

April 2, 2020

Leadership in a Time of Crisis



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What is top of mind?

First is people. It's about their safety. We store over 800 million medical records globally. We have a two-hour commitment to get those to the hospital. So we have a lot of people on the street, making deliveries. We do worry about making sure our people are kept safe. We monitor that at a high level.

We are more and more focused on mental health. We are monitoring the hotlines to ensure that people know that there is no stigma for reaching out for help. We want to make sure the message is clear. I am concerned that in the end the mental effects may be even worse than the virus.

We also must focus on customers and operations. We are supervised, though not regulated, by the Boston Fed, because we are such a big third-party provider, both on the data center side and the records side, for financial institutions around the globe. Banks are sending letters saying they expect us to continue to serve them. We need to make sure our operations continue to function, even if it is at a lower level.

We have to make sure we remain financially sound through the crisis, though there is less impact because of the nature of our business.

Figure out how much you need to communicate and then triple it. We are communicating a lot, but we probably are still not communicating enough. You need

to do a lot of it through tech. You can't have as much face-to-face. We're continuing to work on the communications side.

What about staffing?

The difficult thing is we're a big little company. We have 25,000 employees but less than 600 in management. Most of our employees are front-line staff, with a lot of drivers and couriers. Fewer businesses are asking for our services, and more people are working remotely. There are fewer trucks on the road. We have to make sure the company comes out of the crisis in good form. We need to save the whole rather than the few. That is going to impact our front line. That is the hardest. People are really nervous. They know it is only a matter of time before furloughs or retrenchments come along. They come to work every day. This is taking that away. I feel like I am letting people on the front lines down. It is unavoidable.

What do you expect for the overall economy? What will the recovery look like?

I don't see how it will be a V. What we've done is like shutting down a power plant and not having the manual to turn it back on. Even in World War II we didn't shut the economy down like this. To take a different example, Qantas started flying internationally in the 1930s. This crisis is the first time they haven't flown internationally. Even in World War II they flew internationally.

What is Iron Mountain planning for?

We took the worst of the three scenarios we developed. We're not going to have a vaccine. The politicians have not been clear what the end game is. We thought we saw some green shoots in Asia, such as in Hong Kong. Now you guys are not coming out. Pandemic—it means we go into it and come out of it together. I'm not sure if the recovery coming out of China is sustainable. We're not going to be able to run factories until the whole global supply chain is up and running. Trump looked shaken on Sunday when he was giving his press conference. The Virginia governor is going to lock Virginia down until the beginning of June. Until this vaccine is in circulation, a lot of at-risk people might just avoid seeing others. I'm an optimist, but in this case I want to make sure I'm being conservative about how we plot our course.

What does this say about business continuity planning (BCP)?

BCP looks at all sorts of stresses but never predicted quite this. On the positive side, we have a team that can dig in. My predecessor created a culture of smoke jumpers, those guys that parachute out of planes to put out forest fires in the American West. Ours is a company that thrives in crisis. The company is in many ways at its best during a crisis. We help customers rehabilitate their own record centers after floods, after tornadoes, after hurricanes, like Hurricane Sandy. We are not the most marketing or commercially driven company, but we are a very caring company. It is "mates taking care of mates." It is very rewarding to see the humanity that goes into

the BCP, very rewarding. We need to figure out a way to capture this spirit beyond when crisis hits.

The good news is that we've been dealing with this since early January, we have the right protective equipment in Asia and around the globe. We are managing it. This is the DNA of the company. An example of our collaborative culture is a recent example where we were short of cleaning and sanitation supplies to deep-clean facilities in Southern California. When our district manager found out Seattle was even more short of cleaning supplies, he diverted the shipment to Seattle. This was a great example of "mates take care of mates," which is truly required so we can respond to what is a very fluid situation. So, we've been able to manage it through planning. And culture.

Any lessons from this? Anything that the crisis has helped you to improve?

I was naive to think that it wouldn't become such a broad-based pandemic. Folks in Asia were dealing with it in January. They thought it was like SARS. What's happened since SARS in 2003 is that urbanization, global integration, transportation have all developed. I think these types of things are going to be more routine. At Davos, Professor Niall Ferguson said that we always talk about the wrong thing at Davos. The theme this year was climate change. He said that no one is talking about this epidemic that is brewing in Asia. And how right he was.

Has technology helped?

We were lucky that at the beginning of this year we switched to G Suite across the company. The technology that comes with that and our ability to touch our 25,000 employees in over 50 countries is powerful. We chose G Suite because we wanted to change the way we co-operated. G Suite forces you to collaborate and it only operates in the cloud so it is designed for collaboration. When people can't meet physically, using these tools, we can still produce responses to our customers, adjust our operations, and modify our plans in record time. The ability to collaborate remotely is very different now from what I've known before.

Final thoughts?

Two things: first, I try to focus on the blessings that come with every challenge—for me it is the time I have with Judith and the children. Additionally, this will be a defining moment for our generation just as World War II was for our parents' generation and I believe we will all be better leaders and people as a result.

Interviewed March 31, 2020 by Mark Clifford, Jill Baker, and Colleen Howe