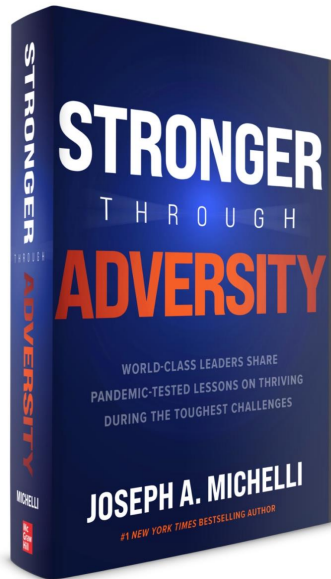


STRONGER THROUGH ADVERSITY

Leadership Tips from 140+ World-Class Leaders



5 LEADERSHIP LESSONS

**FROM PANDEMIC-TESTED
WORLD-CLASS LEADERS**

Leadership Forged Through Adversity

When COVID-19 struck, former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson's words proved prophetic: everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth. Some organizations were knocked out. Some wobbled. Some emerged stronger. This eBook captures five leadership lessons from the 140+ world-class leaders Joseph Michelli interviewed for his McGraw-Hill book *Stronger Through Adversity*.

Self-Care

Leaders who sustain peak performance treat self-care as a discipline, not an option.

Safety

In a crisis, safety becomes the highest law — physical, psychological, and financial.

Character

Crisis reveals who leaders truly are. Legacy is built by design, not default.

Leaders interviewed include executives from:

Airbnb	American Red Cross
Barron's	Direct Relief
DHL Supply Chain	Feeding America
Farmers Insurance	Goodwill
Goldman Sachs	Human Rights Watch
Kohl's	Humane Society of the US
Marriott	St. Jude Children's Research Hospital
Mercedes-Benz	Salvation Army
Microsoft	United Way
Panasonic	University of Arizona
Quest Diagnostics	University of Tennessee
RBC	Yale University
Roche Diagnostics	
Siemens	
Southwest Airlines	
Starbucks	
Target	
Verizon	
Volkswagen	
Whole Foods	

A Note from Joseph Michelli

When COVID-19 arrived, I had just started a new book project with GODIVA Chocolatier. By February 2020, that project was on hold. Within weeks I was working on crisis leadership taskforces for several major brands, watching leaders navigate one of the most disorienting moments in modern business history.

What I observed was extraordinary: leaders who succeeded were not those with the most elaborate plans. They were those who led with authenticity, adapted with speed, and kept people at the center of every decision. I began reaching out to the most effective leaders in my network. What started as a planned series of 30 or 40 conversations became 140+ interviews across six continents, representing some of the most recognized organizations in the world.

The insights in this eBook are drawn from those conversations. They apply far beyond the pandemic. Any leader who faces uncertainty, disruption, or adversity — which is every leader — will find here a framework for not just surviving the storm but emerging stronger from it.

I hope these pages offer you both perspective and a renewed sense of what leadership is truly for.

With gratitude,

Joseph Michelli, Ph.D.

Keynote Speaker & Customer Experience Expert

Global Gurus: Top 5 Customer Experience Thought Leader, 10 Consecutive Years

LESSON ONE

Put Your Mask On First

Self-Care Is the Foundation of Leadership

"Self-care is not selfish. To deliver consistent leadership for others, you must first practice consistent self-leadership." — Joe Carella, University of Arizona

Put Your Mask On First

We all know the airline instruction: put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others. Most leaders intellectually agree. In practice, many ignore it entirely. During the pandemic, leaders across industries reported running on adrenaline, caffeine, and chronic sleep deprivation — convinced that the urgency of the moment justified the sacrifice.

Chris Recinos, CEO of the Nurse Leaders Network, worked 52 consecutive days without a day off. Stephanie Linnartz, Group President at Marriott International, oversaw a company that lost 90% of revenue nearly overnight while managing a household with children, a working spouse, and a barking dog — and fought to keep her running routine intact, telling herself that self-care was not selfish.

Tash Elwyn, President and CEO of Raymond James & Associates, put it plainly: leaders should think of themselves as professional athletes. Training and recovery are not luxuries — they are what sustain elite performance over a marathon, not a sprint.

The leaders who sustained peak effectiveness through the pandemic were those who ritualized self-care rather than treating it as optional. They walked. They meditated. They expressed their feelings rather than suppressing them. They held accountability partners. They protected sleep.

Ronnell Higgins, Chief of Police at Yale University, closed his office door and cried after learning a retired colleague had died of COVID-19. He called it what it was — grief — and returned to work steadied rather than destabilized.

STRENGTH TIPS

- Servant leaders must practice self-care. Leaders may want to eat last, but they still need nourishment.
- Crises pull leaders toward endless organizational threats. That pull can result in neglecting personal well-being.
- Self-care is a discipline that needs to be practiced and ritualized. It benefits from social support and partner accountability.
- Leadership effectiveness is the byproduct of a marathon, not a sprint.

My Strength Plan

Put Your Mask On First

When have you seen leaders (including yourself) neglect self-care, and what was the cost?

What self-care rituals do you currently practice? Which have you abandoned under pressure?

Who could serve as an accountability partner to help you sustain self-care through your next challenge?

One action I will take in the next 30 days:

LESSON TWO

Make Safety the Highest Law

Physical, Psychological, and Financial Security

"Salus populi suprema lex." Let the safety of the people be the highest law. — Cicero, 106–43 BC

Make Safety the Highest Law

The Roman statesman Cicero lived more than two millennia ago. His maxim — that the safety of the people is the highest law — proved as relevant in 2020 as it did in ancient Rome. The leaders who navigated the pandemic most effectively were those who treated safety not as a compliance checkbox but as the primary filter for every decision.

Gerry Agnes, CEO of Elevations Credit Union, described a paradigm shift: he had spent his career thinking of employment as a way to make lives better. The pandemic forced him to see work as having the potential to produce harm and even death. From that realization came concrete action: heroic pay for essential workers, modified branch operations, catastrophic leave policies, and 14 days of emergency pay for COVID-affected employees.

University of Denver Chancellor Jeremy Haefner created an explicit priority framework: health and safety first, then student educational experience, then long-term institutional well-being, then equity, then financial considerations. That framework enabled fast, consistent decisions without endless debate.

James Yarmuth, CEO of Sonny's BBQ Franchise Company, aligned his entire franchisee community around safety before state governments issued mandates — closing dining rooms ahead of requirements and establishing safety-based criteria for re-opening. Leaders like Yarmuth discovered that placing safety above all other considerations, including short-term revenue, produced extraordinary organizational alignment.

Physical safety was table stakes. The leaders who stood apart extended their commitment to psychological and financial security as well, recognizing that fear and financial instability are as threatening to people as the virus itself.

STRENGTH TIPS

- Safety must be treated as a top-level filter, not a background concern.
- Physical safety is one part of the equation; psychological and financial security matter equally.
- Your commitment to team member safety must be replicated on behalf of customers.
- Placing safety above all other considerations has the power to drive extraordinary organizational alignment.

My Strength Plan

Make Safety the Highest Law

What specifically are you doing to drive the physical and psychological well-being of your team members and customers?

How would you grade your leadership on safety — physical, psychological, and financial? What would improve that grade?

With whom can you partner to drive greater safety across your business, industry, or community?

One action I will take in the next 30 days:

LESSON THREE

Practice Employee Obsession

Caring For and Caring About

"Take care of your employees and they will take care of the clients, which will translate into success for shareholders." — Hans Vestberg, CEO of Verizon

Practice Employee Obsession



Amazon is famous for its principle of customer obsession. During the pandemic, a different imperative emerged from the leaders Joseph Michelli interviewed: employee obsession. Not employee management. Not employee engagement. Obsession — the kind of compelling motivation that filters every decision through the question: does this serve our people?

Steve Cannon, CEO of AMB Sports + Entertainment (Atlanta Falcons, Atlanta United), used weekly video calls with 400 to 600 team members and small CEO lunch sessions where attendees were asked to share something personal — wedding photos, children on their laps, rescued dogs. These were not HR programs. They were acts of genuine human curiosity.

Hans Vestberg of Verizon provided 100% pay for the first 8 weeks and 60% for an additional 8 weeks of COVID-19 leave — for all 135,000 employees. He did not frame it as a strategy. He called it a responsibility.

Cheri Perry, President of Total Merchant Concepts, had a practice she called Love Letter Fridays — handwritten notes to clients each week. During the pandemic she turned that practice toward her team, writing personal letters home to employees.

Scott Kendrick at CallMiner sent care packages to remote workers: branded swag, hand sanitizer, a whiteboard, and a deck of cards. The response was overwhelming. One team member wrote: "I have never been more proud to work for a company."

The distinction the best leaders made was between *caring for* (meeting needs) and *caring about* (knowing the person). Both matter. But the second is rarer — and it is the second that builds the kind of loyalty no compensation package can manufacture.

- The pandemic elevated the employee experience as a leadership priority. That elevation should outlast the crisis.
- Employee obsession involves both "caring for" and "caring about" your team — meeting needs and knowing the person.
- Technologies like video conferencing can make leaders more accessible and reduce the gap between them and their teams.
- Low-tech acts of thoughtfulness — care packages, personal notes, a phone call — can create powerful connections.
- When leaders invest in people, team members create customer success, which fuels results for all stakeholders.

My Strength Plan

Practice Employee Obsession

Would the people you lead describe you as genuinely interested in them as human beings — not just as performers?

What is one low-tech, personal act of care you could extend to your team this week?

How would you map the employee journey in your organization, and where do the biggest gaps in "caring about" appear?

One action I will take in the next 30 days:

LESSON FOUR

The Humble and Authentic Prevail

Vulnerability Builds Trust

**"When you acknowledge an errant choice and swiftly remedy it, your vulnerability forges trust." —
Joseph Michelli**

The Humble and Authentic Prevail

The pandemic stripped away the conditions that allow leaders to perform confidence they do not feel. Remote work, physical distancing, and the pace of change made authenticity not just a virtue but a survival strategy. Leaders who tried to project certainty they did not have lost credibility. Leaders who admitted what they did not know gained trust.

Jeff Dailey, CEO of Farmers Insurance, publicly acknowledged a decision he regretted. His team had recommended returning money to customers through reduced premiums as driving declined during lockdown. He passed on the idea. Another insurer moved first. Farmers followed. His eNPS score — a measure of whether employees would recommend Farmers as a place to work — rose 27 points during the pandemic, from 40 to 67. Honesty and accountability, not perfection, built that score.

Lior Arusy, President of WordCreate Inc. and a former Mercedes-Benz consultant, made a deliberate choice about language at the onset of the pandemic. He refused to use the word "unprecedented" — because it implied defeat. Every challenge is unique, but leaders throughout history have navigated pandemics, wars, and economic collapse. The framing you choose shapes the response you get.

Douglas Conant, former CEO of Campbell Soup and founder of ConantLeadership, cited Brené Brown: "You can either walk inside of your story and own it, or you can walk outside of your story and hustle for your worthiness every day." The leaders who emerged strongest from the pandemic walked inside their stories — acknowledging fears, naming mistakes, and leading with the full weight of who they actually are.

Authenticity is not a style choice. It is a leadership foundation. And in adversity, it is the foundation that holds.

STRENGTH TIPS

- Leaders who admitted what they did not know gained more trust than those who projected false certainty.
- Vulnerability, when paired with accountability and swift action, builds rather than undermines authority.
- The language you choose shapes the culture you create. Choose words that enable rather than immobilize.
- Authenticity is not a style choice — it is a leadership foundation that holds under pressure.

My Strength Plan

The Humble and Authentic Prevail

When have you seen a leader's admission of error increase rather than decrease the trust of those around them?

What is one situation you are currently navigating where greater transparency would serve your team better than managed messaging?

Where in your organization does the language you use imply defeat rather than possibility?

One action I will take in the next 30 days:

LESSON FIVE

Crisis Uncovers the Character of Heroes

Legacy Is Built by Design, Not Default

"You will be remembered more for what you do in a crisis than what you do in calm." — Joseph Michelli

Crisis Uncovers the Character of Heroes

Joseph Michelli asked all 140+ book participants the same question: how do you want to be remembered, given your choices during this crisis? Their answers fell into three categories. They wanted to be known for leading with competence, purpose, or character. Most had a dominant theme, though many blended all three.

Bradley Feldman, Chairman, President, and CEO of Cubic Corporation, put it plainly: "This legacy isn't about me. I hope we can all look back on this time and know we responded with increased consideration and care for one another and our customers. Ideally, they would say we were obsessed about taking care of our customers and that we stepped up to this moment with compassion."

Joe Duran, CEO of Personal Financial Management at Goldman Sachs, used a word rarely heard in a boardroom: love. "I hope people will say love was the driving force for everything we did. Ideally, they would feel we loved our people and our clients. They would also sense that we loved waking up each morning to serve them."

Mahatma Gandhi put it this way: "Strength does not come from winning. Your struggles develop your strengths. When you go through hardships and decide not to surrender, that is strength."

The leaders who emerged strongest from the pandemic did not set out to build a legacy. They set out to do right by their people — and legacy followed. Edward Mady, former recipient of the *Hotels* Hotelier of the World award, captured it well: "Crisis is not only a test of leadership but a catalyst for personal and organizational growth. I would not wish a pandemic on anyone, but I view it as a time for community and leadership growth."

As Napoleon Hill observed: "Every adversity, every failure, every heartache carries with it the seed of an equal or greater benefit." The question is not whether you will face adversity. The question is whether you will use it.

May those seeds position you and your organization to be **Stronger Through Adversity**.

STRENGTH TIPS

- You will be remembered more for what you do in a crisis than what you do in calm.
- Effective leaders decide in advance how they want to be remembered — and act accordingly.
- Crisis can foster an appreciation for collaboration, service, and the importance of putting others first.
- Legacy is built by design or by default. Intentional leaders choose design.

My Strength Plan

Crisis Uncovers the Character of Heroes

How do you want to be remembered by the people you lead when the current challenges have passed?

Are your daily actions aligned with that desired legacy — or is there a gap?

What is one decision you could make this week that would reflect the leader you aspire to be?

One action I will take in the next 30 days:

Five Lessons at a Glance

1. Put Your Mask On First

Self-care is the foundation of sustained leadership effectiveness.

2. Make Safety the Highest Law

Physical, psychological, and financial security must be the top filter for every decision.

3. Practice Employee Obsession

Care for and care about your people — meeting needs and knowing the person.

4. The Humble and Authentic Prevail

Vulnerability paired with accountability builds deeper trust than projected certainty.

5. Crisis Uncovers the Character of Heroes

Legacy is built by design. Decide now how you want to be remembered.

Your Strength Plan: pick one lesson as your focus for the next 30 days. Translate it into one behavior you will start, one behavior you will stop, and one person you will tell.

Connect with Joseph Michelli

This eBook is drawn from *Stronger Through Adversity: World-Class Leaders Share Pandemic-Tested Lessons on Thriving During the Toughest Challenges*, published by McGraw-Hill. Available wherever books are sold.

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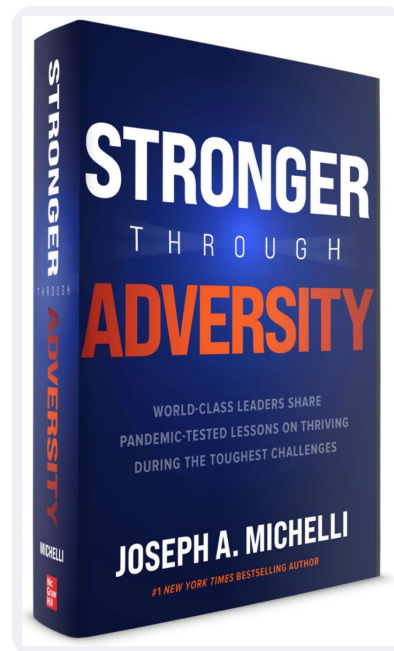
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Books by Joseph Michelli, Ph.D.

All books available on Amazon

- Stronger Through Adversity
- The Starbucks Experience
- Leading the Starbucks Way
- The New Gold Standard
- Driven to Delight
- The Airbnb Way
- The Zappos Experience
- Prescription for Excellence
- When Fish Fly
- All Business Is Personal
- Customer Magic
- The MindChamps Way



Ready to go deeper?

These insights are the starting point. Joseph's keynotes and training programs translate each principle into practical tools, facilitated conversations, and implementation roadmaps your team can act on immediately.

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