

6.25.2020



Photo: Vivian Pantoja

# How should a leader act facing the pandemic?

Experts explain which competences are crucial for CEOs and the executive board in bringing companies to safe harbor in midst of turbulent waters.

*Find the original article published in Spanish by dinero.com  
Note: English article is produced from a free translation*

Winston Churchill is often described as a great leader in times of war, but a lousy one for peace. Amidst the crisis generated by the pandemic, few experts disagree that companies need more CEOs like the British prime minister than leaders used to less turbulent times.

Antonio Sánchez, managing partner of the executive search firm Boyden Colombia, states “our clients emphasize in stating that they are in search of leaders for war, because we are in a commercial war, for companies, and for opportunities”.

Sanchez holds that the leader of a company must have at this moment a great capacity to adjust to change, make critical decisions, and visualize the new market. The last aspect should not be viewed as guessing the future, but being capable of posing different scenarios to define what actions and decisions should be taken and know very well the environment in which the company is moving.

Pablo Agustin Londoño, partner for Spencer Stuart, an executive search company with more than 50 offices worldwide and presence in more than 30 countries, notes that this capacity to pose scenarios and analyze the critical decisions in each one is vital. This is because, in a crisis, the time varied between planning something a week from now can be understood in the long term, thus, an almost immediate follow-up is necessary for each action.

In these times, CEOs should also have a permanent communication model, consistent and frank with the employees and all the collaborators of the organization. This communication should be generated directly by them, explaining its purpose and that they are in front of the ship and making decisions for the wellbeing of the company. They must demonstrate optimism without denying the reality that is being lived.

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### Today and Always

Experts consulted maintain that this can be a good moment to retrieve older leaders that have experience in other crises, for example, from the crisis of 2008, not only because they have the experience to manage difficult times, but also because they have the necessary maturity to understand that difficulties pass and it is possible to move forward.

For this reason, Luis Fernando Alarcon, former finance minister and president of the board of directors of Almacenes Éxito, maintains that the leader of a company, with or without crisis, should always have the same characteristics: having a great capacity of understanding their business, visualizing the future of the company, and have great leadership that allows for shifting of team collaborators and clear communication of the strategy to different stakeholders. “This person must be an integral person, with some hard competencies, but also with soft skills”, he synthesizes.



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Antonio Sánchez  
Managing Partner, Boyden Colombia

Based on his experience as a member of 15 boards of directors, these soft skills are also considered fundamental according to Mauricio Rodriguez, a leadership professor of the universities Externado de Colombia and Universidad de los Andes. He points out three characteristics that a CEO should have at this moment, two of which are very related to his or her qualities as a human being: empathy and resilience. The other: the capacity to strategically plan.

A leadership style that is not authoritarian but of shared value is the one that Jorge Hernández, teacher of the business faculty of the Universidad de los Andes and member of executive boards in several companies, highlights as necessary for this moment. In his concept, the present requires making more complex decisions and because of it the CEO needs team support and companionship, and when he speaks of the team, he refers not only to the management team but also to the members of the board of directors.

### The Board of Directors Also Comes Up Front

According to experts consulted, in the same way, CEOs should have new characteristics, the members of executive boards must adjust to change. Londoño considers that one of the changes that must occur in the board of directors is the inclusion of more specialists. The participation of experts in digital transformation and new channels, as well as a very good financial person, is very important.

Mauricio Rodriguez also feels the need to diversify the members of the board of directors and points out that this is now more critical than ever because no one really knows exactly what is going to happen, and that current business demands require new perspectives to tackle them. For this, he suggests that the board of directors includes younger executives, more women, and professionals of other disciplines that have different views of the world, for example, philosophers and anthropologists. As stated by Rodriguez and confirmed by several of the experts consulted, “in this confusion and in these uncertain times it is necessary to open the mind”.

### Lessons From Politics

Mauricio Rodriguez considers that the leaders who have been able to handle the pandemics are Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, and Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister for New Zealand. These women have been able to understand the needs of the people they govern, have made decisions based on data, and have been capable of changing the course when the evidence has indicated. Merkel, for example, from the beginning showed the Germans that the situation was serious; “it is the main challenge since the second world war”, she said in relation to the coronavirus, and from that day on she was clear in stating what she was facing. Now that the worst seems to have past she has met with leaders in France and Spain to define global strategies to face pandemics in the future. She has demonstrated that teamwork is fundamental, as well as believing in her advisers and the data. In these two women characteristics such as the direct and frank communication with their population with messages that explain the reality honestly, and which make it clear that the work to be done requires a collective effort. In New Zealand for example, days before the quarantine, the citizens received on their phones a text message from the government stating: “This is a message for all New Zealand. The country counts on you”. The past 9 of June the oceanic nation informed that 17 days had gone by without detecting new cases of COVID-19.