

## Carina Cortese

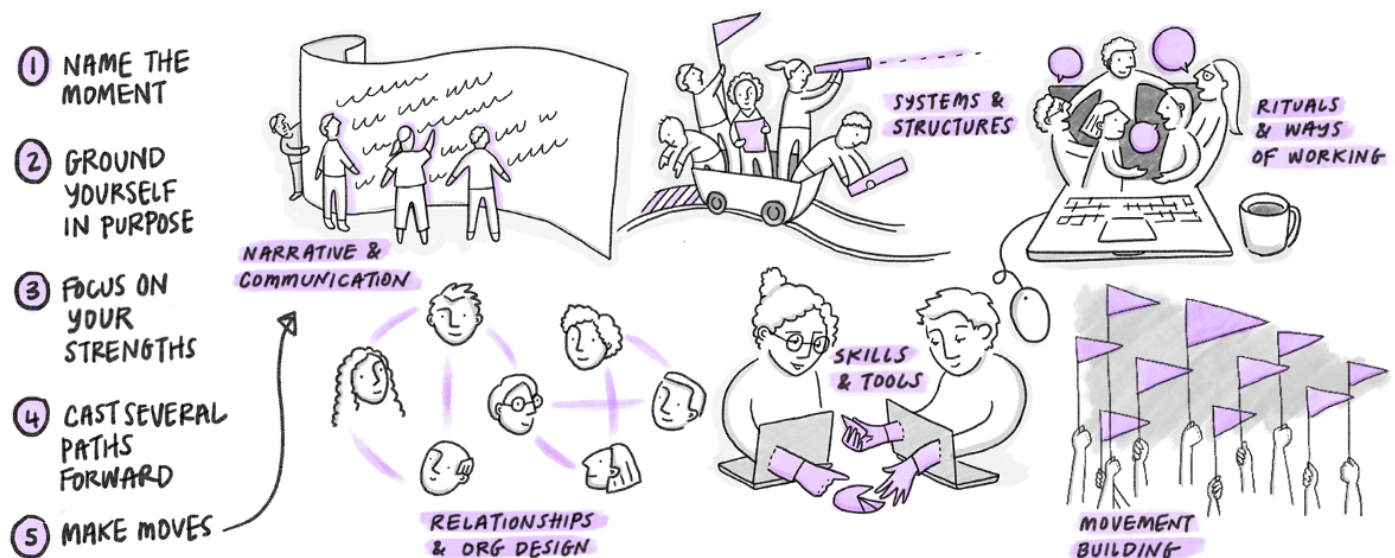
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# Transforming through crisis: Building tomorrow's organizations, today



Carina Cortese Apr 7, 2020 · 10 min read



This is a moment full of uncertainty — at the micro, daily level and the macro, systems level. With the scope and scale of the crisis expanding each day, it's certain that the magnitude of the changes we'll face will not be fully realized for months, even years to come.

In the face of the seismic shifts before us — and with so many things outside of our control, charting a path forward feels ambiguous and overwhelming. Yet, it is in these very moments of crisis and disruption that what we value is clarified — and leadership defined.

The companies that emerge from this not only intact, but stronger will be marked today by clear, values-based decision-making; thoughtful, proactive action; and a secure and resilient workforce that can help find a way through the storm.

Your opportunity is to first stabilize and then adapt — quickly — to make moves that enable your organization to transform in the long-run.

Here's how you can get started.

## **1. Name the moment**

Your teams are the lifeblood of your business, and right now they're hurting — waking up to new challenges and anxieties each day, unsure when it will end. There is loss that comes with a moment of so much change, and people are grieving — grieving loved ones, a way of life, a future they envisioned for themselves.

Recognizing and making space for this continuous emotional toll is critical to supporting the people you serve, building trust, and creating a sustainable work environment. It's why so many of us are starting every conversation by first checking in on how people are doing and feeling, and how their families are faring.

As you engage your teams, customers, communities, and stakeholders, starting from a place of empathy sets the stage for a more human and authentic interaction. One in which you can both share — and learn — important insights that can shape how you choose to move forward.

- How might you contextualize this moment for your audience in a way that builds trust?
- How might you support employees that are struggling?
- What would it look like for your leadership team to champion a relentless focus on morale?
- How might you mark the end of the crisis, allowing teams to honor the moment before moving forward?

## 2. Ground yourself in your purpose and values

At their most potent, your purpose and values guide decisions at every level of the organization—when it's business as usual and in unprecedented situations, like today. The mission-critical, make-or-break decisions you face in a crisis require that you ground yourself in these truths, and help teams translate and activate them to the needs of this particular moment.

Every company has a purpose — a reason for being, the North Star that inspires and drives them forward. This purpose is inherent; it's already there, propelling your business. And, your values are directly tied to your purpose — defining who you are, how you act, and the ways you work.

Most leaders know, deep down, what their organization stands for and the fundamental truths that guide their business. Articulating these ideas and sharing them across your organization is an important first step to activating people in service of the future you're building together. Once you've done so, consider:

- How might you use your purpose as a filter to help make tough decisions?
- Which of the behaviors that drive your team's day-to-day are 1) true to your values 2) relevant to the moment, and 3) pointing to your future?
- How might you enable front-line employees to make quick decisions, guided by your purpose and values?

## 3. Focus on your strengths

Some of the toughest decisions you may face will relate to where you'll invest or pivot moving forward. You'll need to make choices that help you adapt to the moment, but also safeguard the essential elements of what has made you successful. To do this, you'll need to lean into your company's superpowers— the unique capabilities and strengths you can bring to bear.

Companies often take their strengths for granted — they're woven into the fabric of how you work, collaborate, approach relationships, and get things done. The shadow side of these strengths are often the drivers of your weaknesses. For example, companies with deep operational excellence often struggle to think boldly and envision new futures.

Exploring these superpowers may also illuminate behaviors and ways of working that can unlock new value for your business in the current — and coming — environment.

- To remain competitive and thrive, what must you preserve, let go of, or build?
- What are the elements of your business and culture today that 1) translate into the potential realities before you, and 2) accelerate the changes you'll need to make to stay competitive?
- What blindspots or weaknesses might your superpowers generate for your business?

#### **4. Cast several paths forward**

Many companies are experiencing massive disruptions — and huge opportunities — in their business model, supply chain, and operations. Leaders need to quickly make critical business decisions to react to the crisis in the short-term without losing sight of long-term goals.

As you scenario-plan for possible outcomes, centering on your purpose and values will help you make consistent decisions that build trust with employees, customers, communities, and stakeholders over the long-term.

Pairing these enduring elements of your business with your vision and strategy will enable you to scale back and invest in ways that don't undermine — and may actually accelerate — your ambitions.

- What does it look like to emerge from this crisis, stronger?
- To remain true to your purpose and values — in addition to your strategy, which of your current initiatives do you need to 1) safeguard, 2) fast-track, and 3) alter or reimagine?
- Who are your trusted advisors, and how might you create a tighter feedback loop with them?
- What do you want people to say about your personal leadership through these times?

## 5. Make moves

This is a moment to respond to urgent demands, while also building towards a new normal.

There are simple, small but outsized-impact moves you can make now to both respond to this moment and signal what you stand for to employees, customers, shareholders, and the world at-large. These actions may relate to the:

- Stories you tell and how you communicate
- Systems and structures you put in place to adapt to new challenges
- Rituals and ways of working you adopt to drive change
- Connections within your organizational structure that you foster and amplify
- Skills and tools you lean into to accelerate your ambitions
- Partnerships you build to harness collective action



At the end of this article you'll find a **simple diagnostic** with specific actions you can take across each of these dimensions to make meaningful progress, quickly.

As you chart a path forward through the coming weeks and months, revisit these guiding principles — invoking empathy for the moment, anchoring in your purpose and values, playing to your strengths, remaining agile in the planning process, and taking measured action.

Progress is usually not linear — it requires cycles of making, testing, learning, and iterating. Model this mindset by embracing experimentation and making a point to both

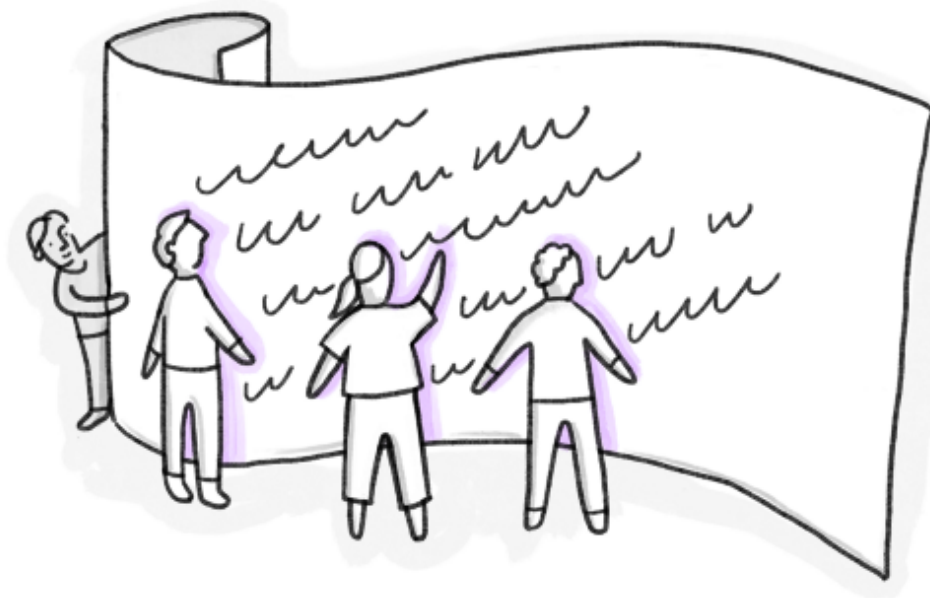
share and seek out learnings across the company.

Training your organization to respond flexibly and quickly in this moment will build the muscles and reflexes that enable endurance and resilience in the long term. These are skills that will be invaluable to your teams as you face the unknown, together.

*Read through the following statements and explore those that most resonate with you — both in terms of what is most urgent to your business, and where your company's unique strengths best suit you to take action.*

### **Narrative & Communication**

*If you're seeing flagging morale and a lack of clarity about what's next—you need to inspire and rally employees and customers to take immediate action... Focus on the stories you'll tell to establish the importance of this moment, what's at stake, and how your audience can help.*



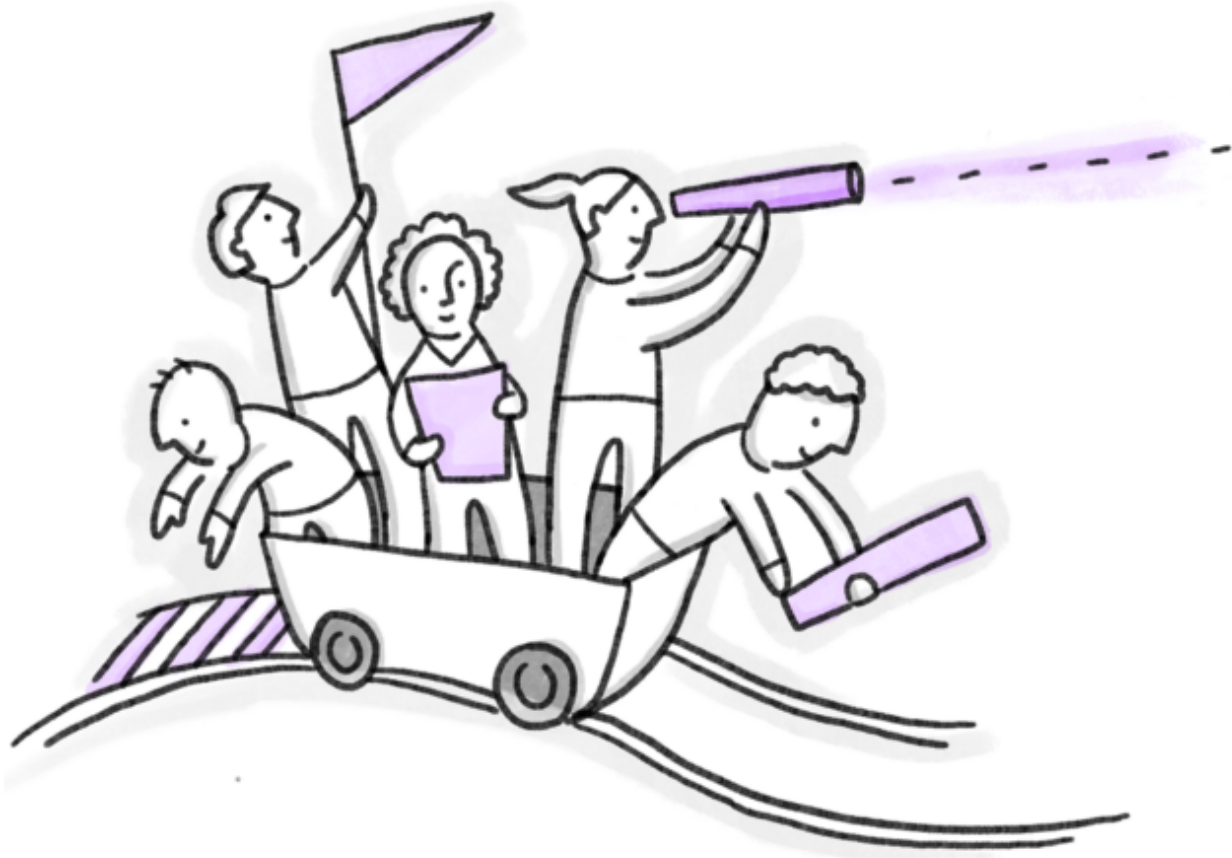
- **Tailor your master narrative** for each audience and their needs (e.g., messaging to front-line employees might be radically different from messaging to managers at corporate).
- **Identify the most impactful channels** to reach each audience — and how you can create two-way conversations to listen and learn from each group.

- **Adapt existing moments and milestones** to resonate more deeply with your audience (e.g., content, format).

Some examples in action: Marriott International CEO Arne Sorenson's emotional furlough announcement; German Chancellor Angela Merkel's empathetic, rational impromptu speech to the nation; Nike's campaign calling for people to “play for the world” and stay inside.

## **Systems & Structures**

*If you have urgent business, employee, and customer needs and pain points driven by real-time crisis factors — you need to quickly enact policy to do the right thing today for people, with an eye toward what will be sustainable in the long-term... Focus on the policies, processes, and incentives that will help you weather the storm and meet new demands on the other side of the crisis.*



- **Deliver on what your teams and customers need — right now — to ensure their safety and physical wellbeing.**

- **Identify incentives and rewards structures** that you can shift in the short-term to have the greatest impact in this moment.
- **Experiment with processes and protocols**, using feedback to iterate and drive adoption.

Some examples in action: CVS expanding and adding benefits (including backup daycare) for frontline employees, Starbucks activating catastrophe pay, PayPal and others announcing a “no coronavirus layoffs” pledge.

## **Rituals & Ways of working**

*If radical shifts in your day-to-day environment are taxing your current ways of working—you need to shape new habits and rituals that are fit for this moment, then quickly adapt as an organization. Focus on the patterns and norms within your culture that will bring empathy, humanity, and care to a remote-first environment.*



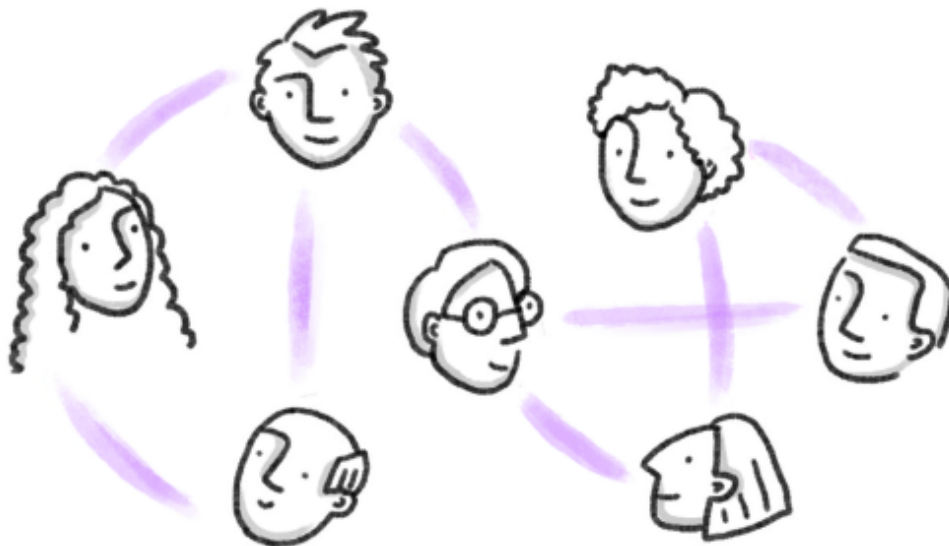


- Demonstrate care and empathy for this moment by **centering on the needs of your user** — whether that’s employees, customers, etc.
- **Design powerful rituals and moments of connection** with top leadership (e.g., a COVID task force that meets weekly or daily depending on needs).
- **Clearly articulate the desired behavior or mindset shifts** you need to create in this moment (e.g., collaboration, experimentation).
- **Model these shifts and new behaviors**, especially within your leadership team.

Some examples in action: Google setting up a daily leadership cadence and a 24-hr incident response team; Salesforce starting a daily mental health call; Beautycounter giving burned out employees a day off to rest and recharge.

## Relationships & Organizational design

*If your teams are focusing inward, struggling with accountability, and duplicating efforts in silos—you need to respond to this moment with speed and an all-hands-on-deck mentality to sense-make quickly...* Focus on the critical relationships, teams, communities, and connective tissue within your culture that will enable rapid response.



- **Lean on your “connectors”** — the individuals you can call upon to bust silos, generate ideas, and then drive alignment.
- **Flex teaming and organizational structures** to encourage new ways of collaborating.

- **Seek out diverse voices and perspectives** from individuals, teams, and communities to solve new challenges and avoid blindspots.

Some examples in action: Pfizer creating a SWAT team of leading experts to focus on the pandemic; Dyson engineers refocusing teams and partnering with the UK government to design and build new ventilators; H&M Group's supply chain teams collaborating across the globe to produce protective equipment.

## Skills & Tools

*If you have teams that will need to quickly shift focus, or major hiring and onboarding needs ahead — you need to build new skills and expertise at scale to stay competitive... Focus on the resources you'll build to help hire, onboard, upskill, and/or train teams to quickly adapt to the new normal.*



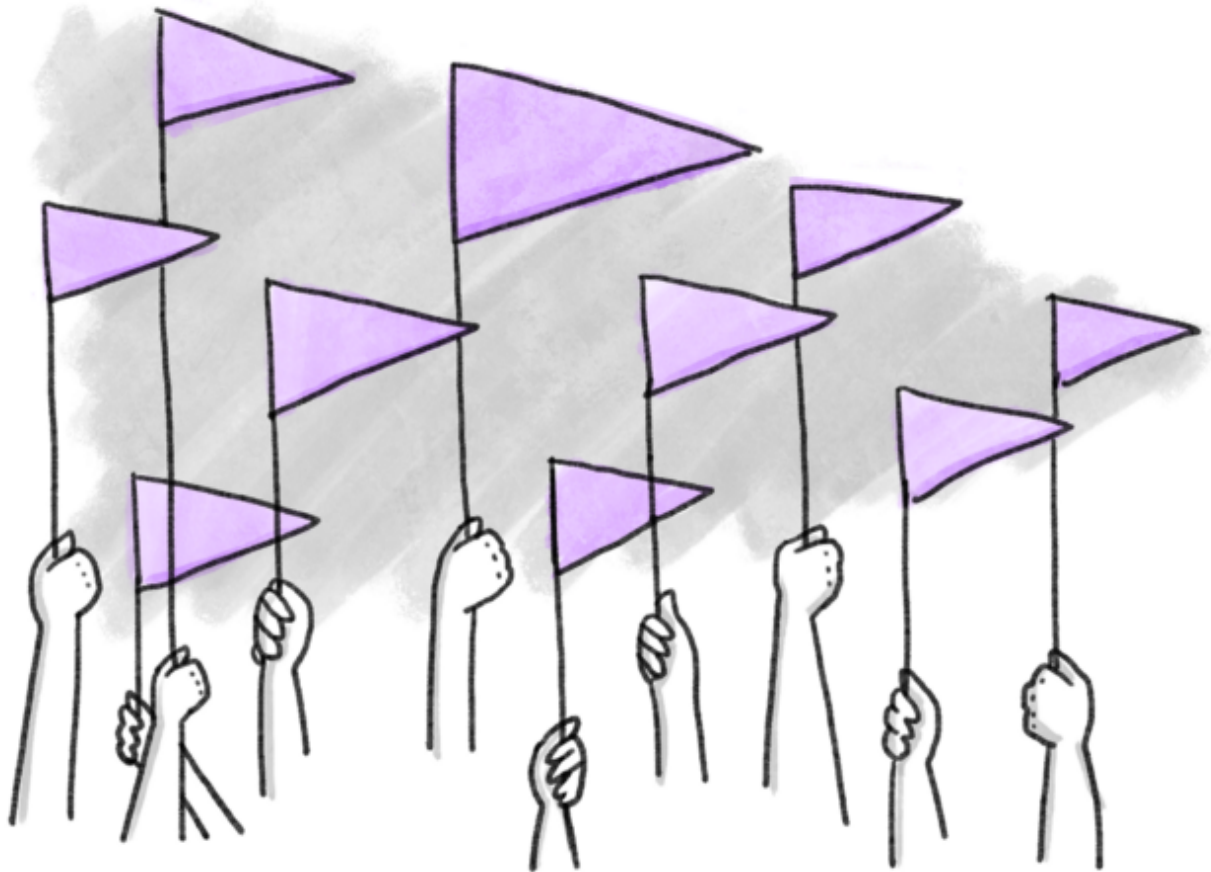
- **Identify skills or behaviors your teams need to master** to thrive in a remote-first environment. Explore whether any of these unlock the others — start there.
- **Identify and share latent expertise** within your organization, enlisting individuals/teams to teach others and accelerate adoption.

- **Create one simple intervention** you can launch in the next week to help enable this behavior (e.g., a weekly ritual, a Q&A session, etc.).

Some examples in action: Microsoft creating a remote-learning community for educators to share ideas; J&J finding new applications for old technology in the race for a vaccine; Uber accelerating a shift to delivering essentials as ride-hailing slows down; Late night TV shows adjusting to home-filming and learning from YouTubers.

## **Movement-building**

*If you see an immediate need or opportunity to create industry or category-wide impact, but can't do it alone—you need to build a broad-based coalition of like-minded individuals and organizations... Focus on the partners, collaborators, customers, and other stakeholders that you can rally around a shared goal.*



- **Prioritize the big ideas** that might benefit from more collective minds — and more collective action.
- **Identify organizations and individuals** you might call upon to collaborate.

- **Align on one step** you can take to quickly build awareness and take action on your idea.

Some examples in action: The [United Nations](#) issuing a global call for creative communications; [Airbnb](#) working with nonprofits to provide temporary housing for medical workers; [IBM](#) helping launch the COVID-19 High Performance Computing Consortium.

*This article was co-written with [Laura Gordon](#).*

*All illustrations courtesy of [Ellie Jabbour](#).*

*In the coming weeks, [SYPartners](#) will share additional tools and insights you can use to take steps forward and lead systemically through this moment. We want to celebrate and share what you're doing, and help all of us learn from how it's working. We welcome your thoughts and ideas.*

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