



## Coach Yourself Through COVID-19

Last week, a member of a senior leadership team admitted to me and his team members that he was struggling with “that little voice in my head.” It was the voice of fear and uncertainty. He’s not alone. Many of us are hearing similar whispers, as we attempt to come to grips with the tragedy, heartbreak, and uncertainty wrought by that silent killer, COVID-19.

Understand, the COVID-19 crisis, as catastrophic as it is, didn’t make this executive—and doesn’t make *you!*—go dark. You have the ability to control how you choose to react to a crisis. The “story” you create about an event—your interpretation of it— triggers the positive or negative response to it.

Stories are our beliefs. We continually seek to understand the world around us, collect data, and then create stories—call them mental models or frameworks, if you prefer—to make sense of the data and the unfolding reality. We then operate emotionally, based on the stories we create.

To return to the troubled executive, here’s what he is processing: He realizes that the COVID-19 pandemic is an objective and devastating event. He has chosen to tell himself a doom-and-gloom story to cope with it. This, in turn, has triggered a response that has often left him afraid and immobilized.

### ***Some leaders, on the other hand, have a story that they are more powerful than their fear:***

Think FDR’s “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” or Winston Churchill’s “We shall fight on the beaches...we shall never surrender” speech to his nation at the outset of World War II. Both had a deeply held belief that they were not victims of circumstances, but creators of their own. Such leaders respond positively to crisis. Theirs is a powerful story that enables them to walk through whatever hell they might face and make it to the other side.

***Here’s a simple yet profoundly important truth that should help you get through the tough time facing us now. The only thing that we have 100-percent control over is how we choose to react to events.***

### ***Let me share with you the story I choose to tell myself these days, hoping you’ll find it helpful:***

Each day I tell myself that all of us will get past the COVID-19 crisis, that my family, colleagues, and clients will be okay, that I’m not going to allow circumstances to derail me, and that whatever comes up I’ll be able to handle it. I tell myself that our political and medical professionals and practitioners at every level are working hard and know what they are doing. There is no payoff for me to think differently. This story keeps me engaged and energized. I feel productive, and I’m in action, rather than retreating to “living inside my own head.” It enables me to reach out to clients, colleagues, family, and friends to stay in touch and on tap.

***If you're feeling frightened or paralyzed by a sense of impending gloom***, ask yourself, what's the story that I'm telling myself that prompts me to feel this way? What are the issues that I'm making up that create this feel of powerlessness? Dig deeply to get to the root cause of why you're choosing to create the stories that make you feel debilitated. If you find that you are overly pessimistic or optimistic, explore what you can do in a more neutral light. Look at what's *actually* happening instead of imposing your story on it.

***If you're a leader in an organization***, you have the choice to determine the story that you want to create. It's also imperative for your team members to know that it's safe to convey their fears and insecurities, that this is not the time to "play pretend," hide emotions, or put a lid on them. Encourage them to go ahead and express themselves and be vulnerable. They're in a safe, secure zone and there's no right or wrong way to feel.

Bring your team members together regularly, even if it's remotely, to check in with them. These days, it's pointless to dive into the meeting agenda, feigning business as usual. First, reveal how you are doing. Role-model being vulnerable! Then ask your team members: How are you doing? What are you doing to take care of yourself? How challenging are you finding it to maintain a sense of balance during the COVID-19 crisis? I'm not encouraging venting, but catharsis. You'll find that engagement and productivity will greatly improve.

If the outcome that you're looking for is to stay cool, calm, and centered as you get through the COVID-19 crisis, search for the stories that will be self-empowering; hold on to them; and avoid self-inflicted, sky-is-falling, self-defeating upset. Remember, the outcome that you seek to create is your choice. And it is up to you to create the stories that will get you there.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Howard". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "Best regards,".