Disruption Gives You Momentum for Change -- Don't Waste It

BY CHRIS MUSSER AND SHERZOD ODILOV

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- During a crisis, people are less resistant to organizational change
- The best leaders lean into disruption and spark much-needed changes
- Use a decision matrix to decide which changes are urgent and important

During times of disruption, the best leaders defy odds while others merely get by.

Those who thrive do so by seizing the unique opportunities that accompany a disruption. While each disruption is unique, they all share a commonality: they temporarily eliminate inertia.

This often makes periods of disruption the best time to enact needed change. Indeed, change-management experts agree that the hardest stage of any change effort is convincing employees that the status quo -- inertia -- is no longer a viable option.
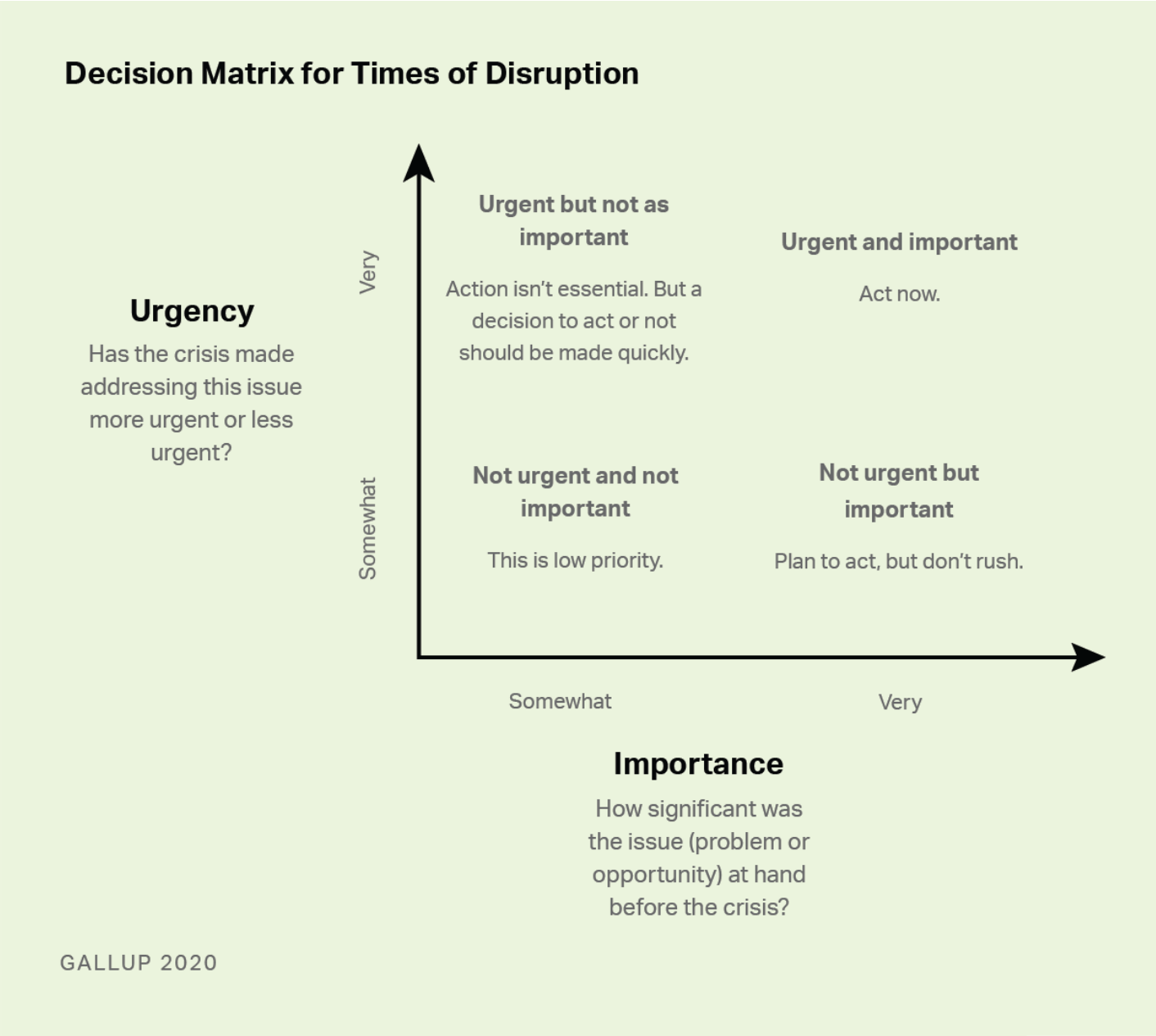
In fact, studies have shown that people tend to be resistant to change under normal circumstances and feel a strong sense of psychological ownership for the status quo.

But during times of crisis, no one needs convincing.

People tend to consider organizational change necessary and justified during crisis events. **That is why leaders in the top echelon capitalize on crises to spark organizational change.**

Instead of wishing a crisis away, world-class leaders lean in and ask, "Which organizational change(s) should we prioritize?"

Then, they discover which is the smartest priority by considering the urgency and importance of the needed changes. The following decision matrix offers a simple way to do so.

Decision Matrix for Times of Disruption

Urgency

Has the crisis made addressing this issue more urgent or less urgent?

Very

Somewhat

Urgent but not as important

Action isn't essential. But a decision to act or not should be made quickly.

Urgent and important

Act now.

Not urgent and not important

This is low priority.

Not urgent but important

Plan to act, but don't rush.

Somewhat

Very

Importance

How significant was the issue (problem or opportunity) at hand before the crisis?

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This is a decision matrix to be used in times of disruption. The Y-axis represents the urgency of an issue at hand with the bottom of the axis being items that are somewhat urgent and the top representing issues that are very urgent, while the x-axis represents the importance of an issue ranging from somewhat important to very important as the graph continues farther. The graphic includes four categories into which leaders can group issues,

problems, or opportunities they face in times of disruption. Starting in the top-left quadrant of the graph, the first category is urgent, but not as important -- action isn't essential, but a decision to act or not should be made quickly. Moving to the right, the next category is very urgent and very important. These are issues where you need to act now. Moving down, the next category is not urgent, but very important -- leaders should plan to act, but not rush. Moving toward the left, the final category is not urgent and not important. These are low priority items.

Using the Matrix to Identify Your Organization's Top Priority

First, leaders should consider all the issues they have wanted to address through change initiatives. This is often best done in collaboration with others to limit leaders' vulnerability to personal biases. During this stage, no ideas are bad.

Instead of wishing a crisis away, world-class leaders lean in and ask, "Which organizational change(s) should we prioritize?"

The next step involves answering the following questions:

1. Importance: How significant was the issue (problem or opportunity) at hand *before* the crisis?

Leaders should work together to place all identified issues on a continuum from "somewhat" to "very" important.

Of course, if an issue made the list at all, it is likely at least somewhat important. But leaders can further gauge the importance of issues by considering factors such as their organization's unique goals, mission and customer needs.

2. Urgency: Has the crisis made addressing this issue more urgent or less urgent?

The nature of the disruption can alter the urgency of a potential change initiative.

For example, a crisis may have exposed fissures in the organization that can no longer be ignored. Alternatively, it may have forced open a window of unexpected opportunity that will close once a "new normal" is reached.

Categorizing the Urgency and Importance of Issues

Very Urgent + Somewhat Important

These issues may have been nagging leaders for some time but have never been prioritized. Because the crisis has made them more malleable than usual, now is the time for decision-makers to speak now or forever hold their peace.

Leaders should consider that when employees perceive changes to be instigated by external factors, they are less likely to blame their leaders for interrupting the status quo. This may be an opportunity to make changes without using up leaders' social capital.

For example, retailers who had been in early conversations about contactless payments before COVID-19 should consider taking action before the opportunity is squandered.

Very Urgent + Very Important

These issues were already significant problems (or opportunities) before the crisis and have been specifically impacted by the crisis. It is important to act quickly while the iron is hot, before they solidify into unintentional (and consequently unimproved) "new normals."

For example, an organization that had been seriously wrestling with remote-work policies before the COVID-19 crisis should seize the opportunity to make sweeping changes, if needed.

Somewhat Urgent + Very Important

These issues were already significant problems (or opportunities) before the crisis but have not been particularly affected by it. They should still be addressed at some point, but there is no reason to address them *now*, and the opportunity cost of doing so may be higher than usual given that other issues may need more immediate attention.

For example, a company that was wrestling with restructuring its incentive plan before COVID-19 may prefer to wait until a more opportune time to make changes, assuming their incentive structures have not been significantly affected by the crisis.

Somewhat Urgent + Somewhat Important

These issues have been on the table for a while at your organization, but the nature of the crisis may make acting on them more costly, risky or difficult to navigate. Such endeavors should be left alone until the crisis has passed unless certain events created a clear path forward.

Once leaders have prioritized potential change initiatives, they must lead the change effort. Strong leadership is one of the most important predictors of successful organizational change.

Gallup has identified seven principles leaders can use for effective change management:

1. Clearly articulate the vision for change.
2. Involve the right people: limited vs. broad involvement.
3. Communicate the right information at the right time.
4. Always account for resistance to change.
5. Celebrate short-term wins without declaring premature victory.
6. Effectively anchor the change to the organization.
7. Always plan for change to be "the only constant."

The best leaders thrive by leaning into crises and seizing the opportunities they afford. Using this simple framework will help them do so most effectively.

Learn more about organizational change and leading through disruption:

- Watch the webinar "COVID-19: Managing Your Workforce Through Disruption."
- Read the article *Steps to Effective Decision-Making in Organizations*.
- Explore other resources for leading through disruption.

Chris Musser is the Practice Lead for Organizational Effectiveness at Gallup.

Sherzod Odilov is a Consultant at Gallup and a Subject Matter Expert in Organizational Change.