

Repa Patel of Leading Mindfully: Five Things You Need To Be A Highly Effective Leader During Turbulent Times

An Interview With Charlie Katz



Charlie Katz

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Be the architect of your destiny. Learn to lead yourself, before you lead others. Harness your innate intelligence (mind, heart and gut)

Fight for your focus. Evidence shows that what you focus on grows. During turbulent times, your attention is the currency. Train your mind like a muscle to consciously choose your focus.

As part of my series about the “Five Things You Need To Be A Highly Effective Leader During Turbulent Times”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Repa Patel.

Repa Patel LL.B (Hons) GAICD, author of “Elevate — a new path for leaders to navigate uncertainty”, is a facilitator, executive coach and former board chair. Repa is known for her insightful and compassionately challenging approach and works with leadership teams and boards to increase engagement, customer satisfaction and business growth by engaging the hearts and minds of leaders. Learn more at <https://leadingmindfully.com.au>

Thank you so much for your time! I know that you are a very busy person. Our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your ‘backstory’ and how you got started?

East Africa gave birth to me, the UK raised me and Australia adopted me 30 years ago. I arrived in the UK with my parents as refugees with very little money.

My professional life started as a lawyer in the UK and spans the gamut of criminal law (as a Crown Prosecutor), commercial litigation and financial services. My last legal role was Head of Legal for the Institutional Bank at ANZ. I then moved into a commercial role as Head of Strategy and Planning for ANZ Bank’s International Trade Finance business.

I’ve always been drawn to the life practice of yoga and was initiated into the Kripalu Yoga lineage 10 years ago. During my executive career at ANZ, I began to integrate

yoga philosophy, neuroscience and positive psychology into the way I worked. People started noticing and asked me to coach them in doing the same.

I didn’t fully accept my new direction in life until I encountered a health issue and took a year off work. Having undergone significant surgery, I had a long recovery period where I was required to rest. During this time, I reflected on my life journey and made the decision to set up my business, Leading Mindfully.

That was 10 years ago! I now work with leaders and their teams to elevate their leadership by teaching them how to connect their heads and hearts to lift customer satisfaction, engagement and business growth. The significant benefits to organisational culture include higher levels of trust, collaboration and accountability.

I guess you could say that I have moved from a deficit focus, fixing “what’s wrong” (as a lawyer) to exploring possibility by enhancing leadership capability and business potential.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lessons or ‘take aways’ you learned from that?

A partner from my law firm requested I attend an urgent court application with our barrister in the Supreme Court. The matter was so urgent that the partner gave me his mobile phone to report the outcome to him immediately.

This was the late 1990s; mobile phones were scarce and the size of a brick. Not having owned one myself, the partner showed me how to place a call.

During the hearing the phone rang and I had no idea how to turn it off! I was extremely embarrassed and had to leave the court room with the phone in my hand, still ringing at full volume. The judge was equal parts annoyed and bemused by my flailing attempts to switch it off.

The next time I attended his court room, that same judge referred to me by name and asked if I had brought my mobile phone, with a cheeky smile.

From this I learned:

1. How to switch off a mobile phone
2. Viewing the situation with self-compassion rather than self-criticism was more helpful in moving forward
3. Even Supreme Court judges have a sense of humor

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story?

Tim Utama was a senior executive and my boss when I was at ANZ Bank. He is one of the most authentic and values-based leaders I have had the good fortune to work with.

Tim taught me many things. One of them was that I am my own harshest critic. In a performance review, I rated myself far below the level my peers and Tim assessed me as operating at. Through my discussions with him, I realized that I had always been this way and that this negative self-voice held me back from taking more courageous steps in my career. My pursuit of perfection was preventing my progress.

This was the time I decided to consciously step into the courage of applying the strategies of my yoga practice into my leadership. From this emerged the model of Leading Mindfully that I use today in my work with leaders. The model prescribes how to take consciously courageous steps, with compassion, during uncertain times.

You could say that Tim helped me find the first steps of my journey to setting up my business.

Extensive research suggests that “purpose driven businesses” are more successful in many areas. When your company started, what was its vision, what was its purpose?

I believe that purpose drives performance. Each leader’s purpose is powerful in engaging them through the storms of business and life. It acts as a compass in making tough decisions when there is no certainty.

There is growing scientific evidence that having meaning and purpose in your life has significant positive benefits for your physical, mental and energetic health plus almost every aspect of your life including financial prosperity. For this reason, purpose is at the heart of all my work, from individual executive coaching to strategy facilitation with boards.

I started my business with the vision to shift business culture by teaching leaders how to integrate their innate intelligence, head (mind), heart (emotional energy) and gut (intuition) to lead more authentically. From this aligned space, leaders build a culture of genuine trust, authentic collaboration and voluntary accountability. This positively influences the business, its employees and other stakeholders, including the communities within which the business operates. We need a greater integration between businesses and communities to elevate trust and work together to manage the uncertainties we face.

When faced with a conflicting or difficult choice, I use this vision as a decision-making compass to guide my journey in the right direction.

Thank you for all that. Let’s now turn to the main focus of our discussion. Can you share with our readers a story from your own experience about how you lead your team during uncertain or difficult times?

An example I encountered recently with clients is the impact of COVID on business decisions. Over the last year I’ve seen varying business responses ranging from a total ban on discretionary spending, including any support for leaders on how to manage and lead their teams through the crisis, to trusting managers and leaders to make the right decisions.

I can cite 2 very different situations.

The first is a global company, headquartered overseas. For 12 months, all leadership development, including investment in leadership resilience was prohibited by the overseas parent company. These leaders were struggling with navigating their own path through COVID and trying to support the mental, physical and emotional health of their team members without any help.

The unintentional implied message to these leaders was “we don’t trust you to make the right decisions” for your people. This had a huge impact on the culture within this organisation. The leaders felt powerless and alone.

Contrast this with a client organisation, again headquartered overseas. The Australian CEO of this company was able to continue supporting her leaders to grow through COVID.

The parent company understands that Australia is in a very different situation to most other countries around the world. They have empowered the CEO to make local decisions for her workforce that align with our regulations rather than the parent company's regulatory environment.

Your leaders on the ground are at the coal face with your customers and people. They have critical data to make the decisions that will steer your business through the uncertainty. Those businesses that have embraced this local decision-making model are accelerating through each new next normal stage of COVID.

Empowering your leaders to make decisions during uncertain times is essential and leads to higher levels of engagement, trust and productivity.

Did you ever consider giving up? Where did you get the motivation to continue through your challenges? What sustains your drive?

This is such a good question.

I have learned that giving up for the right reasons is not failing or being a quitter. For example, when I was a lawyer, I continued practicing for way longer than I should have because it felt like quitting. Through my spiritual practice I was able to realise that I needed to change the question from "why am I giving up" to "am I living true to myself"? The latter is about aligning my work to personal purpose.

Now, I don't give up on living true to myself. My purpose is my guiding light through challenges and difficulties.

My spiritual practice sustains my connection to purpose. By spiritual, I don't mean religious. I'm not a religious person.

For me, spirituality means seeking the truth for myself. I am a seeker. My practice is heavily influenced by Kripalu Yoga. During difficult times, it's a refuge to refuel and recharge my motivation and remain on course. During joyful times it's a deeply connected space that allows me to experience the interconnectedness of life.

What would you say is the most critical role of a leader during challenging times?

The role of a leader is 3-fold:

- Strategy
- Governance
- Culture

The role of a leader does not change during challenging times. Imagine what would happen if one or more of those pillars were eliminated.

Rather, the way in which a leader implements and delivers these pillars needs to change.

Strategy and governance need to be reviewed and adjusted regularly in response to the changing environment. Postponing this review due to disruption puts your business at risk of being outpaced by your competitors and outdated in your compliance with regulations and community expectations.

Uncertainty is certain and so the way leaders manage culture needs to change during challenging times, as COVID has taught us. Rather than waiting for certainty, leadership development must focus on teaching leaders how to be resilient and lead teams that can weather the storms of uncertainty and keep moving forward. This is less about leadership competencies and more about personal and interpersonal leadership, sometimes (wrongly) called “soft skills”.

Leaders must ensure that their people and business are equipped to adapt quickly by building a culture that focuses on leveraging possibility rather than managing uncertainty.

When the future seems so uncertain, what is the best way to boost morale? What can a leader do to inspire, motivate and engage their team?

Senior executives need to have consciously courageous conversations with compassion at 2 levels, individually with their direct reports and with their broader teams. Recognise that you need the support of your leadership group to keep your people inspired and motivated.

At an interpersonal level, consciously choose to connect with your people individually where possible, and ask them what’s real for them right now. Understand what they need to support them through this period and compassionately provide that support or ensure that is provided by a professional.

Follow the same process with key groups within your organisation and support your leaders to do the same.

Share your own experiences of navigating uncertainty with authenticity, congruence and appropriate vulnerability. If the path is unclear, be open about this. The leader’s role is to inspire trust, not give the false hope certainty when there is none.

Engaging the hearts and minds of your people motivates them to follow. Help them to align to your purpose in a genuinely engaging way. Research shows that meaning and purpose is a powerful motivator.

What is the best way to communicate difficult news to one's team and customers?

The United Nations has designated 2021 as the year of trust. Leaders can deliver difficult news with integrity and openness to enhance trust. Here's how to do this.

Identify the outcome you want to achieve in communicating the message. Do you want to be open and allow the other person the opportunity to ask questions, or is this an announcement? Your intention will drive how you approach the communication.

Seek the support you need for yourself in preparing and delivering the message. This includes, but goes far beyond, the information and data. What holds you back or makes you uncomfortable in delivering bad news?

Next consider carefully how and when to deliver the message to achieve your objective. Delivering the news of large-scale role redundancies at 4pm on the Thursday before Easter is not the best strategy if you want to support your people through this difficult and emotional situation. This is a real-life example from an organisation with a corporate value of "caring for each other".

Finally, what support will you make available to the recipient?

How can a leader make plans when the future is so unpredictable?

Plan for uncertainty being certain.

The ancient yogis said that everything changes and therefore life is unpredictable. As humans we seek certainty and this concept of uncertainty is being highlighted now as the pace of change is accelerating.

Leaders need to plan for this uncertainty. As a board setting strategy, expect that you will need to adjust and change to respond to the unpredictability rather than setting a 3 to 5 year strategy.

Leaders in the organisation need to expect the unexpected and set work and delivery plans with the intention of flexing them quickly to respond to changes.

Instead of expecting a certain outcome from your plans, focus on making the plans easily adaptable to change. Nokia lost its mobile phone market dominance when Apple disrupted the industry with the iPhone. Nokia failed to realise that the market had changed and users wanted more than just the ability to make a call from their phones.

Is there a “number one principle” that can help guide a company through the ups and downs of turbulent times?

Perform on purpose. Define your purpose to include all stakeholders, your people, the community, your suppliers as well as customers and shareholders.

Engage the hearts and minds of your people to align with this purpose. Then let the purpose guide your decisions at every level in your organisation.

Can you share 3 or 4 of the most common mistakes you have seen other businesses make during difficult times? What should one keep in mind to avoid that?

1. Not trusting their leaders to make the critical decisions to lead through the difficulty. Research shows that your leaders create your culture. Enable them to curate the right culture.
2. Prioritising revenue and profit above everything else. This drives undesirable cultural and behavioural consequences.
3. Lack of diversity at the decision making table. This includes but goes far beyond ethnic and gender diversity. A diverse group makes better decisions. When the answer is not clear, we need different ways of thinking to navigate the uncertainty. If 2021 is the year of trust, Australian businesses need to gain the trust of the entire diverse community they serve.

Generating new business, increasing your profits, or at least maintaining your financial stability can be challenging during good times, even more so during turbulent times. Can you share some of the strategies you use to keep forging ahead and not lose growth traction during a difficult economy?

Seeking to serve my clients was the cause of growth in my business during COVID.

Look for ways to innovate in delivering what customers need, rather than what you can continue to sell. The needs of your customers change quickly and you need to respond rapidly. Compassion drives genuine trust. Trust is the foundation of all sustainably strong relationships.

Here is the primary question of our discussion. Based on your experience and success, what are the five most important things a business leader should do to lead effectively during uncertain and turbulent times? Please share a story or an example for each.

1. Be the architect of your destiny. Learn to lead yourself, before you lead others. Harness your innate intelligence (mind, heart and gut)
2. Fight for your focus. Evidence shows that what you focus on grows. During turbulent times, your attention is the currency. Train your mind like a muscle to consciously choose your focus.
3. Courage is the critical component of change. Growth happens at the edge of your leadership not in the centre of your comfort zone. Choose courage over comfort as Brene Brown says.
4. Compassion converts fear into action. Self compassion allows you to learn from mistakes (without judgement and blame) and use them as opportunities for growth.
5. Prime your potential. Ensure you have daily and weekly personal practices that help your mind, body and emotions to thrive. Find your centre so that when the winds of change come, you can navigate them with equanimity.

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

“I believe that you can never achieve the life of your dreams — a real life of meaning and purpose until you fully grasp...the core of a fulfilled life is knowing that every moment is a choice.” Rod Stryker

This has helped me in realising that I create my future. Even when events outside of my control impact me in unexpected ways, I know that I can choose how I respond. In that choice, I have control over the direction of my life. When I make choices that align with my true self, I am healthier, more fulfilled and successful.

How can our readers further follow your work?

I am an author, speaker and leadership development facilitator. My expertise is in mindful leadership at the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology and mindfulness. I work with boards and executive teams to engage their hearts and minds. This strengthens their resilience and change leadership. The business benefits include increased engagement, wellbeing and customer satisfaction.

I have recently published a book “Elevate, a new path for leaders to navigate uncertainty”. If you want practical tools to implement the concepts I have discussed, you can learn more by clicking [this link](#).

Thank you so much for sharing these important insights. We wish you continued success and good health!

May you be happy and healthy.

A *bout The Interviewer: As Exec. Creative Director, Charlie Katz spearheads the full gamut of creative marketing for Bitbean Software Development in Lakewood, NJ. Charlie has over 20 years experience in major NY and west coast agencies, including Dancer-Fitzgerald-Sample, now Saatchi & Saatchi, D’Arcy-MacManus & Masius, and Wells, Rich Greene. Starting as a junior copywriter and moving up to Exec. Creative Director, he developed creative strategies and campaigns for such clients as Colgate, R.J. Reynolds, KFC, and Home Depot. Along the way he won numerous national and international awards including the NY Advertising Club ‘Andy’.*