



Toward Productive Perseverance

Leading your team to function well through a long-term challenge

Tim Stevenson

LEADERSHIP IS ALWAYS the critical factor in organization or team effectiveness. If possible, the importance of good leadership is magnified even greater during times like the present. Why?

People wear down under long-term stress

I can speak with much authority on this subject. Before becoming a full-time Sherpa Executive Coach, I spent 30 years in various forms of Christian ministry. As a pastoral counselor, I worked with literally thousands of individuals and families going through every form of trouble and tragedy you can imagine. Here are some general observations.

- *People often have a harder time dealing with low-level but long-term stress than with a major tragic event*

This may seem counterintuitive. I don't mean, of course, that people don't experience grief, shock, and sadness in a tragic event. Those are normal reactions. But it seems to me that most have the ability to step up to a sudden major problem to deal with it.

What seems harder for most people is a lower-level problem that goes on and on and on. Examples might be a chronic disease, prolonged unemployment, or caring for a child or parent with special needs. The daily endurance of the challenge with seemingly no end in sight wears them down over time. This happens regardless of how mature, intelligent, or strong they are.

If you are leading a team during this pandemic, that's what you can expect to see.

- *Under long-term stress, people tend to stray away from self-maintenance practices*

Can you imagine an athlete anticipating a marathon saying, "I don't have time to rest or eat! I have to run a marathon!" Good luck



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with that. Endurance athletes know they must load up on calories, sometimes by two or three times, to successfully complete their event.

Working with people in long-term life challenges, I have consistently seen them do the **opposite**. They begin to neglect basic self-care. They begin to withdraw from important relationships. They lose their taste for things they enjoyed which delivered a needed break.

If you lead a team, you can expect some of your people to do the same.

- *As people wear down, they become duller mentally and emotionally, leading to less initiative and more errors of judgment*

As the marathon continues (one with a completely unknown finish line!), even the smartest and strongest persons experience a gradual decline. Creativity and initiative dry up and they grow increasingly passive.

If this goes on long enough, people arrive at a sort of paralysis. Hope fades. Effort seems increasingly meaningless. They put life, happiness, and productivity “on hold,” waiting for some day when the stressful situation ends.

Leadership provides the antidote

What I have written above may seem bleak, but it is the unfortunate truth about human beings. You may already be seeing it.

Here’s the good news. If you are a leader, you are in a position to do something about it.

Here are some things you can do.

Regularly emphasize the importance of self-maintenance

If your team is typical these days, you are working remotely. That means you are having check-in meetings by a video platform or conference call. A regular topic of conversation should be self-maintenance.

In Sherpa Coaching, we use a tool to examine and build our clients’ self-maintenance practices called Support Mountain. I am an absolutely committed believer that anyone who wants to be a top-level performer over the long haul must know how to maintain themselves. For many of the hundreds of clients I have worked with, this exercise was the single most important thing we covered, even life changing.

Without going into detail, let me sum it up this way: Support Mountain is a 3-D snapshot of your self-maintenance practices.

- ***Intrinsic Lens: What activities for you bring about refreshment and recharging?***

This category can include anything from exercising to reading to watching movies to arts and crafts; in fact, *anything* that regenerates you. I operate by an unofficial military motto: “If it’s stupid but works, it isn’t stupid.” I tell my clients, “If flying on a trapeze is relaxing to you, go for it!”

- ***Extrinsic Lens: What people in your life provide encouragement and support?***

These individuals can be professional or personal relationships: Friends, family, coworkers, mentors, or a “best friend at work.”

- ***Environmental Lens: What places for you are areas of peace, rest, and refreshment?***

These places can be anything from a certain chair in your home to a park bench to a coffee shop. Many have listed their car as such a place. Once again, “If it’s stupid but works ...”

After the client arrives at their answers, I ask the big question: “How are you doing working your system?” It doesn’t matter how many answers they came up with; it won’t mean a thing if they’re not **doing** it.

In today’s challenge, this requires unusual flexibility and creativity. We can’t go to places or meet with people as we’d like. ***But that does not mean we can’t do anything!*** If you are in a leadership role, you can help your people by emphasizing this. Talk about it weekly.

No one can do everything on their Support Mountain in a given week. But **by diligent creativity and planning**, anyone can make sure they are taking action to maintain themselves mentally, emotionally, and physically.

It should go without saying, but I'll say it: If you are a leader, your needs for self-maintenance are as great, if not greater, than those of your team. A leader who wears down pulls the team down with him. Make sure you are maintaining *yourself* so that you can be at your best and at full strength to lead others.

Provide regular transparent communication

The last thing you want is to set off your team members' imaginations. When people don't know what is going on, they will typically imagine the worst. The best antidote is regular transparent communication.

It's almost a universal leadership disease. Leaders *think* they communicate adequately while their people say they do not. Accept the wisdom in this: **You cannot overcommunicate**, especially in times like these!

Transparent means you tell what you know and don't know. Admit when you're in the dark. Confess you don't know all the answers. If your people believe you, they will feel better.

Promote a long-term mentality with a present focus

People tend to build up false hopes and adopt unrealistic expectations as they wear down over time, but that results in much harm when their hopes are dashed and their expectations disappointed. Here is where you must apply a leader's power to **define reality**.

You have to keep reminding them that this is not going to end anytime soon: "It's not

'how are we going to make it for the next two weeks?' It's 'how are we going to make it under these conditions for the next six months?' What if we are still dealing with this a full year from now? Accept it."

You must keep reminding people of this. If you don't, you'll see the return of false hopes and unrealistic expectations, initiating a downward spiral. Tell them often to settle in, that this is a marathon, not a sprint.

At the same time, you want to redirect your people's thoughts back to the **present**. You want to promote a mentality that accepts the long-term nature of the race along with a **focus on what we can do now**.

Focus on what you can control, not on what you *cannot*

Under stress, people's imaginations tend to wander off into fantasyland. They build imaginary scenarios of the future, which tend to be negative and scary. They talk about the things that worry them, which tend to be things they have no earthly control over.

Thinking about, worrying about, obsessing about what you have no control over is a waste of time and energy. One of best ways you can help your team is to keep reminding them of this and redirecting them to what they **can** do.

In times of high anxiety, you may have to step in ten times in a single conversation to redirect them back to what they have control over and can do. You might find yourself repeating, "We can't do anything about that. It's outside of our control. What **can** we do?"

I believe the application of the above principles will help you lead your team through this current crisis – not merely to survive, but to thrive and remain productive. **L**