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Lead with Transparency

In times of crisis, a leader can rise up—even if, like **Eric Yaverbaum**, they're sick in bed with COVID-19. Here's what he learned.

by **JASON FEIFER**



IN LATE MARCH, Eric Yaverbaum was out for a run when his body shut down. “It just hit me,” he says. “My breathing got very labored. I got a cough, extreme fatigue, body aches like I’d never felt in my life.” He went to the hospital, where a test confirmed his condition: He had COVID-19. Doctors sent him home to quarantine himself.

Yaverbaum is the chairman of Ericho Communications in New York City, and he now faced a challenging question: How does he lead his company while fighting a terrifying illness? To answer that, he drew from his experience in crisis communications. He wanted to be transparent, open, and trusting of his team. We spoke in April, after he’d been in bed for 11 days. (He’s since recovered.)

What have the past 11 days been like?

Bizarre. You can feel the virus moving around in your body. The aches—even if you’ve gotten the flu full-out, it makes those aches look like junior varsity.

What did you do after being diagnosed? You still had a company to lead.

I have employees on both coasts. I communicated immediately, and I let my entire company know exactly how I felt. What my company knows about me personally in the past

11 days is significantly more than I ever felt I needed to talk about. I communicated with all the tools that I had, and I did it transparently, optimistically, and realistically.

Your staff must have been afraid—for you, of course, but also their jobs. How did you address that?

Realistically. I said, “Who wouldn’t be afraid?” People like to know about tomorrow. Fear of the unknown exists in everybody’s mind. We are suddenly in an era where we have no idea.

The illusion of control has finally been made clear for what it always was: *an illusion.*

It’s leadership’s job to share calm. Not chaos. I watched September 11 out my office window. I saw jumpers—with everyone in my office covering our mouths, trying to process what we were watching. I was in charge of an organization then. I had to decide what to do, with zero experience. There’s no playbook. It’s instinctual. And I think that in this crisis, you will see great leaders show up. They will help us all take steps forward.

Did you put other people in charge in your absence?

For decades, I’ve said this about the success of the organizations I’ve run: If I’m not the dumbest one in the room, I’m in the wrong room. I have smart people working for me. If they’re not empowered to make decisions when I can’t or am not available, then

we’re not that great an organization.

How do you think we move forward from here?

If you’re feeling like *There is no way...*, then this would be a good time to make a way. What it all boils down to is *How do you enjoy the space between where we are and wherever we might be going?*

You might start with the recognition that the most important things in life aren’t things. It turns out that what we thought might never be gone tomorrow is already gone in so many ways. And if it wasn’t obvious to you before, the people who need help look a lot like people who don’t need help.

If your first thought this morning wasn’t *Thank you*, you might want to reconsider what matters now. We all got dealt some new, real surprising cards, and now we have to learn how to play those new cards. And I say, play the hell out of them.

AND JUST LIKE THAT
EVERYTHING
CHANGED...
WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER!
"THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME"
STAY THERE!
#HAPPY #HOPEFUL #GRATEFUL

