

MARKETING

Pandemic as pivot: How will your company emerge from COVID-19?

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We all learned growing up hopefully that our deeds define who we are. Times of crises especially reveal what kind of character people, and companies, have. The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic is no exception. It is forcing companies to evolve rapidly regardless of size, industry or location.

As we fear job loss and lament the dislocation from our work, we have to stay focused on improving our workplace cultures, processes and environments, all of which define our organizations.

The coronavirus pause

Over time, leadership that is bogged down by deadlines and daily quotas can forget the evergreen management principles needed to drive long-term success.

The coronavirus offers companies a chance to reset their workflow, reexamine their offerings, let go of dead-end initiatives, and embrace emerging opportunities.

The pandemic gives each of us an opportunity to remake ourselves to disrupt the disruption.

Evaluate yourself and your ideal

First, you must find ways to take stock of your brand impact.

If you do not appear to others as you intend, odds are you are not the company you want to be.

Evaluate who you are and why, then decide who you want to be and assess the action needed to get there.

- Find out who you are in the marketplace. Solicit opinions on your organization and its impact from trusted colleagues, friends, prospects, clients and even honest competitors.
- Go through your workflow, your processes, your team, your client list, your vendors, your strategic partners everything that you are currently doing that defines your company. Share and review it with members of all departments. Look at your current mission, revisit your original purpose, and find the direction to match that goal. Define what you need to change.

Next, assess, reassess, and harness all of your information and resources. This may help you find new business lines, action items or process improvements.

- Amass all your institutional knowledge. Bring your leadership and staff together to codify everything you do. Capturing all the tacit and implicit knowledge of your people will reveal new paths to take and lessen the chance of missed opportunities.
- Have your leadership team focus on the near-misses of the past and build a "recent lessons learned" catalog to facilitate self-examination. This will also show you how and where you need to mentor your team, build new working relationships, and improve collaboration.

Third, examine your leadership team through a new lens and rebuild leaving your dysfunction behind.

I have heard countless times from colleagues and experienced myself how destructive it can be to be wholly removed from decision-making, and to have one's hands tied when trying new things, or even just seeking counsel from outside your department due to trivial power dynamics.

- Share ideas and solicit them. Let people from all levels of your organization contribute freely and synergistically. You will be amazed at how much more engaged all your people are when they know they can contribute in a meaningful way.
- Treat your people well. Mental and emotional health is the wellspring of longevity, loyalty and creativity. You simply get much better performance out of happy people.
- Break the taboos. Have people from different teams explain their roles to each other. Encourage them to talk to each other about the different functions in your business.

Becoming who you want to be

An example of such a reboot is a small rideshare startup for kids and families. The company RideAlong was started by parents in New Jersey who were initially just seeking a safe way to get their kids to and from school.

RideAlong CEO Norbert Sygdziak was stunned by how much pent-up demand he discovered: "We started in September 2019 and had double-digit growth and double-digit profits. What started out as a local community need quickly snowballed into real demand across the country. It was incredibly fulfilling. But then came COVID."

Schools shut down. The business went away entirely. RideAlong's leadership was at a loss like everyone else. But then it clicked.

Mr. Sygdziak and members of his board and leadership team all galvanized around one question: "There are so many people in tougher situations. What can we do to help those people in this time?"

Mr. Sygdziak started by taking care of his people and asking his team to pull together. He made sure to take care of his drivers first as they were completely out of work. He paid them to keep the team intact and demonstrate his appreciation of what they were going through.

The executives waived and postponed taking paychecks. He gathered volunteer teams of drivers and staff to partner with hospitals, food pantries, restaurants and nonprofits to deliver food and supplies to seniors and families in need, provide meals to overtaxed healthcare workers, help children get to hospitals for much-needed regular medical treatments, and coordinate school deliveries for students.

It is a common pivot at this time, but it is also a great example of the power of reexamination. These nonprofit relationships and good deeds are leading to for-pay partnerships in ways they never dreamed.

Pulling together the entire team, asking "why do we exist?" and "what should we do?" allowed them to reimagine everything.

Importantly, it crystallized what Mr. Sygdziak and his team wanted the company to be. They were not just a kids' transportation company, but rather a mechanism for building community.

Mr. Sygdziak is moved when he thinks about it: "We were forced to think more deeply about our purpose. By spending our resources on helping those less fortunate, by providing connection, and hopefully alleviating some difficulty, we found inspiration and grew tighter as a team. Now we understand exactly who we want to be."

Who will you become?

Whatever you do with this time, if you have it, embrace it.

Despite the damage done, the coronavirus has inspired companies to pivot to philanthropy.

Maybe you have the opportunity to prepare for change and pursue what the ferocious day-to-day never quite allowed.

Reach out and expand relationships and geographies.

Refine and redirect your team.

Fully explore the ideas and solve the problems that always seemed too big to take on.

Rewrite your story and be better.

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