

“When Your Global Supply Chain Catches A Global Virus”

Introduction/Scene-Setter:

I suspect that if you are a global supply-chain professional or leader, you’re not reading this right now.

Why? Because you just don’t have the time.

At this moment, I imagine you’re overwhelmed.

You’re in a 24/7 search for information and for answers about your resources, your suppliers, your distribution network, your inventory and your manufacturing processes.

Your senior executives want solutions, not analysis. Your customers want assurances, not excuses. Your employees want leadership, not ‘talking points.’

With the COVID-19 crisis, we’ve all been hit by a virus that infects both people and supply chains. Ready or not, how we respond as supply-chain leaders will define our profession for years to come. COVID-19 might recede in the coming months, or it might spread. It might become a ‘*footnote*,’ or the major ‘*story*’ we tell the next generation.

The truth is, as of today, the honest answer to the above questions is “*I don’t know.*”

Yet, as a supply-chain leader, you’re not paid to say “*I don’t know*” are you?

“*I don’t know*” is not an acceptable answer in the boardroom; it’s not an acceptable answer inside ‘the beltway’; it’s not an acceptable answer in front of your customers, the media, or your employees.

Because after all, *you* are expected to ‘*know.*’ Everyone wants to ‘*know.*’

But you don’t, do you? Don’t feel badly.

I’ll let you in on a secret. None of us know all the answers; however, now is the time to roll up our sleeves and work as a team to get the answers.

Be a true leader – put people first

So, as supply-chain leaders, how do we make decisions and recommendations in times like this?

I offer one small piece of advice.

It's a cliché, but '*put people first*' in every supply-chain decision. Put their health, their welfare, their access to medical care, their families, and their future – *first*.

This sounds obvious, I know.

It sounds easy.

However, it is not.

As a supply-chain leader, you will be confronted with dozens of major and minor decisions that impact your employees, your customers, and the broader health of the public your organization serves.

Despite the pressures you are now under, never make a decision or recommendation that – in any way - places the health, safety or welfare of anyone in jeopardy.

I don't think it overstates it right now, but hundreds of thousands of employees across our supply-chains are unsung heroes, at every level. Truck Drivers, Warehouse workers and supervisors, workers at our ports, at our airports, at our distribution centers, they are all doing the work that's keeping our store shelves and pharmacies stocked, and our gas stations fueled. Global supply-chains are often invisible or taken for granted by most people. Those days are gone. And it's not just supply-chain visibility 'in the news' we're talking about.

The global legal, administrative, regulatory, political and economic underpinnings that have driven the evolution of our contemporary supply-chains will be under scrutiny in the coming days and months, like never before. In fact, the COVID19 outbreak could result in significant changes in law and regulations that push our industry in a dramatically different direction.

All of this is happening at once. What do you need to do right now? What aspects of crisis-action planning do you need to focus on today?

Gain Supply-Chain ‘Visibility’

You need global visibility on your supply pipeline – from ‘end-to end’. I imagine you may not have this right now given the fluidity and the speed of this growing crisis, and it’s keeping you up at night.

Believe me, I’ve been there.

I remember deploying U.S. and Allied forces to Afghanistan.

I remember training our teams to learn, know and understand how our supply-chains operated, all the way from a U.S. manufacturing facility to the individual soldier who needed to put a round in their rifle or have food to eat somewhere in the Korengal Valley which if they did not receive it result in life or death.

It was hard to convey this level of detail to all our logistics and supply chain professionals. But, once we did, they all knew what the critical issues were; they knew who to call on the phone to get things fixed and moving; they knew how to address supply problems; and they adopted a ‘911’ mentality – with the urgency, speed and competence expected of an emergency responder.

‘Wargame’ supply-chain chokepoints and disruptors

It’s all about the ‘chokepoints or knowing and identifying those supply chain disruptors.’

Supply-chain and logistics analysis is a fundamental skill of all high-functioning organizations. Have you done the homework that highlights when and where your organization’s supply-chain chokepoints exist?

If you have identified your chokepoints, is there a mechanism to inform your leadership when these chokepoints have been reached and what to do in response?

In the military, we ‘wargame’ everything.

We ‘rehearse’; we ‘practice’; and we pose hard questions – *in advance* – to our leaders. This is a primary method to minimize ‘surprises.’

‘Wargaming’ is a way of becoming “*comfortable with being uncomfortable.*”

Setting aside time and senior leader commitment to ‘wargaming’ is very hard in most organizations. However, it is also invaluable.

In fact, I would wager that many organizations – right now – wish they’d dedicated more time and effort to ‘wargaming’ their response to a global pandemic.

It’s not just the ‘Wargame’ – it’s the lessons you learn

‘Wargaming’ is only a means to an end.

Great supply-chain organizations take the lessons they learn from ‘wargames’ and then turn them into standard operating procedures, training modules, and institutional knowledge.

‘Lessons *acquired*’ are only ‘Lessons *learned*’ if they are instilled into daily practice and repeated throughout an organization. Instilling a supply-chain culture that consistently asks itself “*What if this happens...?*” followed by “*What would we do in response...?*” is the hallmark of a learning organization.

COVID-19: Supply Chain Challenge and Opportunity

No matter what happens with COVID-19, commit to using the sense of urgency it affords to drive your organization to identify and address your supply-chain vulnerabilities.

Lives, organizations and the future of the global supply-chain (developed over many decades) is at stake. We have shared interests – across nations; across organizations; and across people from around the world – in keeping our supply-chains operating smoothly efficiently.

COVID-19 presents challenges to our supply-chains and to the global economy that will persist for months – potentially for years. Now is the time to address these. For supply-chain pros, we’re living through a historic moment. Let’s prove we’re up to the challenge.

###