

Leading During and After a Crisis with Cy Wakeman



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Full transcript

Rob Parsons:

Welcome to the Paychex HR Leadership Series. I'm your host, Rob Parsons. I lead the content team here at Paychex, and we write extensively on a variety of HR topics, covering everything from HCM technology, to team engagement, to compliance with state and federal regulations. Joining me today is Cy Wakeman, a New York Times bestselling author, international leadership speaker, trainer, consultant, and drama researcher. Deemed the "secret weapon to restoring sanity to the workplace," her work is focused on giving leaders reality based tools to capture drama's emotional waste and upcycle it into real results. Cy, thanks for joining me today.

Cy Wakeman:

Absolutely. My pleasure, Rob.

Rob Parsons:

So when we last talked, you were, maybe stranded is too strong a word, but you found yourself in another country during this quarantine.

Cy Wakeman:

Absolutely. When we last talked, I was in Mexico, and was there for three months, completely alone in a house on the beach, and kind of sat out the first part of the world health crisis from that perspective.

Rob Parsons:

Tell me. It's interesting because it sounds nice on the face of it, but you still have a business to run. You still have an organization you're trying to manage. How did you do it being so separated from everybody?

Cy Wakeman:

Well, we, for one thing, our team is pretty ready for what's next. We are very tech savvy. We're on the road, so we already were virtual and we were already presenting many, many of our programs virtually. But at first, yes, I got stranded in Mexico, and didn't want to travel back because of some health reasons. We saw six months of our bookings cancel in a single week. My team was scrambling... We had a whole "Ditch the

Drama” tour that was supposed to be nationwide that we had to cancel and regroup on. So my team is very resilient, they’re ready for what’s next. We got together. We kind of war-roomed the situation. We figured out what was top priority, who could do what. And everybody just jumped in and made it happen, which is just who the Reality Based dream team is.

Rob Parsons:

That’s fantastic. Definitely the whole event and experiential marketing situation’s been completely upended.

Cy Wakeman:

Yeah. It really has. Well, I would say it’s been upended for people who had skipped multiple upgrades until this happened, because what I saw is that not everybody felt the same level of disruption from the world health crisis, and then some of the very amplified and activated conversations on race in this country. Not everybody was that taken aback. It had to do with your awareness, your readiness. It had to do with whether you were leaning in and facing forward so that you could rise up to such a big disruption.

Rob Parsons:

That’s really interesting. You’ve mentioned your team, you don’t even have a traditional mission and vision statement anymore. Does that play into this idea of leaning in and looking ahead?

Cy Wakeman:

It really does. It also plays into this idea that we are involved in a conversation with the world, even on what our mission is and what our vision is because at the face of it, we help people modernize their leadership philosophy so that they can capture all this energy that’s wasted in drama in the workplace. But basically, the minute you set your mission statement and place it on the wall, it’s no longer relevant if you’re awake in a world that’s always changing. And so I think vision and mission statements come from the ego. They’re how I intend to shape the world. But many times, they lead us to be in a position where we aren’t co-creating, and the world can’t shape us, so we’re not evolving.

Cy Wakeman:

And so I just found them to be really archaic. I moved away from them. But needing something for an interview one time, somebody said, “Cy, do we even have values? What do we have in common?” And off the top of my head, and this really stuck for my company, I said, “Basically, two hashtags, two mantras. Love wins, so everything you do externally needs to be kind, respectful, and as inclusive as possible, as uplifting as possible, so love wins, hashtag.”

Cy Wakeman:

And the other one is involve yourself. Be involved in a very deep relationship with the world so that as much as you’re trying to have impact, you’re allowing yourself to be shaped by the world. And if we are all evolving ourselves personally and evolving ourselves as a team, we will automatically have a mission and fulfill the vision that we’ve co-created with the world. So it’s kind of woo-woo. It’s kind of “out there.” But I really feel like mission and vision statements are ego statements on how I want to change what already has happened. I want to change history rather than the future.

Rob Parsons:

I love that. And I love that concept of proactively evolving yourself. Here at Paychex, we’ve been talking a lot about forced evolution. There’s a lot of things people have wanted to do, a lot of things people thought would be great, if only we had time to do it. All of a sudden, we’re doing it. We had to.

Cy Wakeman:

Totally. I just want you to know, being caught in Mexico solo, by myself, literally no human contact for three months, when everything first happened, and I had just lost a 15-year-old nephew who was killed in a tragic car accident. Many other things were blowing up in my world personally. And I was down there, and I had a friend say to me, "You know what, Cy, you can go through this as a prisoner or a monk. You choose." And I really felt it was forced evolution for me and for others. And in fact, I asked people, "What has this pandemic revealed to you?"

Cy Wakeman:

And I was doing a lot of work just helping people manage anxiety. And it really revealed to most of us: Do we have good habits and discipline for self-care? No. Do we have a good relationship with stillness? Do we have a good relationship with uncertainty? How tech savvy are we? How are our Zoom skills? And I really think that as all of this happened, and then now, as I said, we're really in an amplified conversation about finally figuring out race in the country, it's like if that caught you by surprise, you may not have been keeping up with the times. And so there is some forced evolution.

Cy Wakeman:

But if that forced evolution is painful for you, it is a big sign about not only where you need to evolve next, but where you skipped some mandatory upgrades. So a lot of us at home are learning a lot about the state of our parenting skills when we can't get our kids to do what we need them to. We're learning about boundaries. Are we in a partnership where one of us does all of the extra work while the other one makes sure to recoup? And so I just think forced evolution is fantastic. I try and keep my team out of a position where their evolution is forced and in a position where their evolution is voluntary and co-creating.

Rob Parsons:

I really like that. And I like that you touched on the anxiety that comes with all of the change. You had a previous life as a social worker.

Cy Wakeman:

Absolutely.

Rob Parsons:

Is there layers of that, that you bring to the table when you think about that, and try to help people understand how to... And I also love the term upgrade. You're not just talking about upgrading technology. We're upgrading everything here.

Cy Wakeman:

And a lot of us skip upgrades. Right? It's like even maybe we get into a partnership and then never read another book on relationships, when we read 20 of them while we're dating. You can't suddenly start skipping upgrades, otherwise you're going to be the guy with the flip phone you've had since high school, rather than, you're the one we have to call because you don't get group texts. What was your question?

Rob Parsons:

I know. I'm sorry I derailed. I did love that upgrade thought, but yes.

Cy Wakeman:

So when it comes to anxiety, almost always, I think of how I coach, and most of the content I put out in our leadership training...and now we have peace and happiness at work...for employees has to do with my background as a social worker, and good mental processes and mental health. And so what happened during the pandemic, I immediately started to go on Facebook Live and give people strategies to manage their own anxiety, their own grief, their own pain. And what makes our work in the world so different is we really come out with leaders and help them work with people based on informed by brain science and based on behavioral health economics, and those things that I used back when I was counseling.

Rob Parsons:

I like that you lateraled over to leadership because I can see some very different things are being required of leaders right now. And they don't just have to upgrade themselves, but they have to upgrade their organizations. How do you suggest they even start?

Cy Wakeman:

So I'll give you a couple of answers to that. On the one hand, if leaders had modernized their leadership philosophy, again, it wouldn't be such an upgrade. But where leaders need to start and continue to go through, I'll just give you kind of five steps, and then we'll go back to managing energy. So in any type of crisis, there's some predictable steps people will go through, just like grief. And so normally, I don't like to talk about the stages of grief if we're changing your software, because that was based on big stuff like death. But in times that we're in, we really do see some people moving through predictable crisis steps.

Cy Wakeman:

The first step in any crisis for a leader, is to do everything you can to ensure the safety of your people, and that they have the basics. So if you go back three months ago, four months again, whenever, I've lost track of time, people said, "Okay. In two days, everybody's working from home. Don't leave your houses. We don't know what this is. Make sure you have a way to get groceries." In that moment, what leaders needed to have done is really be checking in with everybody. Do you have the foods you need? Do you have the ability to school your kids? Do you have enough laptops in the house to make sure everybody has what they need? Up to and including: Are you in a safe situation? And if not, here's a confidential way to tell me that. Whatever that might be, that you're really looking out for safety and basics.

Cy Wakeman:

The next step is to help people remember they're not alone, so you've really got to connect people into each other and start getting them focused on some meaningful work because engagement is all about meaningful work. And Jason Lawrenson does some amazing stuff on that. But it's like, connecting with each other... so instead of you being the point person and the bottle neck, make sure that they know that "Karen" is at home doing the same amount of work, and connect them. And then you basically need to do triage. You need to say, "Okay, given this new reality, what do we have to get done? And what's our short-term solution, where we're just kind of rigging things together?"

Cy Wakeman:

And most leaders kind of rested there, and they thought, "This'll go on two weeks. We'll have everybody back." But guess what, nope. So the next stage, you can't just stay with this temporary step. It's not efficient. The next stage is take this opportunity to question everything you're doing. Usually, you put a PowerPoint slide through 32 edits because it's going to be presented quarterly, and you have a two camera shot where everybody's in studio. Question that. Does that really need to be done? Do we really need people showing up in suits and ties at home? So those are the basic things. But radically simplify to the point that everything you put back in, you are questioning whether it has any return on investment, whether it fits to where we want to go.

Cy Wakeman:

And then the final stage is curate and choose intentionally what the new normal will look like for you, so that you bring breakthroughs at discovery and innovation, and you really capitalize on the learning of this. You have grown people's resiliency in this, and that you're going forward. Now these are stages, but I would tell you that then with protests coming – many people – we went right back to stage one. "Are you okay?" "Do you have the basics?" Let's say I'm wheeling along, and my father gets COVID: I'm back to stage one.

Cy Wakeman:

So the difference on all of this is that, as a leader, we cannot let people stall out in a stage. If they're three months into this and they're still like, "I really still haven't figured out how to work with my kids at home," it's like, "We can't let you stay there because you're panicked." We don't accommodate the fear. We accommodate the courage. And so how do you call people up to greatness if three months into this, people are still having issues with kids? You need to start pushing. What's your plan for you to have set time that you can dedicate to work? What's your plan to stay on track? And keep moving them up that platform.

Cy Wakeman:

Now, people will return at random times to anxiety, Rob. I do it. We all do it. Just at times, you're walking through the park, and all of a sudden, you're like, "Why am I anxious?" Leaders need to also manage the energy of people – not take care of their feelings, but manage the energy away from, "we're all going to heck in a handbasket." Change "We can't do this. It's too hard. It won't matter," to: "What do we want to create? And how can we make that happen?" Leaders don't manage people, they manage the energy of people. And when people get anxious, there are a couple of things leaders can do. One, I call, "come close in." Most people are anxious because they're way out into the future. If you want stress, get a future. Right?

Cy Wakeman:

So, people are like, "Oh, my gosh"...but if you're thinking through this second wave, three months from now, and what that's going to do to supply chain and distribution, and "how are we ever going to give people performance management ratings because it's been such a messed up year?"...If you're way out there, as your leader, I go, "Come close in. For today, what is it you need to focus on? And currently, what do we need and what resources do we have? In this moment, what do you know?" And then go from today, or sometimes this hour, and move out into this week, this month... now, we may be doing supply chain planning, but it's based on what we know, not what we fear.

Rob Parsons:

I liked how you had to also acknowledge that everybody's in a different place. This idea of this personal layer of leadership, that you touched on a little bit. But how do you help people—instead of just sympathizing—how do you help people be accountable, take ownership and take that next step, up a level? Because I can't fill every cup, my cup needs to be filled too. It gets exhausting.

Cy Wakeman:

It does. The pandemic's revealing is what I call "lazy engagers" because people who relied on the organization or on their leader for their purpose in life, or their external motivation to get work done— we've got to use these times to call people to greatness and to help them be evolved by forced evolution, which increases their resiliency. This is the very time to be working on people's resiliency. And so empathy is, "I see that you're struggling," and then the next thing is a call to greatness that says, "Given this situation, what are your plans?" And my favorite word is "given." You might say, "You don't understand. Both my husband and I are working from home right now, and it's tough." And I'd say, "Given you have two people on calls working from home, what's your plan?"

Cy Wakeman:

“Well, you don’t understand because any given day, I don’t know if my parents are going to be here or not going to be here.” “Given that your parents are not a stable, reliable daycare, what’s your plan?” And what you’re doing is you’re taking what could become a [inaudible 00:17:45] excuse and you’re putting it into, “it’s just a reality.” A reality isn’t the reason we can’t succeed. It’s the reality in which we must succeed. So for me, it’s not backing down on accountability. Just because people have been impacted doesn’t mean a helpful thing to do is decrease accountability. And in fact, this is the moment to grow people’s accountability because I asked people in my research, “How do you get to be a high accountable?” We measured them high in accountability. And they said, “We were challenged and not rescued.”

Rob Parsons:

Yeah. Sink or swim, and they were able to swim.

Cy Wakeman:

Sink or swim. Now supported, yes. You don’t just throw people off a cliff. But we were challenged and not rescued. We were left in some discomfort. We got some feedback, real feedback. But the feedback was short. “I need this done and I’m not going to be able to give any leeway on it.” “You didn’t accomplish it,” whatever it was. The feedback’s short. But self-reflection is really long, and it’s all about the sense-making mentoring. And so one of the things leaders can do to call people up to greatness is use questions and assignments to get people self-reflecting, because that’s really how accountability is born. You challenge people. Resilience is a big part of accountability. You challenge people. You let them experience accountability. You give them your feedback. And then you invite them to say, “What’d you just learn about yourself? What is this revealing to you? Where do you need to evolve next? What’s your plan to get fluent in this?” So rather than making—lowering—the standard, I want people to up the incentive for growth.

Rob Parsons:

I love that. And I love that you purposefully make them a part of the process.

Cy Wakeman:

Absolutely.

Rob Parsons:

Another element that I really liked was your “Marie Kondoing” for when we get back to things. Be very, “everything’s out, now let’s decide what we’re going to put back in.” What are we going to—It’s like the cleaning of the closet.

Cy Wakeman:

It absolutely is. And what I love about this is for all victims out there, there is a hard stop and a hard start because I, currently--if I step up--can be part of planning and influencing what’s going forward. So, guess what? A year from now, I can’t complain about it. I created it. So that curating...and I love the “Marie Kondo”—everything that you put back in needs to bring you joy or fulfill the mission. And, by the way, we need to get to be minimalists. We need far less than we think that we need. I think this could be a breakthrough to the point where we can get down to four-hour workdays. I just really think there’s all kinds of things to be had here.

Cy Wakeman:

But we--especially I—talk about our...I just talked to a women's group. I said, "As women, if we go back to what didn't work for us without question, then shame on us. Shame on them in the past." And what I mean by that is: How many times in the women's bathroom, have we all complained about having to dress up at work, and being expected to wear makeup, and being expected to play some role? If we leave our yoga pants and we go back to work fully made up, unless that's what we love and prefer to do--more power to you--if we go back, we can't be victims about it because now we'll have had a hand in either accepting it or designing it.

Rob Parsons:

That's extremely interesting because you're talking about not just work processes, not just technologies, but cultural artifacts.

Cy Wakeman:

Yeah. Those expectations that are just structurally put upon us.

Rob Parsons:

So I want to shift gears just a little bit now. We've talked about how I can help elevate team members to be accountable, to own their own actions. That still doesn't feel like it gets me all the way to this idea of resiliency and having them prepared for these five steps, and prepared to walk themselves through it as they need to be. Any thoughts on how leaders can cultivate that type of resiliency in their team?

Cy Wakeman:

Sure. Step number one is to look at what this pandemic's revealing for you, leaders, because I had a nurse manager come to me, and she's like, "I have a nurse who just will not treat COVID-19 patients. And I've offered her a different position and different hours, and she basically just won't accept any of it." And I said, "Well, what does that reveal to you about how you managed her in the past?" And she said, "You know what, I allowed myself to be emotionally blackmailed, and I let that nurse carve off parts of her job she didn't like." So one, this is your own reality check, leaders, on how much you've coddled your people because resilience is something we will develop if appropriately challenged. It is something that we will kill off if we are coddling our people.

Cy Wakeman:

So what we know about resilience is that resiliency is not this thing about perseverance, or stamina, or who came from the most dysfunctional home, and so we can over-function and tolerate ridiculous situations... and that muscle through approach to resilience has been rewarded. And a lot of people confused resilience for that. We found out the most resilient people don't look like they're working very hard, oddly enough. The most resilient people are good crowd sourcers, meaning they don't have to heavily exert themselves as much as they have to tap into their resources that are pre-established. So what we found out for resilient people when we studied them, is that there's three main—well, four mai—differences.

Cy Wakeman:

One, resilient people had bigger networks of positive relationships. And what that meant is, "

Oh, Rob might remember I did a good deed and got to be a guest on his podcast." When I call and say, "Rob, do you have any ideas for me?" You're going to return my emails quicker. Right?

Rob Parsons:

Right.

Cy Wakeman:

Because it's a positive relationship.

Rob Parsons:

Yep.

Cy Wakeman:

And a large network of those...and that means that I'm connecting far beyond where my employer connects me...and I'm connecting with experts in my profession. I am a global citizen involved in social media, so people had positive connections. And then they were really living Brene Brown's vulnerability piece, where these were also the ones that asked for help early and often. Resilient people were people that had pre-established networks, and then just crowdsourced for an answer. That was it.

Rob Parsons:

Didn't wait until it was too late. Didn't wait until they were failing.

Cy Wakeman:

Yeah, because you can't build a positive relationship "in the moment." These positive relationships are over time—you really being active in your profession and known. You have a good personal brand. Basically, to put it in today's terms, you've got a good personal brand and you have relationships already established.

Rob Parsons:

It feels like giving is a critical part of that.

Cy Wakeman:

It's a big deal. And resilient people are outer focused rather than inner focused. They aren't always worried about me looking good, or I'm going to get my stuff done first, and then I would help you. Part of how you develop resilience is you over-commit. And you have social pressure that it's like, "Dang it. I promised Jerry I would get him that thing tonight, and it's just a favor." Resiliency is born in those moments where you have to push yourself farther. Resilient people also did not base their confidence on certainty.

Cy Wakeman:

So a lot of people are like, "Cy, you don't understand. My confidence is shaken. I used to know what tomorrow would bring." I'm like, "No, you didn't. That was always an illusion. Your ego just had you fooled." People need to build their confidence on, "I have confidence in myself, not ego." Ego is, "I am smarter. I'm right. I know the answer. I'm better." Confidence is, "I bring some good stuff to the table. I've got some good, deep expertise. And I'm also confident that I don't know what the future holds, but I know together, we can figure it out because together, we're genius." And that became really obvious.

Cy Wakeman:

And then, the fourth thing is that resilient people were evolving. They knew how their mind works so they weren't getting played by their ego. And they knew how the world works, so they weren't arguing with reality all the time, so they were really able to conserve energy. So it was really surprising that a lot of resiliency looked like millennial behavior that people have complained about.

Rob Parsons:

Yeah. I love it, my own self.

Cy Wakeman:

I do too. I do too. And so how can a leader build that resiliency? Don't fix. Don't rescue. Don't sympathize. People come to you, go, "Oh, my gosh. I hear that you're struggling. Thank you for sharing that. And what have you thought about doing? And who do you know that is really great at this? And what did you try?... And then what did you try?...And then what did you try?"

Cy Wakeman:

But it's not as much what you do to build resiliency, as it is what you stop doing to build resiliency. One thing leaders do is they sympathize. People come up and they go, "We still haven't heard from the product launch team a final answer for Tuesday." If I were being great, I would say, "Oh, my gosh. I bet that's certain to be a bit stressful for you. What could you do next that would add value? Who do you think you can connect with?" That's the perfect response. Sympathy is unbelievable. They've done this to us for years. Collude together, decide that the product launch team is the problem. "We're amazing." What I do is I reinforce your victim mindset that we're awesome, they're not. Or I go, "Oh, thanks for telling me. I will call them. Then I will draft and email to you. And I will do everything for the team. Product launch isn't my responsibility, but I will take it." And what we reinforce in people then, is that they're also victims. Any time something out of the ordinary comes up, escalate it because you're not capable. And that's our fixing. So if you're doing kind of older leadership stuff, your helping is hurting your resiliency.

Rob Parsons:

I love that. And that really brings me full circle now. You had a complete change in business. A lot of things closed out. Everything's different now. What's new? What are you working on? What are the new projects? What's on Cy's window right now?

Cy Wakeman:

I love it. Well, we too used the time to get some things done and processes we've had on our list, that we kind of used the excuse of "time." But then we quickly shifted into upping-the-ante on our virtual live events and our virtual training events. We set up two really incredible studios. We took it to the next level. We have all kinds of new ways that we can do virtual keynotes. And we just did a three-day training to rave reviews, all virtual. But what is really exciting for me is I'm doing a lot more work on resiliency. We're offering a lot of sessions on leading in uncertain times and employee sessions on how to stay fully engaged.

Cy Wakeman:

But probably what's most exciting, is my retreat in Mexico, where I got a new book contract, so I'm writing a book called, "Life's Messy, Live Happy." And it's a lot about how I live these principles in my personal life because I get asked that a lot. And no, it is not telling you how perfect my life is. It is telling you how messy my life is, and how these principles help when I use them.

Rob Parsons:

I love it. That's beautiful. Whwwat's the best way for people to get ahold of you, to reach you, and to connect with you, Cy?

Cy Wakeman:

Perfect. Any at Cy Wakeman. So on any social media, just at Cy Wakeman is a fantastic way to get in touch with us and connect with us. We have a wonderful "No Ego" podcast, ourselves, every week. And connect with us on all the social media channels.

Rob Parsons:

That's fantastic. When you visited our SHRM booth last year, and there were lines around the booth and through the aisles, that was just indicative of how needed your message is. And I very much appreciate you participating today.

Cy Wakeman:

Thank you. It was a blast to be together at SHRM. And your team is just top notch professionals. It was wonderful to be affiliated.

Rob Parsons:

Thanks for listening to this episode of The Paychex HR Leadership Series Podcast. You can listen to other episodes and check out the Paychex business series, hosted by Gene Marks, at paychex.com/worx/ podcasts. All of these podcasts are also available on iTunes, Spotify, Podbean and your favorite podcast station. Thank you once again.

Speaker 3:

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