responsibilities coming out of the meeting should be theirs. That is not to say every meeting would need to be at this level, that could be exhausting for the leader and un-nerving for the team!

This approach builds strong bonds of trust, capability and resilience in the leadership team–skills which will be essential to successfully ride out a crisis.

So much of this comes back to time: time for yourself, time for your team, time to set up governance structures, time for honest constructive conversations. If you take one thing from this, make sure you take as much control as you can on how you spend your time - not easy in a crisis, but essential so you can deliver the outcome your business needs.

Iain Blatherwick spent 11 years successfully leading law firm Browne Jacobson. Since stepping down from the managing partner role, Iain has completed the Academy of Executive Coaching's (AOEC) practitioner Diploma Programme in executive coaching and is accredited by the European Mentoring & Coaching Council (EMCC). He recently launched [Space + Time](#), an executive coaching programme aimed at c-suite level business leaders which offers support in horizon scanning and key decision making.

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