

Optimism is the most important part of leadership.

SETH GORDON
Owner and CEO, Comm-Fit

Keeping your business fit for the future

CEO of Comm-Fit Seth Gordon speaks to Dr. Julie Williamson on engaging people in our new distributed work environment and shares his views on how leaders can stay aligned, forward focused, and engaged.

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.

Communication, future-focus, and living your values: Sustaining progress during disruption

JULIE WILLIAMSON, Ph.D.

Welcome, everybody. I'm Julie Williamson, the Chief Growth Enabler at Karrikins Group and today we're excited to be joined by Seth Gordon as a part of our *C-Suite Leadership Series*. Seth is an entrepreneur, an author, and the CEO of Comm-Fit, a small business that works primarily with corporate clients to create fitness centers in apartment complexes, office buildings, and other campus environments.

Seth, we're glad you were able to join us and have some conversation about how, from a leadership perspective, you and your company are navigating this incredibly disruptive time. I would love to start with an open question to you – How are you doing and what's top of mind for you right now as we push through this time in the economy and in our lives?

SETH GORDON

Well thank you for having me and this time of our lives is quite interesting as we are all adapting to the new normal. We are doing quite well despite all the challenges of getting our workforce working remotely and a lot of our customers being unable to take product.

We are focused on the long term plan and where we can impact our business in a positive manner and certainly looking forward to getting back to work and back into the office and being able to see our customers again and service them the

Staying focused includes having fun, communicating, and doing the right thing.

way that we always have.

I think one of the great challenges for leaders of businesses is how, as the CEO, do you find a way to project that sense of optimism and confidence when the environment is volatile. Are there any practices that you're leaning on that are helping you?

Projecting optimism in a down cycle like this is probably the most important part of leadership. I have been fortunate; I have been professionally coached in leadership for many years and being able to leverage that tool set helps us stay connected and focused on where we're going.

We lead through "Guiding Principles" and those are how we make all decisions to move forward with any initiative. The guiding principles are relatively simple:

- 1. We have to have fun. Even though we're not all together, we are working on ways of staying connected and having fun together. Just to keep us connected and share who we are and remember that we're all individuals.**

2. Open and honest communication. We find that this is a behavior that we've always employed and so it's easy to continue but it has to be enforced and we have to make sure we're always sharing information as it comes available, whether it's coming from the government as to what they want from us going forward, or from our customers or even internally.

3. Always doing the right thing. Right now the right thing for our country is to stay remote. We are tempted to get back to work, our customers want us to do the work because their facilities are closed and so as far as they're concerned, we should be putting in product, and of course we want to drive revenue. At the same time there's a mandate that says stay home and be safe and so we're trying to balance those out and to do the right thing by our company, by the community, and by our customers.

I love that, Seth, that reminder we are part of something that's bigger than any one of us. For yourself, is there anything that you're doing personally that's helping you to stay in that more focused mindset and to be effective, given the strange times?

With the strange times routine is certainly the most important aspect to my day. We are all dealing with different challenges at home. Those challenges might be educating our young children, it might be elderly that we are caring for, it might just be cabin fever. We have to be cognizant of that as leaders.

Right from the start we recognized that some of us were going to be impacted differently and our schedules may shift. I have two small children, a three year old and a five year old who we

are now homeschooling. My wife and I are doing shifts. I get a few hours of work in, then go teach the kids, then get back and work late into the evening. In the end, the hours are the hours. We have the same number of hours we always had just maybe the allocation of them is a little bit different. Everybody has the ability to manage their schedule as long as they get their job done.

We all have a responsibility to the organization to make sure that we're healthy and vibrant when we come out of this. There is work to be done but we're not micromanaging the time that it is getting done and we're communicating with each other when we are available and when we're not. The first few weeks it was certainly a challenge for me and the rest of the team.

We have a responsibility to make sure we are healthy and vibrant coming out of this.

It's amazing how our perceptions of time have changed. We can't tell the difference between Wednesday and Sunday anymore! I feel like there is a shift happening where the 9:00 to 5:00 work default is being significantly challenged and people are saying, "Wait a minute...I kind of am getting this figured out."

It seems like there are some things that will change for businesses almost permanently post-COVID-19. There will be some reassessment of what it really means to be "at work." Do

you see areas of opportunity in that for you and your business?

What it means to be at work will forever be changed, I believe. We have always been a kind of butts in seats type of company and I've been a leader who has always managed with my people being close by and being able to message very clearly to them.

What I have learned through this experience is that it isn't as necessary. As an executive team, we spent a pretty good amount of time over the last week or so talking about how do we open back up and who comes back in and where are they going to sit. There is a likelihood it's going to be very few people back in this office. I certainly don't believe that there will be a time in the future when everyone will be back in the office. I think a remote work style is going to be the going forward plan. I think that people are going to get better at it.

That's part of our ask of our employees. Who likes to work from home? Who doesn't? Who is effective and who isn't? How do we make sure that we maintain accountability over each of those roles and ensure that the work is getting done? But yeah, I think there's going to be a significant change to how we look at the work-from-home concept.

We're definitely seeing that as a trend, people reassessing the whole dynamic and what it means to trust people, to have visibility, to know that people are aligned to the strategy.

When you think about your own strategy, are there specific things you're doing with your team to really make sure that they are maintaining that alignment to strategy?

Maintaining strategy is an ever-evolving process in leadership, especially when you're in an environment where everyone is remote. To align strategy you have to know where you're going. There's a saying my late coach drilled into me for years – if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. I remind myself of that every day.

We have strategic plans in place for the organization and for each individual at the executive level that are funneled down to the employee level. We make sure that everybody knows their three to five areas of focus. If you start doing things outside of those areas of focus, communicate. Let's understand, should this be one of the areas of focus and something else come off? Or should that not be something that's addressed right now?

Then we utilize a weekly communication tool to see how everybody is progressing against those activities. We can give immediate feedback to them and realign what they're working on.

Great ideas on staying in strategic alignment through clear priorities and communication. Let's talk about this whole distributed environment. You are in a really hands-on business. There are a lot of things that do require presence but I'm also willing to bet that you've found that there are some things that don't require the level of presence that you've assumed in the past. I'm just curious from your perspective, are there any assumptions people have about what it means to work remotely and how you've worked through those?

Yeah, working remotely for some of our team members has

been more of an impact than for others. Our employees who are in the office doing sales support or purchasing or accounting functions have not been as impacted. For the sales organization or the service or installation teams, this is a complete change to the way they do things. Sales people are accustomed to being out, going around measuring facilities, meeting with key customers – those activities have all halted. The way they're selling has become a little different. That has been a shift for the sales team. On the service and installation front, those businesses have been modified or reduced or almost eliminated in some areas.

We have not been doing any service; most of our customers are shut down. We are about to start getting back into those facilities to get their equipment ready to go for when they can open up. Now it's all about what happens going forward when it's time to get back into our customer's facilities. We are ensuring we have the proper PPE: the masks, the eye cover, the gloves, and that we make our customers feel comfortable with us being there. Our presence and our ability to support them, that we're not going to sacrifice on quality or speed of install or the quality of the products. Those are balancing acts that we're talking about now. We have been testing it through our customers and understanding what their needs are and ensuring that we're delivering on those needs.

We're requesting feedback from our customers, as well, asking them to tell us about suppliers or customers that are really going above and beyond and doing a great job. We want to mirror that. We want to exhibit the same behaviors as the best partners and suppliers our customers are working with.

I think that's such a great success practice to share, Seth. That you can ask your customers what they see, what's working, what's not working from others so that you can continue to build on that success. I wonder, do you think that the design even of the centers will start to change? So instead of maximizing for the amount of equipment you're also thinking about how do we create the ways for people to move around the space that looks different post-COVID?

The fitness facility as we know it is going to change forever.

The fitness facility as we know it is going to change forever. It has gotten a lot of publicity; it was one of the first things that were closed down and it makes a lot of sense. We spend a great deal of time right now focusing on how we support our customers in being able to ensure that their facilities are safe.

Out of any crazy down cycle event like what we're experiencing today, there's always opportunity that comes from it. In our business we have always been very cognizant of the need for disinfectant wipes and hand sanitizer and things like that in facilities but now it's going to be even more so. We are adding to our product offerings to ensure that our facilities are safe, and they're disinfected on a regular basis. We've added some new products and services we're really excited about and that our customers are very excited about.

We are talking about stretching out the spacing between

equipment, thinking about guards that can go up around equipment to prevent any kind of spread across the facility. The challenge really comes down to our customer and how much space they have. Again, talking to the customers, utilizing our experience and knowledge on both the disinfecting side as well as on the equipment side and reconfiguring these spaces so that it works for them and for the patrons of those facilities is really important.

It's a lot to think about, and it sounds like you are staying ahead of it! Speaking of balance, you mentioned that you have two kids and I know for colleagues who have smaller children, that's actually been one of the big hurdles, just figuring out how you shape work around their needs and their schedules because they need attention. You can't just park them in front of a screen and say goodbye for eight hours.

Managing the kids has been the biggest challenge, no question. Trying to explain to a kindergartner why they need to be doing their reading exercises and why they can't go outside and play has definitely been a challenge for me and my wife and I know some of my colleagues. It is as important to us as it is anything else that they get a good education and we are concerned about what it means to not be in school for any period of time and how will that affect them going forward.

Our education system in our local area has been incredible. The work that they've put forward, the programs, the scheduling, the syllabus, everything about it has been very simple for us to manage. Albeit time consuming. I am

extremely surprised and impressed by the way our school district was able to put together a program for us to be able to teach our kids and there is something gratifying as a parent to be part of the education of your children. We do that anyways, just not in the same capacity and to see your kids developing and flourishing under your guidance is pretty awesome.

There's something really lovely in that connection and at the same time, like you say, the capacity that you're being asked to do it in is pretty extraordinary. Teachers are going above and beyond to try to continue to be in service in whatever way they can, both to the parents and to the children. It's really remarkable.

We appreciate our teachers more than ever. I think anybody who didn't appreciate teachers, now that they've had an opportunity to try to teach one or two children, you can imagine trying to scale that out in a class. We do not do enough for our teachers that's for sure.

Yeah, if there's one thing that has come out of all of this I hope it's a greater appreciation for teachers. It is remarkable what they do every day.

Seth, as we wrap this up, this has been great. You've shared with us some really important ways that you're staying in touch with your team, some ways that you're thinking through the opportunities that this particular situation presents for your business and some things that you're looking forward to getting back to as we start to open up the economy. Thank you for that. As we close out, any suggestions that you have for business owners or leaders who are trying to adapt to the

realities of going forward?

As far as advice that I would offer to any leader in this scenario, big or small, we all are dealing with the same issues. We're dealing with the remote environment, with an uncertainty as to what the future has in store for our business, and most importantly we're dealing with people and leadership is all about people.

- 1. I try to remind myself and other leaders specifically to communicate regularly, openly, honestly and on a consistent basis. My most important thing is making sure my team understands what they can expect out of the organization, out of me, and out of each other, as well as what is expected out of them. I think once you have that alignment it becomes much easier to manage.**
- 2. We're focusing not only on now, but also the future. When this passes, my expectation is that we're going to have quite a bit of pent-up demand. We might be in a scenario where we're back with more work than we know how to handle. We need to make sure we're not flat-footed. We're constantly thinking about what that looks like. What systems and processes do we need to improve now to ensure we are as effective as possible and that we're able to adapt quickly when we're fully back? The last thing you want is to have pent-up business and not be able to support it.**
- 3. Finally, live your core values every day as a leader and enforce it through the rest of your team. That will simplify your decision making process, make it easier to**

communicate amongst your team and your customers, and simplify your life in a great way.

**Communicate
Be ready
Live your values**

Thanks, Seth. I think everybody can take something away from those tips because I think we all just need to remember that we're all in this together. Communication is so important, knowing what your core values are and living them even in a different kind of modality is critical. Thank you for sharing some of your time with us today; we really appreciate it.



SETH GORDON

Owner and CEO
Comm-Fit

Seth is a proven leader in sales and marketing organizations focused in health and wellness, sports, and entertainment. Currently, Seth is the Owner and CEO of Comm-Fit Holdings LLC, Sethica Ventures, and FLO Wellness. Comm-Fit is a premier provider of fitness equipment products, service, flooring, and disinfection services for multi-family housing, corporate, and municipalities that Seth acquired in 2019. FLO Wellness is a premier provider of sanitizer, disinfectant wipes and dispensers. Sethica Ventures is an investment firm that focuses on acquisitions in the lower middle market.

Seth is an investor with a proven track record of acquiring, growing, and selling businesses, and an entrepreneur who has a keen eye for opportunity and product development.



JULIE WILLIAMSON, Ph.D.

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Julie is a growth-minded leader who believes executives set the standard for others through the example they provide. She is a strategist, technologist, and a social scientist who puts her energy toward working with leaders around the world as they tackle some of the biggest challenges in their industries and organizations. In today's increasingly complex and interconnected world, Julie knows the power of aligned leaders to deliver on strategy and create value. That's why she focuses her time and energy on helping senior leaders come together to deliver the work that matters most.

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.

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