

5 Strategies for Staying Calm as a Leader During Times of Chaos

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Rather than hit the panic button, leaders can model grace under pressure with a little bit of practice.



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Picture this: It's Black Friday, and the point-of-sale system your thousands of customers depend on keeps crashing. Understandably, those retailers are livid. Complaints pour in day after day, and you start to wonder if the business will survive.

That's exactly what happened to me when I was just starting out as an entrepreneur nearly 20 years ago. And as painful as it was, that "near-death" experience taught me something invaluable: the power of calm leadership.

In today's unpredictable world—whether that's due to economic, environmental, or political events—it can be harder than ever to stay calm and centered. Company leaders are no exception to this. Yet it's critical that they do learn to stay calm because that's what will set the tone for the rest of their team.

Stress and entrepreneurship

There's no escaping the brutal realities of entrepreneurship. As this founder and CEO can attest, stress is an unfortunate part of it. That's why three-quarters of small business owners are worried about their mental health, while more than half have been diagnosed with anxiety, depression, or stress-related problems.

As a company matures, new hurdles and anxieties arise. The average entrepreneur spends almost 70% of their time working "in" the business—much of it putting out fires.

Inevitably, there are days and weeks when the failures far outnumber the wins. That makes it easy to get dragged down into negativity. But if the leader operates from a place of calm, it can help everyone else bring their best selves to work. Here are a few principles that I've learned about that can help you do just that.

1. You're not the hero of this story

So many business leaders feel like it's up to them to save the day and feel like they're the only one who can fix things.

But this is a recipe for dizzying highs and crushing lows. And trust me, the lows outnumber the highs. You whiplash back and forth between elation and despair and rarely find that middle ground of calm that you desperately need to make strategic decisions.

A far more useful approach is to think of yourself as just one player in a larger drama. Sure, you're the boss, but you're channeling greater forces. Ultimately, you're an instrument that supports and directs the talents of the team around you.

2. Mission actually does matter

Sustaining calm is easier with a sense of purpose. People can accept a tough journey if they know where they're going and can see progress, however small.

This is where your mission comes in. Now, it doesn't have to be earth-shattering. You just need something that everyone can get behind. My company's mission is simple: helping small businesses compete in a world of Amazon and Shein. Using technology to empower customers is our rallying cry.

Importantly, this has to be more than a slogan on a website or a poster on the wall. (There's a reason only 25% of employees actually feel educated on company goals, according to Slingshot's most recent Digital Work Trends report). Your company needs to live the mission, and employees need to understand how it translates into tangible goals and also see incremental progress.

As gimmicky as it might seem, dashboards and trackers can be invaluable here. We have screens throughout our office showing key KPIs and movement over time. We also celebrate wins in monthly huddles and recognize team members who push the mission forward.

3. Think impact rather than urgency

The startup world moves fast. On any given week, there will be dozens (if not hundreds) of time-sensitive tasks that demand your attention.

To focus on the things that matter, you need to think in terms of impact, not urgency. Rather than prioritizing your to-do list by deadline, narrow your to-do list down to the tasks that will actually move the needle for you and your company.

With a manageable list, it's easier to exit panic mode and start calmly working away on what really matters. Running on adrenaline—and treating everything like a five-alarm fire—might get results in the short term. However, this is a surefire recipe for team burnout, which is ultimately inefficient and counterproductive.

Doing this right isn't possible without long-term priorities. Setting a North Star or long-term goal for your company allows you to see what you should prioritize and what you shouldn't.

4. Remember that creation follows in the wake of destruction

When I'm not running a business, I work in conservation. I've seen how the terrible violence of a forest fire sets the stage for regreening—and how quickly that recovery can happen.

I think of that every time I suffer a setback, like losing a key employee. Of course, it hurts. But more often than not, such departures set the stage for much-needed changes and renewals. From moments of devastation, new opportunities for growth arise.

5. When in doubt, write down the good and the bad

Calm leaders focus on the positive, but they also take stock of the negative.

Throughout the year, I keep a running list of my "gratefuls" and "lows." The real impact of this approach is retrospective. Looking back, I often realize that some of the lows weren't really that low after all. In fact, they needed to happen and sometimes led to a major transformation. One example was losing a particular deal. In the end, that event ended up setting the company up for success by pushing us to explore new markets.

Ultimately, every leader must decide how they want to show up for the team. In my experience, calm beats panic every time. That's especially true when the stakes are high and people are looking to their leader to lower the temperature. And right now, that virtue may be more valuable than ever.