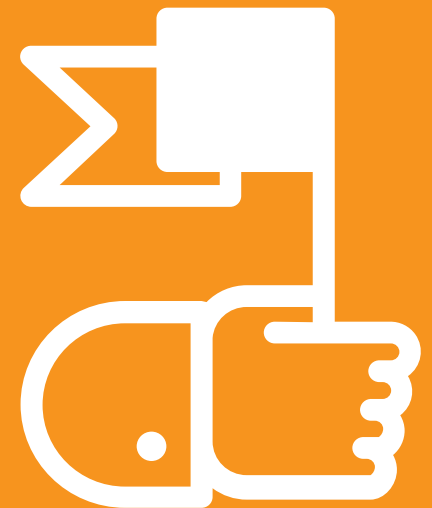




# How to lead with confidence during unpredictable times

When the coronavirus outbreak first took hold, businesses confidence nosedived amid such uncertainty. Leaders everywhere had no way of knowing whether their business would emerge intact. While things are still tough, many are now moving from “if” they can return towards a forward-thinking approach to “how” they’ll look to regain control and start making crucial decisions. In this guide, we’ll look to equip you with some expert-led advice so you can lead your business with resilience, empathy, and transparency – all crucial to the long-term viability of your operation.



# What's the situation?



**The single word that should run like a golden thread through every aspect of your business in the coronavirus era is “resilience” – resilience in your supply chain, in your returning workforce and in your leadership. It is as much a tool for surviving during crises as it is for thriving. However, no leader has ever led through this before and, contrary to some views of leaders as lone heroes, it will require you to fortify an entire network of relationships, from your workforce to your customers and suppliers.**

Given that uncertainty remains, making it more difficult for leaders to find their footing, how do you move forward? Traditional leadership guidelines prescribe that positive, active leadership helps us navigate crises, rebuild communities, and forge ahead in uncertain times. But with so many challenges colliding in unison, many leaders may be struggling to chart a clear way forward.

The most important thing to remember is that you shouldn't try to go it alone. Now, more than ever, you need your stakeholders to unite behind you, from customers and employees to investors and communities. They're the people who drive and measure your success, particularly when it feels elusive. Recommitting to them can stir up the trust, confidence, and morale to forge ahead.



# Who's helping?



## Paula Milligan

**Founder and MD, Lallo Consulting.**

Paula is an experienced management consultant and certified leadership development coach specialising in culture change, change management, motivation, and emotional intelligence. She has successfully worked with over 100 business leaders across the UK, Europe, US and the Middle East.



## Joanna Swash

**CEO of Money Penny, an outsourced communications provider.**

Known for her commercial acumen and transformational leadership style, Joanna is passionate about developing people and creating a culture which breeds success and innovation.



## Jonathan Richards

**CEO and founder of Breathe, an HR software company.**

A qualified accountant, Jonathan was named SME Director of the Year in the Institute of Directors London and South awards in 2019.

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How to lead with confidence during unpredictable times





# Chapter 1:

## How to make the right decisions in a time of crisis



Making good and fast decisions is challenging at the best of times. Making unfamiliar, high-stakes decisions in times of crisis makes it even trickier, and when you have a crisis of uncertainty such as coronavirus, the potential volume of these high-stakes decisions may seem overwhelming.

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Jonathan says taking an initial step usually reveals the next option to take, so it's important to be pragmatic. Don't stall, as any decision is better than no decision. He recommends following this approach:

- Pause and take a breath – take stock, think through things carefully, speculate on what scenarios might occur then prepare responses in advance
- Look at the situation from all angles – don't get stuck in a rut or adopt tunnel thinking
- Engage your team and communicate while making the decisions, even if all you can convey is “I don't know, but I'm working on it”, that's better than leaving your team in the dark

“Most importantly, when navigating through this crisis, don't lose sight of the culture you've nurtured. Making good decisions that prioritise the wellbeing of your workforce will build trust and confidence in your ability as a leader. Taking responsibility and dealing with the downsides is all part of the job.”

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***Don't stall, as any decision is better than no decision.***



## How do I deal with the gravity of making decisions that could have a profound effect on the people who work for me?

Again, if you have a good culture in place, your people will know that you have their best intentions at heart when it comes to making decisions about their livelihoods.

“Trusting yourself is important too, and that’s where a good company culture also plays a part. People having the confidence to come to you and express their feelings about a decision will build faith in your own ability. Always do your best, and just remember that the best is all you can do, so don’t beat yourself up too much about any unforeseen situations,” is Jonathan’s advice.

### Follow an honest, direct approach

Joanna’s advice:

1. Be empathetic
2. Maintain a balance between optimistic and pessimistic
3. Don’t shy away from difficult conversations
4. Involve your people. Ask questions such as, “What would you do if you were me?” to help generate more insightful thinking around the challenge. Once people are actively engaged rather than listening for the correct answer which they can choose to agree or disagree with, they’re much more likely to be supportive

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**Ask questions such as, “What would you do if you were me?” to help generate more insightful thinking around the challenge.**



## Chapter 2:

# Communicate with empathy in times of uncertainty



Before getting back to business, you should determine where your people are mentally and prepare accordingly. Some will be enthusiastic about their return to the workplace, while others would be warier for health and safety reasons.

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According to Paula, uncertainty causes tremendous anxiety in people and is something of which leaders should be mindful. “The brain is a survival organ and has a real disdain for uncertainty. What it does in reaction is to make up hundreds of untested theories, even conspiracy theories, all assuming the worst.

“We’re hardwired to overestimate the threats and underestimate our ability to handle them when we’re in that state. So, if there’s going to be redundancies, it cannot be the best-kept secret in the company. It needs to be tackled early on as quickly, transparently and compassionately as possible so that the people left behind can recover and focus.”

Jonathan concurs: “There’s no room for miscommunication during a crisis. This is particularly relevant for businesses which are looking at getting offices up and running again. Being on the front foot with immediate and clear communication will help in addressing staff anxieties and will provide sufficient time to ask questions and clear up any concerns.

“Of course, this is no mean feat, particularly when you still don’t know all the facts. With the situation we’re in at the moment, guidance is changing all the time. But offering the most up to date information and demonstrating to your employees that you’re doing your best is much better than staying silent.”



## 8 tips for handling uncertainty

Paula and Joanna offer the following advice:

1. Keep your people's minds and mental wellbeing in check (including your own). Offer support and counselling to those who are struggling
2. Establish regular and open two-way communication channels
3. Enforce the basic regulations and make everyone accountable. Well communicated procedures around hygiene and social distancing are something for people to hold onto at a time of uncertainty
4. Maintain openness and transparency, particularly in terms of job security, redundancy, and future plans. Keep people in the loop in terms of the recovery stage and engage with them either in a responsible, socially distanced manner or virtually
5. Draw up a recovery plan to start getting people to work towards and be part of the plan moving forward
6. Empower those same people who are driving the business to focus on creating added efficiencies. Give them the permission to rip up the rulebook and be creative – but remind them of the key principles of how the business operates and what's important
7. Respond quickly. People are inherently impatient
8. Emphasise with staff, customers, partners, and suppliers and be flexible

A word of caution from Paula:

“Communication by email alone won't do the trick. Warm-hearted gestures such as a hand-written card, welcoming employees back or offering them a day's leave if they'd been working throughout the pandemic, is worth gold. People hold onto that.”

Also, don't lose sight of the fact that external trusted advisors can be of immense value to help you see the woods for the trees. “By spending time with different teams in the company, they can help you identify the fear of the moment since people tend to open up more towards external people they can trust. An advisor's non-biased, non-judgmental advice can also create the reflective space for you that will help you make the right decisions,” believes Paula.



## Chapter 3: Better together



According to mental health charity Mind, around one in four people experience a mental health problem in their lives. There can be little doubt that these problems have been exacerbated by the prolonged periods of isolation we've experienced over the last few months. Now, more than ever, it's critical to prioritise mental health. It should be viewed in the same way we think about physical health.

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Jonathan explains: "Remote working has blurred the boundaries between home and work. It's harder to understand the pressures individuals are facing when we're operating from behind a screen. We've found that encouraging management teams to openly talk about mental health, offering enhanced flexibility, and encouraging people to get outside more has created an environment where wellness is actively championed."

Emotionally intelligent leaders are great at understanding emotions and care about the feelings of others. Whether in an external or internal setting, emotional intelligence is the most important skill an SME leader can have. And since empathy, one of the key areas of emotional intelligence, is at the centre of this guide, we'll focus on it here.

"Just like we can all learn how to be more emotionally intelligent," advises Paula, "we can learn empathy as a vital leadership skill. And it's not a touchy-feely skill as many would think, it's a fully-fledged leadership competency."

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***Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another.***



## The five pillars of empathy



See the world of others. Everyone's take on the world is unique, and people have experienced coronavirus in different ways. You cannot walk in their shoes, but you can connect to their experience. Ask: "What can I do or how can I support you?"



Be non-judgmental. Try and understand where they come from. Rather, change judgment into open curiosity



Understand their feelings ahead of your own



Communicate your understanding. This is where emotional literacy comes into play. If you cannot express or understand your own feelings and emotions it will be more difficult, but it can be learnt



Don't be overly mindful. Pay attention and don't get swept away in negative commentary. Refrain from gossip

## Confident vulnerability

While these are two words that are rarely seen together, Paula believes it's going to be an essential competence in the near future. "Nobody could reasonably expect any business leader to have all the answers immediately. So, if a leader walks into the room and admits to it but also saying that 'we can be better together', then that confident vulnerability is replicated in others. That will create a real sense of empowerment, and people will stop hiding behind excuses. They'll become more innovative and start thinking out of the box instead of waiting for you to tell them what to do next."

## Make life work

Joanna offers the following mental health tips for leaders:

1. Routine is key when working remotely
2. If you're going at a Ferrari pace, you need Ferrari brakes
3. You're of no use to anyone if you are worn out and stressed
4. It's not about the amount of work you're doing right now, but the clarity of leadership, your state of mind, and the way you treat your people
5. Short, sharp bursts are a great way to start the day
6. Be flexible and go the extra mile for your employees – they will do the same for the business if you lead by example
7. Be kind to yourself

## Chapter 4: Nurture your networks and alliances



The value of trusted relationships, and the resilience it can foster during times of economic uncertainty, can never be underestimated. The coronavirus pandemic has shown a new light on the importance of these relationships as we navigate these uncertain times.

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The global implications of the outbreak have brought people and businesses closer than ever, making it the best time to consider stepping away from traditional funding and embrace partnerships and complementary alliances. Leveraging on each other's resources and capabilities can expand your company scope and capabilities and will make a substantial impact during this period.

These may be existing suppliers with whom you have an established relationship or even a competitor. Remember, everyone has been affected by the pandemic and reaching out to each other may just be the catalyst for renewed growth.

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***Leveraging on each other's resources and capabilities can expand your company scope and capabilities and will make a substantial impact during this period.***



### Nurturing existing alliances

Joanna has this advice:



Maintain your focus but be flexible



Take time to check in with partners and listen and review systems where necessary



Ask proactive questions such as: What's it like for you? What have you learnt? How can I help? How can we learn from each other?



Share pain points and ideas regularly

### Vision and values in a changing world

Both vision and values are fundamental to hold onto in a changing world. They provide a strategic focus for the business, which is vital during times of crisis and uncertainty. Jonathan explains: "Values are the foundation. A business with solid values will survive a storm, even if it means changing direction. They underpin the company's place in the world. Vision, on the other hand, is what keeps everyone going in the right direction and provides a rallying cry to unite the team."

Joanne agrees, adding that it should offer employees and stakeholders a focal point that everyone can turn to and use as a reference point whenever there are issues or challenges within a business. Core values should drive tough decisions.

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**Vision is what keeps everyone going in the right direction and provides a rallying cry to unite the team.**





## Chapter 5:

# How to recalibrate business ambitions and set brave targets



The coronavirus crisis has caused unprecedented disruption to the business world and people's livelihoods – plans have been thrown out of the window to adjust.

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“The most important thing for any business now is to keep their customers,” Joanna advises. “Go and do a good job for them, cut any cost you don't need, and trust in the rest. Use any spare cash to grow your business.”

Jonathan concurs: “It's important to look after the bottom line during this crisis and pursuing a conservative business plan in the short term will prove to be beneficial in the long run.”

For Paula, recalibrating your business means taking people away from the unpredictable, frenetic activity of the early crisis response. “Initially, productivity, focus and energy levels went through the roof as everyone felt they were in it together. But as fear, fatigue and uncertainty started settling in with extended furlough, regression came. Now they need to move from crisis mode towards a more settled, albeit still uncomfortable, sense of uncertainty.”

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***It's important to look after the bottom line during this crisis and pursuing a conservative business plan in the short term will prove to be beneficial in the long run.***



## Moving to the “interim normal”

Paula’s tips:



Get people to envisage the destination at the end of the recovery. Remind them of the common goal, of what’s working, and where you’re a bit short. They need to get to an innovative, engaged space quickly



Empower your employees to talk to customers. Give them end-to-end responsibility to take products to market



Give them hope. Make them believe that the business can thrive out of the chaos

## Set braver targets

“Once things begin to pick up,” Jonathan advises, “don’t be afraid to map out a full return to recovery with ambitious targets. Keep an eye on your industry and developments in the economy. Ensuring that you understand the new business landscape will equip you for the challenge ahead and allow you to achieve your targets. Involve your team because they will have great ideas and deserve to be part of the recovery.”

Paula believes the focus of leadership is going to expand from a very inward focus on employees’ safety and operational continuity to embracing a return to a market-facing posture. To re-engage employees, you need to get their input on questions such as:

- What’s happening in the marketplace?
- What do our customers need?
- How can we provide that?
- How can we innovate?
- How can we pivot?
- And how can we move into a new normal as quickly and as innovatively as possible?

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***Involve your team because they will have great ideas and deserve to be part of the recovery.***



# Conclusion

The same instincts and actions that have made your business successful in good times will see you through this current global crisis. It will also make you stronger as you face longer-term challenges. The ability to recognise your responsibilities and your opportunities and chart a course based on your emotional resilience and that of your people will fortify you in the time ahead. As you navigate an uncertain road today, your approach to this moment will inform the way you lead tomorrow.

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***The ability to recognise your responsibilities and your opportunities and chart a course based on your emotional resilience and that of your people will fortify you in the time ahead.***



# About Be the Business



**Be the Business is a small, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to boosting productivity among UK businesses.**

We're doing it by helping leaders of small to mid-sized firms do what you do best: improve, innovate and inspire.

In response to the coronavirus outbreak, we created Rebuild. It provides free expert advice on recovery tactics, stories from your peers and access to like-minded people to bounce your ideas off.

Business leaders told us they need practical support in six priority areas – so that's what we've done. In each topic section on Rebuild you'll get a range of articles, videos, guides (like the one you've just read) and other accessible support. Start with the topic that meets your company's challenges and remember, it's the small steady steps that are going to count.

*Subscribe to our fortnightly Rebuild newsletter and you'll be sure to get all our content first, including more guides like this one.*

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