

**Our people are the most
important part of our business.**

REX BROOKING
Owner/Operator, Chick-fil-A

Taking care of your team

Rex Brooking, Owner/Operator of Chick-fil-A of Beavercreek and Chick-fil-A at Fairfield Commons Mall in Ohio, speaks with Kate Huckabay on leading in times of crisis and shares his views on how to support Team Members.

People in all industries are challenged right now to learn new ways of working, to revisit past assumptions of what it means to be “at work”, and to balance home and work to a level most have never even imagined. In this *C-Suite Leadership Series* we talk with leaders and ask them to share their perspectives on leading in times of crisis, especially in a distributed environment.

This transcript has been heavily edited for length and clarity while maintaining the spirit of the discussion.

Make crucial decisions, show confidence, let your team know they are important.

KATE HUCKABAY

Hello, my name is Kate Huckabay. I'm a consultant with Karrikins Group and I'm joined today by Rex Brooking. Rex is a Chick-fil-A Operator and Owner. He owns two franchises in Beavercreek, Ohio, and prior to becoming a Chick-fil-A Operator/Owner, he was a high school math teacher, head basketball coach, and high school principal.

We are so happy to have you join us today. I'd like to start off asking, Rex, how are you feeling, with everything happening during this time?

REX BROOKING

That's kind of the question of the moment. How's everybody feeling health-wise? Great. Family's great. My team has fortunately been healthy at both my stores. I think there's obviously an emotional toll that is bearing down on all of us, not just the financial toll that's taking place with all the shelter-in-place orders that are present in most of the country. But we're hanging in there as business owners and as business leaders we tend to roll with the punches. So, this is just another thing. It happens to be a bigger thing than what typically is something that we face, but we're managing.

How do you maintain or project a sense of optimism with your team when the broader environment is so volatile?

As business owners and leaders, we tend to roll with the punches.

I think maintaining some optimism with the team goes back to something that happened about a year ago. We were hit by a tornado that impacted one of my stores. My store took a direct hit from this F4 tornado, and even though as I said before we're always dealing with business challenges and the day-to-day, getting hit by a tornado is not something that happens very often and for most of us we will never experience. That was the first time for me, but it was a time I knew that, as the business owner, as a leader of the business, I had to make some key decisions very quickly.

I wanted to make sure our people knew that:

- 1. I was going to take care of them during the time that we were closed, and**
- 2. I was going to go through that period projecting the utmost confidence that we were going to come out on the other side just as strong or stronger than we were before the incident had taken place.**

We're not even a year removed from that and so stepping into the current situation with COVID-19 was another obviously big impactful situation that we've been forced to deal with in the business. And our people knew, those who were with us, which most of them were a year ago, they knew that was my goal, to take care of them then, and it's my goal to take care of them now.

I think being a business owner, being a business leader, you have to be a glass-half-full kind of person. That just kind of comes with the territory.

It sounds like your team has already been through a lot of adversity and has been able to pull together and have a lot of resilience, so your team is in a different position to be able to handle COVID-19.

Yeah, unfortunately that is the case and obviously not in the not so distant past. In some ways it helped to prepare us for what we're going through now, but our people have always had that mindset. They have a terrific amount of resilience and a desire to rise to whatever the next challenge is. We're fortunate in that respect.

What beliefs and philosophies are you leaning on personally to get through this time?

I would have to go back to some things that I learned from both my mom and my grandmother, my mom's mom. In terms of philosophy, my mom always refused to let me, as a child growing up, feel sorry for myself. As a matter of fact, she considered that being selfish. My grandmother would often

say, "If you've got something to do that you don't want to do or don't want to face, just do it, get through it, and move on."

So those have been two bedrock philosophies in my life – I don't spend time worrying about things that I can't control or feeling sorry for myself, and just do the best I can to plow ahead and deal with the things that come.

As far as beliefs, I'm an Operator with Chick-fil-A. I think most people know that Chick-fil-A is based in biblical principles and my life has been based in biblical principles. So as a Christian, that's where I draw my strength from, and I know that the Lord's in control and I'm not and I'm okay with that.

Our people have a terrific amount of resilience and a desire to rise to whatever the next challenge is.

Are there any specific practices that you're prioritizing at this time for yourself or with your team?

We work pretty hard at prioritizing our vision and values day-to-day. We base a lot of what we do together as a team, how we work, how we serve the community, how we serve one another based on that vision and those values. So those have continued to be front and center during this time.

We also have obviously prioritized, even more so than what's usual, in the area of hygiene. Obviously in food service, that's a big deal all of the time, but it has been something that we

have hyper-focused on over these last six weeks or so.

I'm assuming that your stores have remained open, from the drive-thru perspective, and then I know you have a store in a mall, so how are the social distancing requirements impacting your specific stores?

One of my stores is closed. The mall store has been closed now for four or five weeks, because the mall shut down. We could have continued to operate there within the state guidelines since we are deemed an essential business, but it just did not economically or financially make sense for us to keep that store open when the freestanding restaurant a mile away is open, has drive-through capabilities, mobile delivery, third party delivery, etc. We've certainly had some challenges with one of the stores being closed, but you know, as I said to begin with, the most important thing for me has been to care for people during this time.

Our vision is to be the best business in Beavercreek at caring for our team and our guests, so this is a readymade opportunity, as it were, for me to show that and prove that amongst our team. Our mall folks who are currently not working in the business are still getting paid.

Are you using a virtual environment with your team leads?

Yeah, we are using some Zoom calls. We're using BlueJeans. We have other ways that we communicate internally that we have continued to use even more so during this time, especially with those folks from the mall who are not in the store every day now. We have done some of that, but

probably not as much as what would be typical in an office environment. It's just simply because that's not how our business functions, but we certainly have had our fair share of digital communication over these last few weeks.

Do you feel like that's been a big hurdle for yourself or for your team?

I think most of our people are fine with social distancing. They have accepted that that's our current reality and they've adjusted accordingly. I said before one of the hallmarks of our team is that they have been able to adapt very quickly and pivot quickly and adjust accordingly to whatever it is that comes our way. And, this is just another piece.

I really appreciate you bringing up that piece around caring and that this is an opportunity to live that and not just talk about it. So, because your environment isn't a typical office environment and you aren't dealing with the distributed environment challenges in the same way that other businesses are, I'd like to pivot to your top three pieces of advice for other leaders today:

- 1. In times like these, our people are looking to us as business owners, the top leader in the organization, whatever your role may be, for not only care, but to be able to make crucial decisions. The reality is that all of the information that was coming in regarding this pandemic was disjointed. Some of it was misunderstood initially. There were more questions than answers, but we had to make some decisions early on that we then had to go back and determine that maybe those weren't the best**

decisions. So we changed course, but I think it's important to have the courage to be able to make decisions and accept that maybe they weren't the best decisions when you don't have days or weeks or months to determine what the best course of action is. Because that's typically how we make decisions. We make a lot of decisions in the moment, day in and day out, but big pivots in the business, we take time to deliberate and garner counsel and we didn't have that luxury with this pandemic. I would say the first thing would be to have courage to make tough decisions and it's okay if you have to go back and rethink those later.

2. It's important that our folks know that we are confident in where we're headed. I remember as a young administrator in a high school, the principal I worked for was getting very discouraged about something that was not in their control, and I won't get into the weeds on that situation, but it was the first time that I had seen that individual not exude confidence in where we were headed and what the next step was. And I can remember as a 28-year-old really being concerned about what the situation was and if it was going to get worse or if there was a chance that it could get better. I remembered that, as nearly a decade ago, I became a business owner and determined that I was not going to do that. Even if I had questions, I want to make sure that my people believe, not only in me, but believe in the directions where we're headed.
3. As I said to begin with, our people need to know that they're more important than the virus; they're more

important than our revenue; they're more important than our profitability; they're more important than anything else that's going on in the business because ultimately we don't have a business without them. If people feel like they're being used or if they're not the most important piece of your business, that does not give them confidence and it's not something that plays into our vision or values either.

Have courage to make tough decisions, exude confidence, take actions to show your people how important they are.

Excellent. So, the courage to make hard decisions as well as to be able to adapt when needed to make a new decision, to exude confidence, whether or not internally you have questions, but to your people to be able to exude that confidence, and then to make your people feel important, to take actions that make them know that. I really appreciate you saying at the end of the day, your business doesn't exist without the people. Thank you so much.



REX BROOKING

Owner/Operator
Chick-fil-A

Rex is the Owner/Operator of two Chick-fil-A franchises in Beavercreek, Ohio. Prior to being a franchisee with Chick-fil-A, his career was in education as a high school math teacher, head boys basketball coach, and a high school principal. He and his wife have been business partners for many years. They have two children and were high school sweethearts. Being in business with Chick-fil-A has been the highlight of his vocational life and there is no brand with which he'd rather be associated.



KATE HUCKABAY, M.A.

Consultant
Karrikins Group

Kate engages with executive teams across many industries to take ownership, create clarity, and drive alignment to a defined way of leading. As a consultant with Karrikins Group, she delivers client projects including facilitation, design, and workshop execution both in-person and virtually. Kate loves working on and with teams, is ever curious about the human experience, and is dedicated to collective and individual growth.

We are Karrikins. We're strategists, world-class facilitators, consultants, coaches, cultural changemakers, behavioral scientists, and experience creators, but above all, we're people looking to make a lasting and positive impact. We help organizations outperform the limitations of strategy, structure, capital allocation, and market conditions.

**KARRIKINS
GROUP**