

LEADING SELF

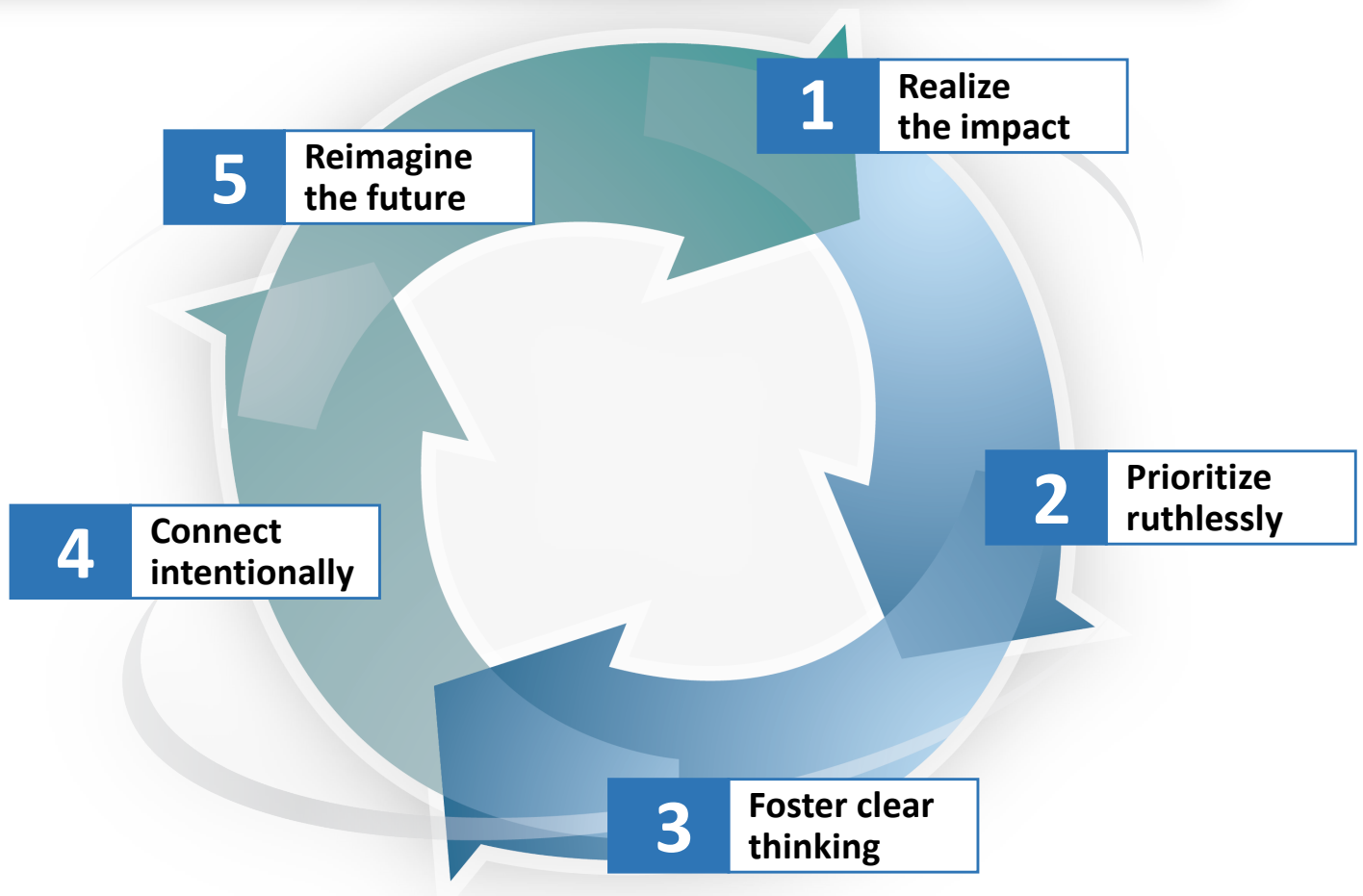
A toolkit for sustaining your
leadership impact in uncertain
times

PREPARED BY



THE LEADERSHIP
IMPACT PROJECT

Leadership Impact Framework



Amidst the current crisis, we have talked to countless leaders who have asked us to help them navigate what is probably the biggest challenge of their career. The uncertainty and complexity of the pandemic, let alone the business implications, are unprecedented. While some leaders are noticing and welcoming a forced change to some of their default routines, most are questioning their effectiveness, feeling ill-equipped and exhausted. Burnout was an issue before the pandemic but is now heightened in many ways. In a recent [survey](#) conducted of 1,001 U.S. employees by Eagle Hill Consulting, nearly half report being burnt-out—with one in four of them attributing that to the pandemic.

From our own research and experience helping leaders navigate and build the sustainability needed for a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world, we know there are tools and techniques that can significantly help. In this Leadership Impact framework, we have curated and synthesized findings around the brain and human system that we believe are most relevant to leaders immersed in a sustained crisis. Leaders can, in fact, use a 5-step approach to refocus and realign their impact. Of course, this is only a framework; every leader has unique needs and challenges. We believe that the intensity of the current situation is creating an immediate demand for an ongoing opportunity for more sustainable and impactful leadership practices. This toolkit introduces the Leadership Impact Framework and provides a summary of current best practices and insights (with links to sources and resources if you desire more) that we believe leaders will find most useful at this time.



1

Realize the Impact

The first step for a leader facing extreme uncertainty and complexity, and probably the most important step, is to take stock of the personal impact. Regardless of how directly we have been impacted by Covid-19, our brains are processing a perceived threat—and more extreme the closer the pandemic and related events feel to you. At a neurobiological level we are all wired to seek safety, belonging, and feeling valued. When those feel threatened, a series of physiological responses are triggered, activating our sympathetic nervous system and sending our brain and body into ‘fight, flight, or freeze’. Not only is the surge in hormones and energy related to this exhausting, but it also diminishes our capabilities for decision making and higher-level thinking as blood flows away from our pre-frontal cortex ([more information on the brain under stress](#)).

Neuroleadership expert David Rock created a useful model to help leaders think about this phenomenon. His SCARF model explains that changes to: **Status**—our relative importance to others; **Certainty**—our ability to predict the future; **Autonomy**—our sense of control over events; **Relatedness**—how safe we feel with others; and **Fairness**—how fair we perceive the exchanges between people to be, will activate a threat response, triggering either a ‘*move towards*’ or ‘*move away from*’ response in the brain ([brief introduction on the SCARF model](#)). A crisis, let alone a pandemic, magnifies this. The closer, more believable, or personal the threat, the more difficult it is to generate novel solutions. In addition, our cognitive energy is depleted from all the thinking required to navigate a new normal. Even simple activities—like conducting meetings over zoom when we are not accustomed to it—create neurological dissonance, [which is exhausting](#). The more tired we are, the more our brains perceive threat. It’s a vicious cycle. Recognizing this for yourself and your team and then taking measures to reduce the level of perceived threat and to get your brain into a more optimal state is Step 1 in our framework.

TIPS

- Connect with your physiology and take stock of your current sense of stress or overwhelm as the situation continues to evolve.
- Consider the aspects of threat that are being heightened for yourself and your team. Consider what you can do to reduce the level of threat being experienced.
- Where possible, look for [actions](#) to minimize perceived threats along the key areas of the SCARF model:

STATUS - Let teams know—frequently—how important they are. Provide positive feedback and new ways to recognize employees. Infuse positive energy as much as possible.

CERTAINTY - Reinforce the “controllables”. Overcommunicate. Simplify. Clarify what is known and unknown. Create scenarios. Repeat.

AUTONOMY - Delegate. Avoid micromanaging unless necessary. Empower and enable decision making. Engage in co-creation and include employees’ points of view in solutioning. Provide discretion, as possible, on employees’ work environment.

RELATEDNESS - Stay connected. Check in more informally beyond the work at hand. Show that you care. Reinforce group norms.

FAIRNESS - Be honest and open about what is going on. Clarify roles and responsibilities. Pressure test processes and systems. Create new team norms. Reduce the burden, if needed.

STEP 1 IN ACTION

One client recently shared that senior leadership had taken dramatic measures to connect with employees during this crisis. The company quickly implemented a weekly Covid newsletter that provides employees with updates to the impact on business, preparedness, and the response plan, but also includes a section called “The New Normal” with personal stories on how employees are adapting to working from home (including a photo of the CEO trying to work with a cat on his laptop) and a section called “Playtime, Downtime & Family Time” with tips on how to decompress during the crisis.

IBM responded by creating a single source of truth for employees around the world by mobilizing a digital Resiliency Toolkit for their leaders in a matter of days. As leaders began to work virtually, they also realized they needed to adopt certain behaviors in this new normal. What emerged was a work from home [pledge](#) with commitments like: I pledge to be Family Sensitive; I pledge to Be Kind; I pledge to Take Care of Myself; I pledge to support Not Camera-Ready times. This pledge has now been signed by thousands of employees.



Prioritize Ruthlessly

At the same time that we are experiencing the neurological exhaustion described in Step 1, the average employee is working significantly [longer hours](#) today than they were before the pandemic. While [sleep](#) and self-care are paramount in managing our stress and moving out of a heightened threat level, few are making the time for either. One company that measures employee fitness via fit bit steps has seen a 60% decline in steps, now that employees are working from home. With rising stress, more work, and less self-care, leaders are not in an [optimal state](#) to access their most resourceful selves. The sheer complexity of business challenges brought on by Covid-19 requires innovative solutions and new adaptive strategies—not easily accessed when leaders are overly stressed, burnt out, or distracted by less critical matters.

In order to create time for both critical thinking and the self-care required to prevent burnout and build resiliency, leaders must ruthlessly prioritize for themselves and others. Focus on delivering what matters most. It is time to rethink goals and relax some expectations. Take time to review your calendar and project list and ask yourself how critical and how urgent each item is right now. Sacred cows within your organization (like mid-year reviews) may need to be shifted or released. Old models for meetings must adjust to accommodate a virtual setting (and the neurological strain of days filled that way). Take care to use your time in meetings wisely—manage agendas and connect intentionally. Use your position to model self-care and set an example of how to prioritize and make shifts possible. Time is a sacred resource; protect it now more than ever.

TIPS

- Look at organizational priorities through a new lens. Get clear on your new criteria: what really matters now and what delivers the most value.
- Audit your calendar (and set an example) where possible
 - Get 7 - 9 hours of sleep each night.
 - Create 5-min check-ins to connect intentionally.
 - Make default meeting times 25 min or 50 mins (vs 30 or 60 mins).
 - Ensure you have a break between meetings.
 - Pause intentionally more often.
 - Schedule time to move, meditate, and exercise.
- Create new operating norms for your team.
 - Model the realities of working from home
 - Embrace the opportunity to show your humanity and vulnerability.
- Model and discuss the importance of prioritizing self-care.

STEP 2 IN ACTION

One of our clients is a leader who oversees many critical projects. One of her senior project managers was not coping well with the stress and added responsibilities of caring for a toddler while working from home. His true capacity was at a fraction of what it was pre-Covid, but she believes this isn't representative of his capabilities. As we worked through a path forward, she began to prioritize daily, virtual "huddles" with him, helping him identify the most important actions to keep the project moving forward: what he must lead, what he can delegate, and what can get delayed. She recognized that given his level of stress, he was not capable of effectively prioritizing and she chose to intervene to help get him back on track. Given the importance of the project and the welfare of a critical member of her team, this became a top priority.

Some companies are adjusting to respond to this intense, virtual, work-from-home environment. Goldman Sachs Group, Inc. gave staff 10 extra days of family leave; Microsoft is offering workers 12 additional weeks of parental leave; and Starbucks Corp. employees now get 20 free therapy sessions.



There are a number of very practical techniques, garnered from a greater understanding of our neurobiology, that can be utilized to enhance our cognitive abilities. These techniques are grounded in activating our parasympathetic nervous system, which calms us, and managing our mindsets and emotional state ([short video](#)). As we said in the previous step, reducing the physiological cues or magnifiers of stress through proper sleep, nutrition, and exercise is a priority. In addition, we can activate greater calm and clarity through body awareness and deep, intentional breathing (read [here](#)). This technique can be used in any moment of agitation or distraction. It can also be used proactively in preparation to join a meeting or sit down to important work. Taking a few minutes to intentionally clear your head and calm your body will pay for itself through greater efficiency and effectiveness. Remember that “anyone that is successful or fulfilled is the author of their own attention” (Richard Strozzi-Heckler). There are often [many questions](#) about meditation and mindfulness: Do they work? How can I find the time? Why should I do it? Where do I start? Understanding that these are [tools](#) for attention training that better enable you to be the author of your own attention can be a helpful incentive.

In addition to noticing our physiology, it is important to check in on our mindset and emotions. Our thinking can get hijacked under stress, and the current environment can be particularly triggering. Being able to reframe our thoughts—for ourselves and our teams—is paramount. Be aware that, like a virus, emotions are contagious. This emotional contagion is both internal and external, affecting not only those around us but also our ongoing emotional state. It is important to remember that “positive emotions are the building blocks of resilience, physical health, everyday effectiveness, and fulfilling relationships” (Barbara Fredrickson). Recognize that there are [ways to proactively activate our ‘happy chemicals’](#). This, combined with buffering from sources of unnecessary negative emotions, can enhance not only our own well-being and performance, but that of those around us (TED Podcast: [How To Be Your Best Self in Times of Crisis](#)).

TIPS

- Practice breathing rhythmically and regularly throughout the day.
- Complete an [energy inventory](#): make a list of the people, places, activities that fuel your energy and those that drain energy. Create buffers for negative [emotional contagion](#) (i.e., newsfeeds, catastrophizing).
- Develop a daily gratitude practice.
- Serve communities, causes, and one another.
- Be easy on yourself; practice self-compassion.
- Incorporate some type of mindful practice daily.

STEP 3 IN ACTION

A [study](#) of South African bankers found that after 21 days of paced breathing, they achieved an average of 62% improvement in cognitive capacity on complex decision-making tasks, whereas poor breathing led to procrastination and delaying important decisions.

One of our client companies has significantly heightened their focus on gratitude and giving during Covid-19. A cash compensation was distributed to all employees, acknowledging that many families have been impacted. It was suggested that the cash be used either to cover personal expenditures or to make a charitable contribution. In addition, the company is emphasizing a GIVE Double Match and is increasing community donations and working with local charities in counties where they have infrastructure projects.

Human beings are social, emotional beings who are wired for connection. Physical distancing challenges this, which is why many experts have appropriately emphasized the need for physical—not social—distance. Now more than ever, we need each other, and employees need their leaders. How we show up as we connect with others matters. As a leader, consider how you use each interaction to leave your team better than you found them. Think carefully about the behaviors you want to model (see suggestions in the Tips section). How we connect with others—through the words we use and the messages we send with tone, body language, and energy—will reinforce the behaviors we will see in others. With more time in virtual meeting spaces, it is important to monitor your [body language and level of distraction on zoom](#). People notice.

Beyond managing how we show up, we need to manage what we show up with. Consider your stakeholders and what information they may need (e.g., changes to business processes or work policies), as well as where new needs for support may be surfacing (e.g., employees working with children at home). This is a time to simplify and clarify messaging for employees, while practicing empathy and honesty. Like managing any disruption or change, leaders need to over communicate to get the impact they desire. For critical messaging, consider a [10x10x10 rule](#) (tell people 10 times, in 10 different ways, for them to retain 10%). On the flipside, know that our brains are wired to take in more negative messaging than positive, and a recent [study](#) found that remote employees tend to receive more critical feedback. Be mindful of your interactions to ensure that, where possible, you are providing positive feedback that is specific, meaningful, and constructive, which can boost performance and engagement. In all of this, recognize that your behaviors communicate loudly.

TIPS

- Simplify and clarify communication.
- Heighten oxytocin and serotonin in your teams by appreciating them and acknowledging great work.
- Operate intentionally on video calls by effectively managing body language and expressions.
- Model important behaviors:
 - Be curious - Recognize you do not have to have all of the answers. Tap into the collective wisdom of your team. Seek to listen deeply to understand.
 - Be human - Lines are blurred. Create new ways of operating; bring humanity to your conversations.
 - Be caring - Check in on stress, fatigue, health, and support needed.
 - Be positive - Send positive messages, rewards, and feedback.

STEP 4 IN ACTION

One client realized that the culture committee that had recently been established to create more in office cohesiveness would need to transform its mission quickly. By starting daily, 15-min, open-ended check-in calls, she was able both to gather a pulse check on the evolving needs and concerns of employees and to provide a bit of daily inspiration. These calls have led to the development of virtual working parent groups, a single repository for all Covid-19 related developments, coordinated virtual happy hours, and the creation of an Office of the Future task force to look at what is being learned from the pandemic and how to create a new vision for the future.

Although we have a desire to get back to work and the life we once had, we are most likely on the precipice of a new future and need to start to build the vision and the bridge to this new way of being. We believe that rethinking the employee experience is going to be important for leaders. A recent [Gallop poll](#) revealed that more than half of all employees would like to work remotely as much as possible even after restrictions are removed. We are also noticing an opportunity to rethink culture. Crises have a way of revealing the existing character of an organization. What has this pandemic revealed to you? Are there changes that need to be made? While we want to focus on [certainty](#) right now, Futurist Bob Johansen believes the future will reward clarity over certainty. He suggests leaders create informed scenarios of what might be ('if this, then that') as a guide for planning, with an understanding that prediction is not the goal—but rather a way to recognize new possibilities for harnessing clarity around patterns. To do this, leaders can adopt a 'now, future, next' approach for planning in a VUCA world, considering where they are today and identifying next steps based on patterns that emerge from imagining future possibilities ([Leaders Make the Future](#)).

Beyond planning purposes, creating a positive, motivating future vision is magnetic, especially in times of change. When we envision or imagine something, it activates our Reticular Activating System—our internal gate keeper that looks for things aligned with our vision and purpose and helps keep other information out. Beyond these immediate benefits, there is an opportunity to note what is actually working better now, based on the shifts that are forced upon us. We are hearing (and noticing) from our clients an incredible opening to new possibilities brought on by the pandemic. Where do we feel more aligned with our values? What feels possible now that didn't a few months ago? How can we use this as an opportunity to create a more sustainable and human organization in the future? Whatever it might be, we are helping our clients notice what is changing for the good and, through those reflections, paving a path for new leadership behaviors and organizational cultures. Many paradigms and operating models have been disrupted or will disappear—now is the time to reimagine the future.

TIPS

- Revisit your values; use these as a decision-making lens.
- Take an inventory of the paradigm shifts that impact you, your work, and your family. What is now possible?
- When faced with uncertainty, try the 'now, future, next' approach: Where am I now? Where do I want to be 3, 5, 10 years from now? How does this inform the next steps to take?
- Increase certainty with more mini-goals and milestones.
- Pay attention to the positive shifts you are experiencing. Explore why these resonate. Write a letter to your future self, what have you learned, what do you want to keep from these unusual times?

STEP 5 IN ACTION

We are seeing countless "awakenings" with our clients right now. Some have realized that setting better boundaries (which has become absolutely necessary with children home from school) actually makes them more engaged at work. Others have elevated their voice to fight for the needs of their team and are finding themselves rising to new levels of influence. Many are recognizing the benefits of showing more empathy, vulnerability, and compassion. One client has noticed such significant (and surprising) positive changes to her leadership in the midst of the challenges that she has dedicated time each week to jot down her reflections (what's different? what's working? how am I changing?) and will use those notes to create ongoing practices as conditions revert to a new normal.

In a recent Neuroleadership Institute poll, over 50% of companies were looking at the pandemic as a way to completely reinvent their leadership development offering. Companies like Merck in fact, believed we are on the cusp of reinventing leadership itself and what it means to really be a leader.



The Leadership Impact Project

OUR MISSION

Our mission is to help leaders build resiliency and sustainability to thrive in today's volatile, uncertain and complex work environment. We are doing this work by providing tools, resources, executive coaching, and programmatic learning to companies based on emerging neuroscience research and leadership best practices to drive both individual and organizational performance.



**THE LEADERSHIP
IMPACT PROJECT**

WHO WE ARE

Robin Martin and Jennifer Tankersley are Executive Coaches and leadership experts with a shared belief in the vital role leaders play in the well-being of our society. With voracious appetites for learning, we recognized a vast treasure of science and research-based knowledge that wasn't adequately being leveraged by leaders to increase their impact and sustainability – both challenged in an increasingly complex world. As practitioners, we aim to bridge that gap by distilling, synthesizing and delivering the best developments in neuroscience, human systems, adult development, behavior and somatic awareness to today's leaders. To learn more, please contact us at info@leadershipimpactproject.com or individually at Robin@thriveccg.com or Jennifer@thetankersleygroup.com.

**Robin
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HOW WE CAN HELP

- Supporting HR and OE teams to provide resources to leaders
- One-on-one Executive Coaching
- In-tact Team and Group Coaching
- Targeted Webinars and Virtual Roundtables
- Six-Week Virtual Offering: The Sustainable Leader
- 2-Day Sustainable Leader Intensives
- Facilitated team offsites
- Speaking Engagements

***Most of these programs can be effectively delivered virtually*



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