

**The Stockdale Paradox: A Lesson for
Leadership in a Time of Crisis
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

Comments from the president of the United States:

February 24, 2020: “The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA.”

February 26, 2020: “We’re going to be pretty soon at only five people. And we could be at just one or two people over the next short period of time.”

Also, on February 26: “The risk to the American people remains very low. We have the greatest experts, really in the world, right here.”

February 27, 2020: “It’s going to disappear. One day, it’s like a miracle, it will disappear.”

Let’s skip ahead to:

September 9, 2020: It is revealed that in an interview with journalist Bob Woodward reported by ABC News on March 19, 2020 the president acknowledged that he knowingly downplayed the severity of the virus. He explained, “The fact is, I’m a cheerleader for this country. I love our country. And I don’t want people to be frightened. I don’t want to create panic as you say. And certainly, I’m not going to drive this country or the world into a frenzy. We want to show confidence. We want to show strength. We want to show strength as a nation. And that’s what I’ve done.”

October 19, 2020: “Dr. Anthony Fauci is a disaster. People are tired of COVID. People are tired of hearing Fauci and all these idiots, all these idiots who got it wrong. If I listened to the scientists, we’d have a country in a massive depression.” (I assume he used the word “depression” in reference to the economy and not mental health.)

As of this writing: Total cases of people who have contracted COVID-19 in the United States: 8,640,000. Total deaths in the United States: 225,000. Both numbers are still significantly increasing on a daily basis.

The statement that “people are tired of COVID-19” is accurate. Who wouldn’t be? Several people have told me that their children or grandchildren, dealing with everchanging disruptions such as shifting school models (in-person, hybrid, remote) and other social restrictions have asked with exasperation, “When will this end?” Adults are

wondering the same thing, triggering such psychological descriptions (not formal diagnoses) as “Pandemic fatigue” and “Election stress disorder.”

Leadership in a World of Uncertainty

During the past six months I have collected numerous articles pertaining to the impact of COVID-19 and the murders of George Floyd and other Black Americans on the physical and emotional well-being of children and adults. Depression, anxiety, and mental health problems continue to rise. In my website articles written since March of this year, I have suggested possible actions to cope more effectively with the unprecedented, alarming events that have emerged throughout the globe. Additional strategies are included in a number of links to articles I have posted or tweeted on such social media platforms as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.

I have also continued to accumulate articles about effective leadership, a topic that has been of interest to me for many years. I have been fortunate during the past several decades to have had opportunities to share with and learn from those in leadership positions in various fields, including mental health, health care, education, finance, and business. My colleague Sam Goldstein and I wrote of the relationship between leadership and resilience in our 2004 book *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, citing the work, for example, of Jim Collins (*Good to Great*), Stephen Covey (*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*), Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee (*Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*), and James Kouzes and Barry Posner (*Encouraging the Heart: A Leader's Guide to Rewarding and Recognizing Others*).

There are numerous other articles and books I have read since the publication of *The Power of Resilience* that have served to expand my insights and knowledge about leadership. (*The Harvard Business Review* and on-line articles from the Harvard Business School provide many thoughtful and thought-provoking pieces about this topic.) Not surprisingly, given the world-wide challenges that have emerged since last February and March, a number of excellent writings have addressed the theme of leadership during a time of crisis. I would like to review two such articles.

The Stockdale Paradox

Boris Groysberg, a professor at Harvard Business School (HBS), and Robin Abrahams, a research associate at HBS, co-authored a column, “What the Stockdale Paradox Tells Us About Crisis Leadership,” that was published on-line by the HBS this past August (<https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/what-the-stockdale-paradox-tells-us-about-crisis-leadership>). For those not familiar with The Stockdale Paradox, it became well known when described by Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*. Admiral James Stockdale was a Prisoner of War in Vietnam for more than seven years and endured repeated torture. In preparing to interview Stockdale, Collins read his memoir and wondered, “If it feels depressing to me, how on earth did he survive when he was actually there and did not know the end of the story?”

Collins asked Stockdale this question and the latter answered, “I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into a defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.” Interestingly, Stockdale added that the prisoners who had the greatest struggles and often didn’t make it out of the camps were “the optimists,” observing, “They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

What a powerful observation. When I first read Stockdale’s words, I wondered if qualifiers should be added to the word “optimist,” qualifiers that others have used, namely, “realistic” and “unrealistic.” For example, Heidi Grant, a social psychologist at Columbia University, in an article titled “Be an Optimist without Being a Fool” that was posted on hbr.org <https://hbr.org/2011/05/be-an-optimist-without-being-a> wrote, “Realistic optimists believe they will succeed, but also believe they have to *make success happen*—through things like effort, careful planning, persistence, and choosing the right strategies. They recognize the need for giving serious thought to how they will deal with obstacles. This preparation only increases their confidence in their own ability to get things done.” Grant advised the importance of “an honest assessment of the challenges

that await you,” citing research to show the poor outcome experienced by “unrealistic optimists” who believed that “*success will happen to them.*”

Stockdale captured the distinction between realistic and unrealistic optimists when he proposed: “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end— which you can never afford to lose— with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

In essence, the Stockdale Paradox captures the belief that one must maintain hope while being able to accept and consider options for dealing with existing, often seemingly overwhelming, hardships.

The Significance of the Stockdale Paradox in Today’s World

The lessons of The Stockdale Paradox are very relevant when applied to leadership during the stressful events of 2020. Think about the message a president is communicating when he acknowledges that he knew about the pending COVID-19 crisis but was not willing to share that information with those he serves, reasoning as mentioned earlier, “I don’t want people to be frightened. I don’t want to create panic as you say. And certainly, I’m not going to drive this country or the world into a frenzy. We want to show confidence. We want to show strength. We want to show strength as a nation. And that’s what I’ve done.” In addition, rather than displaying honesty, he offered a “miracle cure,” embodied in his pronouncement that the virus will “just disappear.”

Although not everyone will agree with me, I believe his stance represents the belief that the people of the United States are weak, will easily panic, and are not up to the task of dealing with the challenge. I could not help thinking of the famous and often quoted line from the 1992 movie “A Few Good Men” when Jack Nicholson (Colonel Nathan Jessup) screams at Tom Cruise (Naval Investigator and lawyer Daniel Kaffee), “You can’t handle the truth!”

However, unlike Nicholson’s accusation of Cruise’s ability to handle the truth, as Stockdale discovered and as research studies have corroborated, when leaders display honesty about the struggles that confront us, when they offer hope and propose strategies to address these struggles, we are more likely to overcome these challenges. When leaders withhold information, it suggests that they perceive the people they lead as being

incapable of rising to the occasion. To justify this view, a false narrative is created that by keeping people in the dark they will do better, especially if you assure them that a “miracle” is right around the corner.

I emphasize the importance of truthfulness during my webinars about assisting children to be more resilient. I express the importance of validating and not minimizing or dismissing a child’s worries and anxieties about COVID-19, racial injustice, and other difficult situations that currently dominate the landscape. I add that our messages of honesty must include realistic hope. I advise parents and other caregivers not to reply to children who say they are scared and worried with words such as: “You shouldn’t worry, everything will be okay.” Although such seemingly reassuring words are typically born from a desire to protect our children from distressing thoughts and emotions, they often have the opposite effect, namely, to increase anxiety since children are aware that problems exist. False reassurance creates the belief that the problems must be overwhelming since no one wants to discuss them.

I believe a more prudent approach is to acknowledge and normalize the concerns of children by communicating, “I’m glad you can tell me how you feel. Many kids and adults feel worried right now. There are so many difficult things going on at one time.”

And then add, “What helps me to feel more hopeful is to think about the many people who are working to solve these problems. I find it also helps to think about what each of us can do, such as wearing face masks and social distancing.” As I have discussed in previous columns, identifying positive steps one can assume strengthens a sense of what I have labeled “personal control.” I should note that the politicization of some of these practices such as wearing masks is sad to witness.

In response to the words I recommend we use with children, I have been asked, “Won’t children become more anxious if we talk with them about COVID-19 and the racial unrest that is taking place?” Similarly, before the school year commenced a teacher inquired, “Whether we’re teaching in-person or remotely, should we say anything about what has occurred during the past six months?”

My answer is that even young children are “living” what is transpiring in this world. Not to address these issues is to allow the proverbial “elephant in the room” to

storm around without anyone mentioning its existence. A key component in our conversations with children is to be guided by their cognitive and emotional level, to let them know we are available to answer their questions at any time, and to voice as Admiral Stockdale did, “Faith that we will prevail in the end.”

The Strength of Vulnerability

In concluding this column, I want to cite another article that was posted just a few days ago on hbr.org <https://hbr.org/2020/10/todays-leaders-need-vulnerability-not-bravado> titled, “Today’s Leaders Need Vulnerability.” It was co-authored by Amy Edmondson of the Harvard Business School and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, a business psychology faculty member at University College London and Columbia University, and an associate at Harvard’s Entrepreneurial Finance Lab. In my December, 2019 article I cited Edmondson’s groundbreaking work in defining the concept of “psychological safety” in the workplace.

Edmondson and Chamorro-Premuzic compare leaders who have been more successful in managing COVID-19 in their countries with those who have had much poorer results in terms of contracted cases and deaths. They highlight the success of those leaders “who have the courage to reveal their vulnerabilities.” They describe the most effective leaders as “those who are aware of their limitations, have the necessary humility to grow their own and others’ potential, and are courageous and curious enough to create sincere and open connections with others. They build inclusive team climates with psychological safety that foster constructive criticism and dissent. Above all, they embrace truth: They are more interested in understanding reality than in being right and are not afraid to accept when they are wrong.”

I believe that leaders with these qualities generate hope, a sense of togetherness, and realistic solutions, especially in a world replete with uncertainty and divisiveness. And let us not forget that parents, teachers, and other caregivers who possess these same qualities are more likely to nurture within their children those attributes associated with resilience, namely honesty, empathy, compassion, problem-solving skills, and the courage to confront rather than flee from challenges.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com/>