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Adapting to lockdown

Case study: Richard Branson and the challenges of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic

“Crisis does not build character, it reveals it” is the old adage, and the COVID-19 outbreak certainly created significant challenges for leaders at all levels and in organizations of all sizes.

Richard Branson – one of the most high-profile leaders in the travel sector - was no exception. He has called the pandemic the most challenging crisis that he has ever faced. In March 2019, your author heard Branson speak at a conference in Salt Lake City, where he was composed, articulate, full of confidence for the future, especially his new venture Virgin Voyages, a cruise line he was gearing up to launch. How things can change in a year!



Figure 2.1: Virgin Atlantic A330 (courtesy of Virgin Atlantic)

Introduction

By mid-April 2020, a third of the global population was under full or partial lockdown. While ‘lockdown’ was not a technical term used by public-health officials, it referred to anything from mandatory geographic quarantines to non-mandatory recommendations to stay at home, closures of certain types of businesses, or bans on events and gatherings. During this lockdown period, the travel sector worldwide continued to experience a loss of business. For example, Spain’s famous annual San Fermin bull-running festival, which usually draws thousands of participants, was canceled because of the coronavirus crisis. “As expected as it was, it still leaves us deeply sad,” said acting mayor Ana Elizalde in a statement from the local Pamplona town hall. The July festival, which was made famous in Ernest Hemingway’s novel *The Sun Also Rises*, has seldom been canceled in its history. Other major European tourist events were canceled, including Oktoberfest, the famous annual German beer-drinking festival which traditionally sees six million people travel to Munich.

Unfortunately, as the coronavirus spread across the world, so too did misinformation about it, despite an aggressive effort by social media companies to prevent its dissemination. Facebook, Google and Twitter were removing false information about the coronavirus, such as miracle cures, secret labs and government plots, as fast as they could find it, and worked with the World Health Organization (WHO) and other government organizations to ensure that people got accurate information (Frenkel, Alba & Zhong, 2020). One report from the Reboot Foundation



Figure 2.2: By mid-April 2020, a third of the global population was under full or partial lockdown (photo by Edwin Hooper on Unsplash)