



IN THE FOLLOWING SERIES OF WHITE PAPERS, OUR EXPERT THOUGHT LEADERS WILL SHARE CRITICAL IMPERATIVES TO ACHIEVING RESULTS DURING UNPREDICTABLE TIMES.

## REDUCE FEAR AND ANXIETY

### JENNIFER COLOSIMO

Fear is a natural human emotion, particularly when the stakes are high and include threats to health, safety, or our ability to financially support our families now or in the future. In true fight-or-flight situations, fear is critical to survival. Our adrenal glands kick in, ramping up the energy in our body to do what we need to survive.

As leaders, it's critical that we allow and validate these natural emotions in ourselves and our team members. Organizations face a unique challenge in unpredictable times when fear is ever-present or evolves into a continuous undercurrent of anxiety that wears down the body and mind. Left unchecked, fear and anxiety deteriorate our higher-level thinking abilities, memory, and concentration. We diminish our capacity to think critically and solve problems creatively exactly when we need those abilities the most.

As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stated in his inaugural address, "Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

Leaders can influence bringing the higher-level functioning of our team back online and converting "retreat into advance."

In this white paper, we'll discuss three strategies for managing fear and anxiety in our leadership roles:

- Listen empathically to your team as they express their fear and anxiety
- Foster connection
- Focus on your Circle of Influence® and help team members focus on theirs

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### LISTEN EMPATHICALLY

People will likely be anxious when the outcomes of a situation are entirely unknown. Some might put it into words: *I'm scared I'll lose my job. I worry about my elderly mother.* Others will uncharacteristically lose their temper or break into tears during a minor conflict.

## PRACTICING EMPATHY... WILL HELP TEAM MEMBERS **MOVE** TO PERFORMANCE.

When emotions are high, particularly at the onset of a crisis, slow down and be human. While your head is swimming with urgencies — retaining customers, increasing cash flow, saving the business — you won't get the effort required to address those urgencies if emotions are hijacked.

Practicing empathy, besides being the right thing to do, will help team members move to performance. Research by Jane Dutton at the University of Michigan suggests that “leaders who demonstrate compassion towards employees foster individual and collective resilience in challenging times.”<sup>1</sup> One way to practice this compassion is to listen empathically.

Most leaders are well-versed in the importance of listening, but they listen

with the intent to respond or solve. Empathic listening, on the other hand, means listening with the intent to understand another person from their frame of reference. It requires you to move off your own timeline and agenda and intentionally check into another person's point of view and emotional state.

Encourage your people to talk to you, then listen empathically to what they share: *How are you, really? How are you adjusting to your kids at home? Do you have a comfortable and focused workspace? Do you have the supplies you need?* Effective leaders view this as a chance to “check in,” rather than “check on.”

Empathic listening is taking off your shoes and putting on someone else's. In practice, reflect back what another person feels and says in your own words until the person feels understood. The basic framework for empathic listening is “You feel \_\_\_\_\_ about \_\_\_\_\_,” or even remaining silent and simply nodding. It means not judging, probing, evaluating, advising, or interpreting. This may also require you to check a natural tendency to interrupt or immediately solve their problem.

Do leaders get the chance to speak and be understood? Of course. But the sequence is critical. When emotions are high — which they almost always are right now — stop talking and listen empathically until that person signals they feel understood. When emotions de-escalate, you can respond, ask clarifying questions, share your point of view, or give advice. Once that foundation of mutual respect and trust is established, you can get to work!

If possible, use video during these conversations, so that you can see facial expressions, body language, and other nonverbal communication. Without

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<sup>1</sup> Seppälä, Emma and Kim Cameron. “Proof That Positive Work Cultures Are More Productive.” *Harvard Business Review*, Dec. 1, 2015. <https://hbr.org/2015/12/proof-that-positive-work-cultures-are-more-productive>

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seeing the person, it's much harder to listen empathically and develop a deep understanding of thoughts and feelings. Make sure your phone is on silent, and your computer notifications are set to eliminate distractions — even from clients and bosses. We demonstrate respect by giving people our full attention.

**And note:** Clinical anxiety disorders or other mental health illnesses are outside the scope of this white paper and shouldn't be confused with natural and elevated levels of human concern. Consult your human resources department about the appropriate supportive actions if needed, confidentially and quickly. Options may include mental health education to destigmatize mental illness, employee assistance programs, or workplace accommodations.

### FOSTER CONNECTION

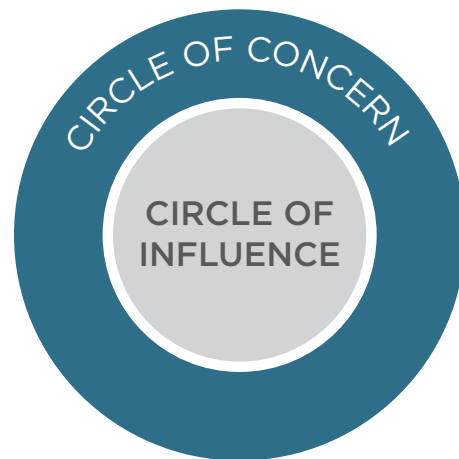
Be very deliberate in how often you meet with your team. Our regular cadence of meetings and 1-on-1s is not enough in times of crisis or uncertainty. Huddle each morning for 15 minutes to respond to questions or convey new information. Encourage subgroups to work on challenges while supporting each other. Utilize technology and build structures and processes for virtual collaboration. Foster this connection not just with your team, but with your clients, partners, and interdepartmental colleagues.

Additionally, think about your own process for working through your emotions. As my colleague and *FranklinCovey On Leadership With Scott Miller* podcast host Scott Miller says, "Just because you're a leader doesn't mean you're immune to having the same fear and anxiety reactions." Consider how much to share to create a connection with your team — what's private and what's public? Beware of oversharing your own fears, but you may choose to share some challenges and reactions to show we're all in this

together. People thrive more when they can relate to their leader.

### FOCUS ON YOUR CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE AND HELP YOUR TEAM FOCUS ON THEIRS.

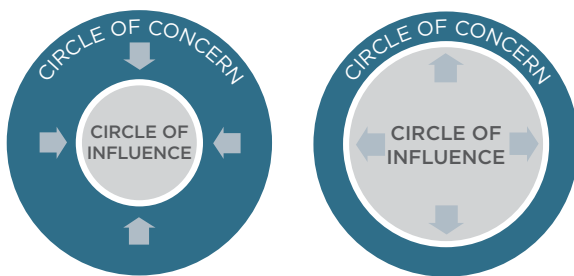
No matter what our title, we don't have control over everything. It's critical that we influence what we can versus investing time on things over which we have no control. One strategy is to write down everything on your mind in a stream of consciousness: *How do we keep sales up? Is my son doing his homework? How long is this going to last? Will I have a job next month? Is the product launch going to delay? What's going to happen to my family member who was furloughed? How much cash runway does the company have?* Write them all down — personal and professional — and everything else you're concerned about. This is your Circle of Concern®.



Then look at those concerns and highlight everything you can influence, focusing on your personal strengths. This is your Circle of Influence, consisting of the challenges you have the power to influence. You might see possibilities for transformative, quantum-leap influence. Or you might see chances for small, incremental change. Either way increases your personal power.

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An interesting phenomenon occurs depending on which circle we focus on: When we focus on our Circle of Concern — the things we absolutely can't influence, but still care about — we have less time and energy to spend on things we can influence. Consequently, our influence and power shrinks. But when we focus on things we can influence, utilizing our creativity, agility, and innovative ideas, our Circle of Influence grows.



This is a great exercise to share with your team, especially if they seem stuck. But remember the importance of the order: The more you can help them reboot their “thinking brains” by practicing empathy and fostering connection first, the more likely they are to move their focus from their Circle of Concern to their Circle of Influence.

In the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey, one habit surrounds all the others: Habit 7 — Sharpen the Saw®: The Habit of Daily Self-Renewal. There's an important reason for that — you are the most valuable tool you have. And your organization, colleagues, and customers won't benefit from your leadership if you are fatigued and frazzled. Renewal includes the following four dimensions, all within our Circle of Influence:

- **Physical:** At the moment, many of our physical habits are subconsciously trending us toward comfort, which is understandable in the short term, but might make us feel worse in the long term. Assess your eating habits: Notice

if you're subconsciously turning toward carbs and sugar, or whatever foods you find calming. If you find it difficult to stop, at least raise the habit to consciousness by thinking, “I'm choosing to eat for comfort right now.” Many of us are also seeking comfort in the form of staying up late to binge-watch shows or scroll social media — understandable, yes, but try to curb the habit if it's disrupting your sleep schedule. And finally, curling up on the sofa can give us a much-needed sense of comfort as well, but make sure you are also breathing in fresh air and moving around to the extent you can.

- **Social/Emotional:** If live celebrations are on hold, try celebrating virtually. Perhaps schedule working lunches with colleagues, virtual dinners with family members, or remote games with friends. If appropriate, consider deploying some of the video-conferencing technologies from your day job to connect with people important in your life and broaden your perspective in other people's experiences. One of my colleagues hosted a virtual forum to share best practices on wellbeing with her clients. Because they were focused on what they could *do*, not just how they *felt*, they essentially created a collective Circle of Influence that left participants uplifted and renewed.
- **Mental:** We can't control the news, but we can control how often we check it. The news is captivating but also debilitating. Things are changing fast, but not so fast that we need an hourly update — we can catch up on everything we need to know by checking the news once a day. Just as you would restrict or limit conversation with a toxic friend or family member, set boundaries or a schedule on how often you check for updates, so they don't hijack your emotional state all day. This is a perfect time to “carry your own weather,” as written in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, and not let your moods and wellbeing become subject to

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the whims, emotions, and updates (often exaggerated) by others.

- **Spiritual:** How do you find meaning? Might you express gratitude more often, get out in nature if possible, or seek solace in faith practices? In what ways can you contribute to the community in which you reside, making a difference for those facing significant challenges? In many parts of the world, one of the most important things you could do right now to serve your community is to stay home.

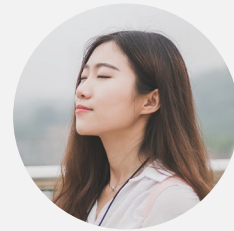
What one small practice could you implement each day in each of these categories? When you make conscious choices about your own wellbeing, you're focusing on something within your control and expanding your Circle of Influence.

Another way to proactively influence our wellbeing is to become more aware of and leverage our energy's natural ebbs and flows throughout the day. FranklinCovey recently interviewed social scientist and famed author Daniel Pink in our weekly *FranklinCovey On Leadership With Scott Miller* podcast.

 [CLICK HERE](#) TO WATCH DANIEL PINK'S EPISODE.

He explained that each of us experiences energy peaks, troughs, and periods of recovery throughout our days. They will vary greatly for each of us and may be disrupted in times of crisis or uncertainty. Take some time to self-assess: When are you at your personal "peak"? Can you use that time to marshal your mental and physical energy towards projects or relationships that need your best thinking and focus? Same for your trough: When during the day are you naturally at an energy slump? Perhaps instead of trying to power through it, we can accept this energy low point and lighten our schedules to coincide with it, so we renew and are recharged for the coming recovery.

We can also work within our Circle of Influence by distinguishing our emotions from



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facts. In her *FranklinCovey On Leadership With Scott Miller* interview, Harvard Medical School psychologist Dr. Susan David, author of the bestselling book *Emotional Agility*, reminded us that emotions, feelings, and facts are important to consider, but we must be careful not to confuse them. Facts are often more helpful in making proactive decisions, whereas emotions and opinions tend to drive us into the Circle of Concern.

Finally, I believe one of the highest uses of our Circle of Influence is to draw on four uniquely human gifts, described by Dr. Stephen R. Covey in his 7 Habits writings:

- **Self-awareness** is our ability to stand apart from ourselves and examine our thoughts, moods, and behavior. *How am I feeling? What am I anxious about? How am I managing that? What am I communicating to my team — directly and indirectly? What's it like to work with me right now? What's it like to be confined in a home with me right now?*

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- **Imagination** is our ability to visualize beyond our experience and present reality. We're not talking about visualizing our eightieth birthday right now. *Can I visualize June? September? 2021? Do I know what I should do now to prepare for when this is over? How am I going to make it day to day to get to that point? What do I need to do now, to be positioned to emerge in the future?*
- **Conscience** is our ability to sense right from wrong. *What is the right thing to do? What can I do to help others?* It brings to mind the adage, "Humble leaders are more concerned with what is right than being right." Especially during a pandemic like the COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus), recognize what you can do to minimize the risk to other, more vulnerable people both in your community and at work.
- **Independent will** is our ability to act outside of external influences. In emotional intelligence parlance, that means self-managing. *Am I making choices each day that align with my vision, values, and conscience, despite urgencies, worries, and obstacles that arise?*

During this challenging time, leaders must remember to be human by practicing empathy through listening, fostering connection, and focusing on what we can control—and help our team members do the same. Remember that the order is important: If we don't first help our team members feel understood through empathy, we won't be able to guide them through strategies that will help reduce fear through connection and our Circles of Influence. In the words of William James, "Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does."

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Jennifer Colosimo currently leads sales and operations for FranklinCovey in the United States and Canada. In addition to sales and operations, she has led teams in IT, learning and development, and corporate social responsibility while with Accenture, DaVita, FranklinCovey, and several private equity-backed organizations. She co-authored the book *Great Work, Great Career* with

Dr. Stephen R. Covey. She has been a featured speaker and panelist at numerous conferences speaking on business acumen, strategy execution, culture change, employee engagement, and women in leadership. Jennifer has delivered on-site training and keynotes to over 50,000 people across 45 states and 12 countries.