How to Self-Disrupt Your Leadership

Breakthrough performance requires leaving your comfort zone.

BY JUNE ZERINGUE   ILLUSTRATION BY JON KRAUSE

AS the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States in March, two Los Angeles artists created a video to illustrate the power of social distancing. In the video, matches stand like dominoes, and after one is lighted, fire passes quickly from one match to the next—until one illustrated match takes a step to the side, halting the flame in its tracks and protecting all of the matches that follow it from being set ablaze.

It is an apt metaphor for business leadership in times of crisis or other major disruption, too. What if, rather than merely standing in place and waiting to respond to whatever was thrust at you—and then responding in an entirely predictable way—you moved first?

To reinvent the rules of the game for your business, you must self-disrupt. Leadership is not only about you, but game-changing leadership demands intentional action on your part to create an environment in which people can thrive and fulfill the vision that you set for them. The world has changed; your business's world has changed; your team members' world has changed, but this change creates a compelling opportunity to reimagine and reinvent how you do what you do. It is an opportunity that will not be realized without self-disruption—without stepping away from a predictable path.

Disruptive leaders evolve with intention, continually seeking process improvements and creative solutions to recurring challenges. They are not afraid to shelve old techniques in favor of actions better suited to a new moment. They constantly seek to improve themselves and their ability to inspire others.

By definition, disruptive leadership is uncommon; it defies expectations, and so it persistently challenges those willing to take on the task to step outside of their comfort zone. Most of us view our leadership style and skills as inherently part of who we are, and we are not in the habit of questioning things that seem fundamental to us. Yet not critically questioning these can hold an individual back from truly game-changing leadership.

Transformational leaders, however, recognize that sometimes what is called for is a break from the past, not just on the part of the people within an organization but also on their own behalf—a break from their past as a leader, including those actions and tactics that have yielded success in the past.

Great leaders are willing to wade into unchartered territory and stretch themselves to go beyond past wins. By disrupting their own leadership and consistently reimagining their approach for the moment at hand, these leaders inspire others to thrive. They regularly hold up a metaphorical mirror and ask: Who am I as a leader? How am I showing up? Am I relying on how I have always led before, on past successes or on assumptions that proved true in different circumstances?

Throughout history, great leaders were made so by seeing things differently or identifying something that was missing and meeting that need. To reinvent the rules of the game, leaders must disrupt the patterns and processes that led them (and their organization) to their current positions.

New Approaches, Different Style

Disruptive leadership is rooted in curiosity and

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self-awareness. With a willingness to examine automatic thinking and go-to strategies; assumptions about people and functions; and the effectiveness and impact of one's actions, leaders can discern new possibilities for leadership.

That alone takes courage. It is not easy to cast off behaviors and responses that have become reflexive over the years. But perceptive leaders recognize when aspects of their leadership no longer serve the organization well, and they take action accordingly.

There is no set formula for disruptive leadership. However, regularly asking questions that are meant to disrupt can help leaders improve and grow. Leaders must evaluate whether they are bringing a new lens to their leadership and identifying new opportunities to achieve results. When that is no longer happening, chances are that a leader has become stagnant and risks missing out on valuable opportunities to inspire and drive growth because they are not continually challenging themselves to do better.

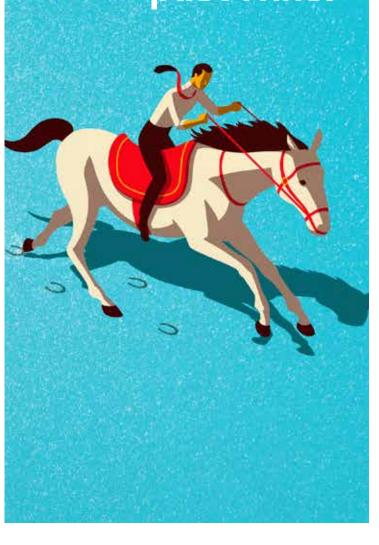Four key principles define a leader who is willing to reinvent the rules of the game.

Disruptive leaders:
- seek to be uncertain
- have a bold intent for the future
- look from other stakeholders' worldview
- create a road map to the future

First and foremost, disruptive leaders seek to be uncertain. Rather than aiming to hold to familiar ground, they continually venture into the unknown to find new perspectives, learn things about which they have a tenuous or tentative grasp and discover what they were not even aware that they did not know.

They are curious for the sake of their own education and curious about others' motivations for action. They have a need to understand the worldview of the people they lead, because they recognize that people's worldview motivates and shapes their action. To inspire a change in

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course, you need to change how people see a situation—and you cannot help them see a situation differently until you deliberately ask about their current view of a given situation.

Asking people about their perception of a situation allows leaders to speak to individuals' concerns genuinely and authentically. Disruptive leaders do not just mull questions about team members' worldviews in their head; they deliberately ask: What do team members see as potential obstacles to success? How are they envisioning the future of the company and their place in it, and how might this have shifted as challenges and opportunities for the business have shifted? What do they need from leaders to be able to best execute on the organization's goals? These questions can yield vital insights that will help leaders connect their own actions and communications with their teams' self-identified motivators.

Having a bold intent for the future also is of utmost importance. It is imperative for leaders to create a clear and compelling vision for the future. It can be scary for individuals to feel that their leadership does not have a well-articulated plan for the organization's future. In contrast, when people can see the future a leader envisions, they are better equipped to begin the work of bringing that vision to fruition.

Finally, leaders must shape a road map to the future. People want to know that their leaders have a plan—even if it is a high-level direction.

Sometimes leaders hesitate to be direct because it can come off as forceful, but it is important to offer clear guidance on how the team is going to get to the future that is being envisioned. That does not mean the path is guaranteed to lead to success, but it is a plan of action and a place to start. It includes clear guidance on what everybody will need to do to get there, and it ensures that all efforts are being directed towards a common goal. When it no longer works, acknowledge

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what went wrong, determine what needs to change and forge ahead.

Using these principles, leaders must put in the intellectual effort to discover new ways of thinking, communicate those to others and lead to produce results through people that were not otherwise going to happen.

Key Benefits and Risks

There is an inherent uncertainty in shifting one's leadership paradigm. The path is less certain and the route to success may be less well-defined. It is of course easier and more comfortable to default to the familiar. But doing so also means forgoing the opportunity to excel in new ways and achieve breakthrough results.

Leaders who have prided themselves on their track record of success may be disinclined to expose themselves to the possibility of faltering. But again, no one is immune to failures and mistakes, and when leaders demonstrate that they are willing to take responsibility for these, people can be remarkably forgiving. Even a failure addressed the right way can inspire followers.

There are numerous rewards to reap for taking on the risk of failure. They come in the form of the talent that is unleashed, vision that drives people to achieve what they did not think was possible and the opportunity to invent a future that does not yet exist. When leaders are willing to examine their own approaches and reinvent the rules of the game, they unlock the hidden talent and passion in their organizations. Any

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team member within an organization has the opportunity to make a difference, but leadership has to inspire the workforce to take on the personal risk involved in striving to achieve more.

How to Get Started

Self-disruption begins with an acknowledgement of room for growth. No leader has ever "maxed out" his or her potential for development. There are always ways to elevate one's leadership, and a leader must be willing to ask, "How?" to begin the journey.

The next step for leaders is an honest examination of their practices and their interactions with others. It is crucial to ask: "What am I committed to as a leader? Do I have ways of leading that are not consistent with this?" Inconsistencies identified here offer a starting point for evolving and transforming one's leadership. Pinpointing the places where a leader may be falling short of his or her ideals and possibly failing to provide their teams with the guidance and inspiration those individuals need is a necessary exercise in pursuit of transformed—and transformational—leadership.

Leaders must also consider to what extent the people around them are thriving. Is the organization meeting its expectations, and what role does leadership play in that? It is easy to point fingers, especially down the chain of command, but great leaders ask how they are contributing to performance that fails to meet expectations and what they can do to reverse the tide.

It can be difficult to achieve this level of self-examination without help. And as many executives know, it can be very lonely in the C-suite. Not many individuals are willing to provide honest feedback to those leaders. It is up to the leaders to identify and cultivate relationships that can provide them feedback on what is working and what is not. Further, it is up to leaders to set the tone and give permission to offer that feedback.

Take the example of one executive who, in the throes of the COVID-19 outbreak, was tasked with delivering a crucial project for a client that required a two-day turnaround. As the leader coordinated with one of his direct reports to accelerate the team's efforts, the leader also directed him: "Let me know if I start behaving in a way that doesn't work." This leader is aware that moments of stress can make him act in ways that are unproductive and not helpful for the team, so he trusted his direct report to give him a heads-up if signs of that began to emerge.

Everyone has blind spots and default modes of response in moments of stress. Leaders must be sufficiently aware of their own quirks to recognize the ways in which these can prove counterproductive to their teams. Having an inner circle of trusted people who can provide that feedback is crucial to a leader's success.

A courageous leader is not afraid to ask, "What is it like to work with me?" or, "What do I do that is not working for you or your team?" Not everyone will be wholly forthright, but by asking these questions, leaders can signal that they seek to create an environment in which people feel comfortable being candid in their responses. Over time, such genuine conversations can help strengthen bonds on a team and motivate people to work together toward a common goal.

Bumps in the Road

No approach is without its challenges. In companies where the tendency is to bow to

tradition—to "that's the way we have always done it"—self-generated changes may run up against organizational pushback. Being a disruptive leader is much easier in an organization that recognizes that growth is not achieved without movement. Yet going the path alone is not impossible. Depending on one's sphere of influence, a leader can change the conversations that people have.

Consider if one executive takes the initiative to be the first at her organization to take on leadership in this way. As she challenges her own default responses and actions, she also makes time to share her learnings with her peers. Through her, others begin to see the potential for evolving their own leadership. Setting an example of accountability for one's approach to leadership can promote a positive shift in organizational culture and drive higher levels of growth.

Further, in times of exceptional external disruption—when there is no "business as usual" on which to rely—leaders who relentlessly pursue self-disruption can, through the sum of their efforts, effect meaningful shifts in the global business arena. They can spur change in how and where work gets done, whether with respect to supply-chain management or employee teams working remotely. Where the stress hits is where the greatest opportunity exists.

The level of personal responsibility and accountability required for one's leadership to act on this philosophy is not reached without deliberate effort. It is much easier to examine how the industry is evolving, how other people work, and how to retool teams to improve performance.

But to investigate one's own leadership style and how it affects others? That also is crucial work: Leadership sets the tone for an organization, and that is where all transformation begins. **IQ**

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