Leading in a Crisis
What Leaders Are Saying—and Doing

Many corporate CEOs are facing their toughest leadership challenge. Two Korn Ferry veterans tell us what they are hearing—and seeing—from the C-suite.

In a stunningly short time, demand for her firm’s multibillion-dollar product had dropped almost in half. And almost as quickly, the call for many inside the company was to act fast and preserve as much capital as possible. It was the standard reaction multiplied many times by a global pandemic—save all that is left for better times.

Yet this CEO saw things differently. Cutbacks were made, of course. But instead of purely hunkering down, she directed the teams to work on finding new efficiencies for the product, create new services for customers, and streamline operations. The goal: yes, wait for better times, but give the company an edge for when demand inevitably returns.
In today’s remarkably rough times, with the global coronavirus outbreak upending the modern world as we know it, everyone is dealing with their own challenges. And that certainly includes the world’s chief executive officers. It is these leaders who must keep their organizations afloat. It is they who must inspire people to innovate and try to preserve as many jobs as possible. And while these CEOs are balancing so many impossible dilemmas—what suppliers to pay, what factories to keep open—they must carry the burden of their own uncertainties as well as those of the thousands of workers for whom they bear responsibility.

“It’s something that nearly everyone we’re working with is wrestling with,” says Kevin Cashman, Korn Ferry’s global leader of CEO and Executive Development. “It has never been tougher.”

For weeks, Cashman and Jane Stevenson, Vice Chair of Korn Ferry’s Board and CEO Services practice, have been speaking daily with this group—hearing their struggles as well as their responses. Some admit to having moments of fear. But others have found a way to be energized. In a recent conversation, Cashman and Stevenson spoke about the common themes that shine through their work with the CEOs, and what great leaders are doing to help not only their organizations but themselves.
WHAT ARE CEOs STRUGGLING WITH THE MOST RIGHT NOW?

Kevin Cashman: In a crisis, “perform” can become “survive,” and that can provoke fear. Many CEOs right now are saying, “I have to act. I have to move forward.” But sometimes the desire to thrive, to transform, requires you to slow down. The more something is complex, the more you need to go slow to get it right. The paradox in the crisis is where do you push, where do you pause. You have to do both.

Are CEOs courageous enough to deal with the immediate problems but also courageous enough to do the things that will connect the organization to the future? And that, during a crisis, is one hell of a challenge. You have to be both empathetic and executional. Most of us are typically more one than the other.
Jane Stevenson: The fact that you can’t fix so much of what you’re dealing with is really hard for many CEOs. Some CEOs carry these burdens more easily or with less weight than others. Those who take on the challenges without carrying the weight of them personally have more internal space to stay creative. Taking on today’s challenges personally adds enormous emotional weight to an already heavy load. For example, the leader of one major company I work with is doing all the right things, but I worry that it’s almost killing him.
Jane Stevenson: The round-the-clock nature of this is taxing. The sense of not being in the same place as your team is also isolating. But there’s more interaction than what you’d expect. Because of the nature of this crisis, top competitors are talking with one another more about issues. For example, several CEO clients in the healthcare sector are talking in real time with CEOs of “rivals” on how to fight a common enemy: COVID-19. There’s more collaboration than ever before around “What are you doing on this or that issue?” and “Here’s what we are thinking...” In this sense, for today they’re in it together, despite being competitors.

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DO MOST CEOs HAVE A “WE HAVE TO SURVIVE THIS” MENTALITY NOW?

Jane Stevenson: We’re seeing an innate reaction to pull back, but the great leaders are pushing forward.

Kevin Cashman: Yes. There’s a big difference between what we’re seeing with CEOs across the bell curve distribution and what we’re seeing with great CEOs. The best leaders are not only connecting across everything they can within their organization to keep people engaged and motivated but also across the industry with collaboration that fits a deeper, broader purpose. Also, in the face of these tough, complex dilemmas, these top CEOs are doing their best to balance empathy and execution across stakeholder groups.

“ If the CEO can focus on the key priorities, then the organization can harness its energy around the right things. ”
WHAT ARE THE GREAT LEADERS DOING THAT PERHAPS OTHER CEOS ARE NOT?

Jane Stevenson: In a situation like this where everything feels out of control, there’s an innate move to try to control as much as you can. Just survival can overwhelm you. But some leaders are adapting in the moment and moving forward to new realities even as they address issues like the company’s survival.

For instance, one transportation player has had to retire the vast majority of its fleet and is still dealing with a huge reduction in capacity for the remaining operating segments. So one way to approach this would be to just shore up capital to survive, which is no small issue, and which they are definitely doing. But this CEO is also asking his teams to use technology now to help shift the company for the future. Their approach during the downturn is to look at how they, a sleeping giant, can be ready to come back even stronger in four or five months.

Kevin Cashman: It really seems that the CEOs who are truly purpose-driven are thriving a bit more. Take life sciences, where many are seeing their purpose as healing and touching patients. So what are they doing? Collaborating with competitors on treatments, cooperating with governments, even giving supplies away. That’s purpose playing out, and at the same time, creating an environment of global innovation and service.

Purpose can be set aside very easily in a crisis because we have to survive. But we have to remind ourselves that purpose elevates us from survive to thrive. Purpose clearly shows up in world-class leaders in a crisis.

THEY ARE DEFINING THE FIRM’S VALUES CONCISELY, SO PEOPLE HAVE THE CLARITY AND GUIDELINES TO MAKE DECISIONS.
WHAT ELSE ARE THE TOP LEADERS EXHIBITING?

Jane Stevenson: They are defining the firm’s values concisely, so people have the clarity and guidelines to make decisions on their own and quickly. The leaders don’t have time to check in with everyone constantly, so everyone has to know what the values are against which they’re going to operate and make decisions. Those values aren’t inconsistent with the firm’s normal purpose and values, but firms haven’t always defined them well in the first place.

For instance, one CEO says, “Our first priority is the safety of employees. The second priority is to use every available opportunity to add unique value to our customers, building brand loyalty during this time. And the third priority is to use these opportunities to learn and develop as we go.” That gives all of her employees the ability to operate with confidence and purpose for decision-making. It doesn’t change the amount of risk there is in the world, but it does provide clarity and clear accountabilities as employees move the business forward with agility.

Kevin Cashman: They are showing resilience. I asked one CEO recently “how are you doing?” and was ready for some pretty tough stuff and then to empathize with him. He said, “I hesitate to say it, but I’m really energized by all these challenges.” This situation will drain every bit of energy that most of us have. To be resilient and, as Jane says, to elevate in this situation is huge.
The paradox in the crisis is where do you push, where do you pause.

**WHAT TYPE OF GUIDANCE ARE YOU PROVIDING DURING THIS CRISIS?**

**Jane Stevenson:** Honestly, rather than providing answers, I am being more of a thought partner and asking questions that may open up thinking. I remind them that human nature is driven by gravity and right now it is pulling us down. So this concept of elevation and really getting above the tactics of the essential minute-to-minute firefighting is really critical. I also want the CEO to, instead of pulling back, really look at the most pivotal points that will make a difference. That’s even more important for the organization than it is to the CEO. If the CEO can focus on the key priorities, then the organization can harness its energy around the right things and not feel like it has to tackle everything.

**Kevin Cashman:** All of these conversations start personal, no matter what their role is, and then move to professional and all of the complexities. With CEOs, you want to give them a place to think out loud and sort through things.
HAVE CEOS DONE ANYTHING THAT HAS SURPRISED YOU?

Jane Stevenson: One of things that has helped is to maintain a sense of humor, even during this very serious time. One of the people we’re coaching oversees a huge global business that has seen its sales drop by billions in a few months. She is a results-focused leader with a keen awareness of the global gravity of their situation, including a huge number of employees on the front lines daily. Despite that, every day when she has a video call with her top team, she places something totally ridiculous somewhere in the background behind her. The day I saw her, she had stuck a huge British saluting gnome right behind her and started the meeting as if nothing was out of the norm. It was hilarious! I laugh just thinking about it! She is doing something different like that every day and, despite grim realities, her team is looking forward to seeing what she’s going to do next. Silly, corny things like that can bring people to a common sense of reality. Having the emotional intelligence to know when and how to do that is really significant.
8 STEPS LEADERS CAN TAKE NOW

1. Be purposeful.
   - Constantly remind people why it is so important that we exist.
   - See this crisis as a new way to purposefully serve colleagues and customers in new, meaningful, value-creating ways.
   - Leverage purpose as a new tool of innovation; purpose can touch lives in new ways.

2. Be empathetic.
   - Acknowledge others’ stress in this situation.
   - Know that people are also struggling with personal and family issues beneath the business issues.
   - Show you care about them versus the enterprise only.
   - Repeat, repeat, repeat.

3. Be calm, clear, and confident.
   - Communicate with realness, clarity, authenticity, and regularity: tell the real story.
   - Express a vision of the other side of this...elevate from now to next.
   - Convert anxiety to the attitude “we will get through this together.”

4. Be both action oriented and reflective.
   - Reconcile the paradox of pause and action; both are critical.
   - Avoid being too passive or too hyperactive during these times.
   - Step back to reflect, learn, and strategize when the pace and bias for action are too high.

5. Be inspiring.
   - Share stories that reveal the enduring values and what is really important now.
   - Remember the purpose of the enterprise and rally people around it.
   - See the crisis as an opportunity to more deeply live and serve our people and customers.

6. Be resilient.
   - Take care of your energy, wellness, and fitness.
   - Encourage others to take care of themselves, and demonstrate by modeling it.
   - Show your energy to take on these challenges with energy and innovation.

7. Be aware of mindsets.
   - Move from fixed/fear mindsets to growth mindsets.
   - Know that our openness and closedness opens or closes others.
   - Catch yourself in fixed/fear mindsets and move to growth mindsets before acting or behaving.

8. Be courageous.
   - Make the tough decisions on purpose and with courage.
   - Pay attention to fear-based, reactive decisions.
   - Inspire others with your courage, energy, and positivity.
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Get more insights like this in our new report, written by and for leaders working to get through and beyond this crisis.

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