

5 indispensable lessons CEOs can learn from Volodymyr Zelenskyy
Marguerite Ward - Business Insider



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy shows the power of effective communication and leading by example, according to experts. Ronaldo Schemdit/AFP via Getty Images

Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy is a case study in effective crisis management, experts say. While running a company is not the same as running a country, there are strong similarities.

Zelenskyy's direct communication style and practice of leading by example are lessons for CEOs.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is navigating one of the world's biggest geopolitical events since World War II. Leaders of all types, but especially CEOs, can learn from Zelenskyy's approach to crisis management.

Though leading a country is certainly different from leading a company, there are similarities. Like presidents, CEOs are responsible for overseeing and taking care of a group of people.

Many oversee budgets that are comparable to, or even larger than, some countries' gross domestic product. They're responsible for delivering on certain goals, are in the public eye, and are increasingly being asked to make decisions on global issues like the climate crisis and discrimination.

Over the past several weeks, Zelenskyy — dressed in camo-green T-shirts and zip-up sweaters — has been visible. He's posted videos from the streets of Kyiv, his country's capital, and repeated clear messages in media interviews.

He's given emotional speeches to world politicians and even spoke virtually at this year's Grammy Awards.

Zelenskyy represents a new era of crisis leadership, according to professors of international relations and business. CEOs have the opportunity to learn from him.

"History will look highly favorably upon Zelenskyy," William B. Eimicke, a professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, said.

"Good leaders recognize that they're only as good as the people who follow them. And they are, in fact, a personification of the team of the organization, of the company they represent. They're not separate and apart."

CEOs facing unprecedented challenges can study these key elements of Zelenskyy's approach.

Cut to the chase



Zelenskyy on March 10. Office of the President of Ukraine

In times of crisis, people are stressed and overwhelmed and don't want to spend mental energy deciphering long sentences or drawn-out arguments, LaToya Evans, a crisis-communications veteran, said.

"It's really about connection. You're talking about people who are under great stress, people who are evacuating, people who lost their homes, who lost their businesses," she said. "They don't want to hear a PR speech."

The Ukrainian leader's speaking style is characterized by short sentences, vivid imagery, and empathy, all of which make him effective.

"I am here. We are not putting down arms," Zelenskyy said in a Twitter video played over 19 million times.

"That is it. That's all I wanted to tell you. Glory to Ukraine."

Zelenskyy teaches us that effective messaging is clear and concise. We see this in the business world, too. In a memo Nestle CEO Mark Schneider sent out during a peak in

the pandemic in 2020, he outlined three clear points he wanted employees to take away.

Intuit CEO Sasan Goodarzi's 2020 memo after the murder of George Floyd was written in plain language. Indeed, the most successful memos after Floyd's murder invited difficult conversations, outlined concrete plans, and appealed to emotion, public-relations experts told Insider.

Lead from the front lines



Zelenskyy delivering a video address that was released on March 11. Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Zelenskyy had an opportunity to escape hardship when President Joe Biden offered to help him leave Ukraine as Russia began its assault. But the Ukrainian leader stayed.

Experts likened the decision to a CEO deciding to go to the scene of a disaster or crisis, rather than hunkering down in their office or at home. A 2021 research paper published in the Academy of Management Journal found business leaders who led by example boosted productivity in their businesses.

"Zelenskyy put himself in the forefront, despite the fact that the ultimate cost in his case could be his own life," said Vesko Garčević, a Boston University professor who previously served as the ambassador of Montenegro in Brussels for NATO.

"He doesn't hide behind the thick walls of the presidential palace or humiliates his subordinates in front of cameras to show his power."

The most effective leaders don't lead crises from boardrooms or corner offices, Ceon D. Quiett Smith, a professor of communications at Grambling State University, said.

"President Zelenskyy understands that the people — children, families, men, and women — are Ukraine and that freedom is the heart of Ukraine," she said.

"His crisis strategy is simple. Every message, visual cue, and action he takes focuses on the people."

Show your humanity



Zelenskyy visited wounded citizens in Ukraine. Photo by Ukrainian Presidency / Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

When circumstances are difficult, people are likely emotional and want to feel their emotions are validated. Zelenskyy uses the rhetorical strategy of pathos, or emotion, Alyssa Farah Griffin, a fellow at Georgetown University's Institute of Politics and Public Service, said.

This garners support. A significant number of Ukrainian women are refusing to leave, per government orders, and are taking up arms instead. And international volunteers, including American veterans, are traveling to Ukraine to help in the fight.

"Zelenskyy shows that CEOs and other leaders should not shy away from emotion when it is warranted," Griffin, who was the White House strategic-communications director for President Donald Trump, said.

Some of the most convincing business leaders of our time have leaned into emotion when making key arguments. Think of Steve Jobs, a co-founder and former CEO of Apple, when he unveiled the first iPhone. He spoke about unleashing the future and the power of technology.

Consider PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi, when she announced she was stepping down from her post. She described a "surge of emotions" and made employees feel connected to the brand she was leaving.

Emotion is a cunning rhetorical device to connect with audiences and drive buy-in for one's goal, scholars and researchers said.

Dress the part



Zelenskyy. UKRINFORM/ Ukrinform/Future Publishing via Getty Images

Though the pandemic has bent the rules of formality, starched suits are still the go-to for world leaders. But Zelenskyy, who used to don suits and ties regularly, too, made a complete wardrobe shift when Russia invaded. He understood the power of fashion to communicate an ideology.

When Peter Schiff, the CEO of Euro Pacific Capital, criticized Zelenskyy's casual attire, people on social media eagerly shut him down.

For example, one person tweeted in reply: "Is this a joke? Kyiv is under brutal assault with mass civilians being killed and Zelenskyy should worry about a suit?"

Business communications and brand strategists think the Ukrainian president's departure from decorum is a smart move. It makes him approachable and relatable, which builds rapport with audiences, Evans, the crisis-communications veteran, said. Stay relentless



Zelenskyy spoke virtually during the Grammy Awards on Sunday. Matt Winkelmeyer/Getty Images

During a crisis, CEOs should be laser-focused on their mission. For Zelenskyy, it's protecting his citizens and doing everything in his power to get more international support against Russia.

His unending energy to protect his people is evidenced by the sheer volume of interviews and speeches he's given over the past few weeks, his constant tweets, and his visits to citizens. A few days ago, the Ukrainian leader also removed several top generals, calling them "anti-heroes."

"Now, I do not have time to deal with all the traitors. But gradually, they will all be punished," he said in a speech.

"Every CEO has one core assignment," Derrick Anderson, assistant professor of public affairs at Arizona State University, said.

"President Zelenskyy remains focused on his core assignment. He has already demonstrated a commitment to prioritize loyalty and is starting to move key leaders in and out of critical roles."

Zelenskyy is also unafraid of taking nontraditional media opportunities to make his plea for support. His somber, serious plea during the Grammy Awards over the weekend was in stark contrast to the event's tradition of being celebratory, but the president knew many people were watching and seized the opportunity.

The president prompted a standing ovation, more news coverage, and a wave of tweets.