



# Your People First

Thoughts on leadership  
by Karl Pister



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*There is a great book with the title "Culture Eats Strategy for Lunch". Another book is unwritten about people and change which will carry the title "Maslow Eats Everything for Lunch".*

A quick review of Abraham Maslow. You might remember him from an early psych class in college. One of many theories. And one, as a leader in crisis, you never, ever want to overlook. He has several levels of human response. We will only mention the first two, since those are the game-changers during tense times.





**Level one** is the physiologic need - food, shelter, water, sleep. Mess with these and NOTHING gets done.

**Level two** - safety and security needs. Even if food, shelter, water, and sleep are OK, mess with these and, yes, you guessed it, your leadership brilliance, vision, and spread sheet magic will run into a brick wall at 60 MPH. Because safety and security being threatened triggers what the researcher Joseph Ledoux called, in his book "The Emotional Brain", an amygdala hijack. The eyes glaze over, the trust in you goes through the floor, and while the head might be nodding, your ideas are toast.

Think that is an exaggeration? Why did the Wall Street Journal say that something around 60% of corporate change initiatives fail within a few months? When people feel threatened by change or crisis, they will fight, in a fight or flight type of response, every good idea you have. Why? They believe that their ability to survive is at risk.



So, my point? Anything you put forward as a strategy or approach to navigate this Level Five Tsunami we have going on right now will be worthless unless you run it through the filter of the basic physical and emotional safety needs of your people.

With that said I want to be clear that I realize that there will be emotional and economic impact in many arenas that sadly will be unavoidable and life-changing. No polyanna thinking here!

What will mitigate that will be the trust built by a few simple questions, well stated by the Arbinger Institute:

1. *Can you picture your people?*
2. *What are their concerns and fears?*
3. *Do you know what they think they are losing?*
4. *What do they want and hope for?*
5. *Who do they need you to be today?*
6. *Can you picture yourself being the person they deserve to have lead them?*
7. *Can you commit, just for today, to being that person for them?*



If you can commit to #7, your words and your actions will be such that, even in intense times, you will lead them well through Maslow minefields and you will get through to the other side with your team as intact as possible and ready for all the opportunities that await.

To conclude, consider the words of John C. Maxwell, one of the world's foremost thought leaders in leadership, given in a talk this past Sunday on crisis leadership. *"You can't manage yourself out of a crisis. You can only lead your way out of one. And you always have to do what is best for your people ."*





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