

BONUS CHAPTER:

The Power of Pivoting:
Making a
Difference in a
Time of Crisis

Jane Mosbacher Morris
Founder and CEO of TO THE MARKET
with Wendy Paris

BUY THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE

FOREWORD

When I first released *Buy the Change You Want to See: Use Your Purchasing Power to Make the World a Better Place* (Penguin Random House, January 2019), I wanted to provide a path for consumers to make a positive impact through their everyday purchases. As founder and CEO of TO THE MARKET, a turnkey solution for ethical manufacturing, I was eager to share what I'd learned about harnessing my purchasing power for good. But what happens when the world and economy shifts beneath our feet? When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, TO THE MARKET had questions familiar to many of you: How can our business pull through this? How can we do good in this uncertain time?

In a year of economic precarity, physical isolation, and a social justice reckoning, when something as simple as hugging a loved one could be a health risk, we had to adapt on our feet. When we made a lightning-quick pivot from apparel and home goods to producing PPE for healthcare workers, we got a crash course in taking positive action during a crisis. My hope is that this bonus chapter will serve as a road map for conscious consumerism in uncertainty - because when tough times hit, we can still make a difference.

In February of 2020, our executive team met at our new office in New York city. We had just leased space on the third floor of a historic, stone building in Manhattan overlooking Sixth Avenue and the buzz of the sidewalks below. We had our samples there, and could touch and talk about the products we were selling. We could walk out the doors and be in Central Park in minutes. Teammates would go across the street and sit on one of the wooden benches just inside the park to take calls. It was great for the team to be able to physically work together in the same place, and it gave the team a boost of confidence to have a location to meet clients and host suppliers visiting New York. Having a permanent office presence was a huge step for us. We'd also raised money from new investors, and hired two new sales people, giving us more bandwidth to pursue additional accounts and take on bigger orders. We were still running pretty lean, but growing quickly. It was an exciting time. The year 2020 looked like it would be our best yet.

When I got back home from New York, I immediately set up meetings with a few big retailers and new clients for my next trip to the City, which would be the second week in March. But when I returned to New York, all my face-to-face meetings were switched to video calls. In light of the Coronavirus that was spreading in Seattle, companies in New York had instituted a “no-outside-visitors” policy. I was surprised and disappointed—and a little confused. The virus didn't seem to be present in New York at that time. I was still taking taxis everywhere and hugging people. I was also concerned; in addition to the health risk the virus posed, what would be the business ramifications if commerce shut down? I had no sense that it would spread globally, or that this restricted access would last longer than a couple of weeks.

But even a week of closed doors, lost income, and lost wages could really hit many companies and their workers hard.

Upon my return, I started reading about the spread of the virus and the threat of a pandemic. Seattle hospitals were concerned about a possible shortage of beds and personal protective equipment (PPE)—items like masks and gowns that doctors, nurses, and other staff wear to shield themselves from patients with potentially contagious diseases. If the virus kept spreading, hospitals could run out of PPE for patients, too, as well as for critical staff members that service hospitals, like administrators, janitorial workers, and line cooks.

As I quickly learned, hospitals nationwide had insufficient PPE reserves for a pandemic. The government did not have adequate stockpiles of these emergency supplies either. Other types of businesses also could run out of protective gear, such as those with employees who work in close proximity to hundreds of others—restaurant workers, meat processing plant operators, nursing home caregivers, prison guards, prisoners, farmers, pickers and growers, to name a few. If the international supply chain shut down, neither hospitals nor businesses would be able to buy protective gear from China, where much of it was made. The virus had already walloped China, and that country had shut down factories and limited exports. Because U.S. businesses had outsourced nearly all of the production of PPE to overseas factories, everyone in the U.S. was vulnerable to the production abilities of other countries.

Poring over the news, I realized something about my own business, too: TO THE MARKET would likely not have the year we'd anticipated. If the virus continued to spread, meetings and conventions would probably be cancelled. If retailers closed, their sales would also stop. Our customers—people passionate about conscious consumerism who strive to make purchasing choices aligned with their values—would have other things on their minds.

Sitting at home with my husband Nate, I felt fortunate to be healthy, to have economic security, and to be able to work remotely. But I was worried about the financial, physical, and mental health of everyone involved in the business. How would TO THE MARKET, our team members, and the makers in our supply chain manage?

I called Cindy, our chief marketing officer and a constant confidant, to discuss our options. We'd probably have to shut down our new New York office, sadly. But what else could we do to cut costs and keep our doors open? And what about our artisan partners? Ongoing shutdowns in the U.S. could severely limit the demand for many of the retail orders that were providing our makers with consistent economic opportunity. That drop-off in income could make paying for basics like food and school even tougher. But was there some way we could help? How might we use our expertise to add value in this moment and provide work for our makers around the world? Could we engage them somehow in creating products that were desperately needed right now?

Pivoting in a Pandemic

Crisis do not make us powerless to do good, as I soon realized. It took just that one call with Cindy for me to see a role for TO THE MARKET. We are a sourcing, manufacturing, and sales company working with cut-and-sew suppliers all around the world. Cut-and-sew is a very versatile core competency. If you have a pattern and know the stitches, you can make a blanket or a bag, an ornament or a face mask. Our makers weren't currently creating PPE, but that didn't mean they couldn't. Why not see if they could switch gears and sew these needed supplies?

Together, we devised a plan. We'd send out a request to our makers, asking who was capable of and interested in using their skills to make masks, gowns, and other PPE. If anyone was willing to give it a try, we'd reach out to hospitals to see if we could make the sale. We sent out a query to about 100 cut-and-sew groups—cooperatives and factories in Ghana, Kenya, Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Hong Kong, Guatemala, Haiti, and Malaysia. Some of these were small, women-run artisan groups, like one in Kenya with a handful of employees. Others were The Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) Certified Organic factories with thousands of employees, such as those in India and Bangladesh.

It was becoming clear that the virus and factory closures could roll through country after country; contracting with makers in various locales would give us a steady stream of supplies and let us spread opportunity around if we got orders.

That one query to our makers generated an outpouring of interest, pricing options, and concern—about us. Coronavirus hadn't yet spread widely to the developing world, and our suppliers were worried about our safety. "Are you okay?"

“It looks really bad there,” a factory owner messaged me on WhatsApp. At TO THE MARKET, we think of ourselves as working in partnership with these makers, all of us linked in an interconnected chain. Still, it’s generally the makers who grapple with real hardship—not us. They struggle with daily challenges that most of us in the U.S. never face. The amount of care and concern our suppliers expressed about our safety and wellbeing was heartening. It also highlighted how bleak the COVID situation in our country was.

We sent specifications for masks and gowns to the interested groups. Within about forty-eight hours, suppliers from Guatemala to Ghana sent us photos of their makers on their facility floors wearing masks and gowns they’d just designed and produced. It was so encouraging to see how quickly they could produce new products and how eager they were to help. As the businesswoman in me noted, the right incentives can help make it possible for groups to pivot quickly. In this case, the chance to help in a life-threatening crisis and to participate in a significant work-generating opportunity motivated rapid action in our supply chain. When incentives are aligned—and powerful, like saving lives—business can adapt at lightning speed.

The immediate response from our suppliers also felt like a testament to their trust in our company. They believed it was worthwhile to invest their time and creativity in these new products because they understood what their contribution would mean and were confident TO THE MARKET could sell their PPE. In the midst of this tremendously uncertain time, it was so validating to me to see that we were genuinely good partners for these makers around the world.

Hatching this idea and seeing how quickly our partners responded to it also felt like a lesson in resilience. No matter what our current role, there may well be a way to pivot. We just have to consider the stakeholders affected and propose a change that inspires them. Your stakeholders might be your supply chain, as in our case, or your customers, your company, and/or your family.

We came up with a specification sheet based on the cost of our fabric and labor, plus our mark-up. The cost of goods was higher than during normal times because of China’s manufacturing shutdown, which caused a shortage of raw material. Also, masks and gowns for COVID-19 required specific water-repellant or water-resistant fabric that wasn’t easy to source. We decided to cut our general mark-up significantly to make our products affordable for hospitals. Then Cindy and I began reaching out to anyone we knew personally who worked in the hospital system. Our sales team registered our company on state websites that list suppliers of PPE and sent emails to hospital procurement officers whose email addresses they could find.

Ethical Business in a Time of Peril: Beyond the Law of Supply and Demand

If you sell a critical product in a time of crisis, you may ask yourself, “Should I raise my prices to what the market will bear?” Or alternately, “Should I lower my prices to help those in need?” Or even, “Should I donate my services?”

Figuring out what to charge in the midst of chaos and upheaval is definitely confusing. But one thing is clear: there is a big difference between the straightforward economic principle of supply and demand in ordinary times, and the call for a lifesaving product in a crisis.

If a critical need and an urgent deadline put you as a supplier in a serious position of power, another calculation must be made when setting prices—an ethical one. This is not a pricing formula from business school but rather the need to act with integrity.

Here’s are some ideas to consider:

- 1. Assess your stage of business.** Be realistic about what you can do. If you’re a young and relatively fragile business with few employees, little capital and scant stock, you probably have limited flexibility in terms of lowering prices. A more mature financial position and economies of scale due to size may allow for more discretionary spending and/or more flexibility with your profit margin.
- 2. Factor in the real cost of goods.** During the pandemic, raw materials and shipping skyrocketed, raising our cost of goods so much that charging pre-pandemic PPE prices would have entailed a loss. But this did not mean price-gouging was our only option. Meet costs first, then establish a price that will generate profit for stakeholders while still providing value to those in need.
- 3. Consider your stakeholders’ needs and priorities.** Whether you want to trim your margins or raise them, speak to your stakeholders about your ideas, and get their buy-in.

Stakeholder feedback about brand position and moral good is particularly important if you’re considering raising prices in a crisis. If you have stakeholders beyond yourself, you can’t make a unilateral decision about giving away resources such as time, talent, capital, or goods. Investors, board members, and employee shareholders have a right to weigh in. All will be affected by what you do.

- 4. Vet your plan with those whose moral compass you admire.** When the usual way of doing

business gets seriously disrupted by factors beyond your control, it's super valuable to reach out to people whose moral compass you admire. This is one way that tapping into your network allows you to provide opportunity for others to give—in this case, to give advice.

5. Recommit to your core values. Times of crisis can bring out the best in people, and the worst. It's important to take stock of what you're doing and what you care about, even in the midst of chaos. You may not know how things will end, but you do know that you'll want to look back at your actions and feel good about them.

Necessity is the Mother of Invention

During the pandemic, I used my usual method of reaching out to friends and friends-of-friends—and asked everyone in the company if they knew anyone involved with the healthcare industry. I called those contacts to ask about their PPE needs.

Cindy was doing the same. She connected with a neighbor who worked at a large Texas-based healthcare system with dozens of hospitals and clinics and thousands of employees. Cindy's neighbor, a nursing executive in the group's Dallas Ft. Worth region, was leading her staff through this critical time. Her position meant that just as we were starting up our PPE operation, she was trying to find a reliable vendor of PPE.

COVID-19 patients began turning up at the health system's hospitals in mid-March. The staff had many decades of combined healthcare expertise, but COVID-19 was new to every healthcare provider in the world. As such, the team was picking up new protocols, learning new test procedures, and fine-tuning care for COVID-19 patients as they went. On a national and state level, there wasn't yet a clear set of procedures for interacting with a COVID-19 patient's family or contacting the health department about new cases. Throughout March and April, many team members were attending daily two-hour staff meetings, meticulously reviewing ever-evolving CDC guidelines, establishing new practices, and educating team members to keep them up to speed with each shift.

In the beginning, everyone was focused on survival. All hands were on deck and it was critical that the staff were kept safe and that they had the most up to date information on how to care for patients. Many front line ICU nurses were worried about their own chances of contracting COVID and what that might mean for them.

A looming PPE shortage became apparent very quickly. But Cindy's friend found it was hard to find a reliable, honest vendor of PPE - a company not engaged in price-gouging that could deliver what it promised. Cindy connected her to TO THE MARKET, and our information was sent on to the person in charge of procuring supplies. The health care system placed our first PPE order.

Meanwhile, I'd reached an old classmate who was working at a large hospital in Houston. Those two connections led to orders totalling 500,000 masks and 250,000 gowns. We had two buyers interested and suppliers ready to start producing, one in Bangladesh and one in Hong Kong. We were ready to go to work. And then we hit a serious snag.

The makers had to pay so much for raw materials that they asked us to front the cost of the entire order. We didn't have enough cash on hand to spend on orders of that size all at once. I still had to make payroll and meet other company expenses. We were trying to pivot—and had identified a clear need, lined up producers, and found customers—but we lacked the cash to complete the deal. We couldn't scramble to get a bank loan because banks generally don't do purchase-order financing.

I'd been talking to various investors about our desire to make PPE. One of them, a woman named Mary Susan who is a new investor in the company, was particularly excited about the fact that we could be helpful at this moment. She thought it was our duty to get these masks and gowns to U.S. hospitals, given that we had the capabilities. I decided to share our cash-flow problem with her. I hoped she'd have advice about negotiating with the hospital or some other idea that could help. Instead, she immediately offered to personally loan us the money to fulfill the order. I was surprised by and deeply grateful for this offer. It was hugely generous, and unprecedented for a company at our stage. But accepting her offer would allow us to proceed. I created a formal loan document for her, and we placed the order.

TO THE MARKET was adapting to this crisis, and quickly. When I stopped to look at what made this shift possible, what stood out to me was the willingness of so many women to step up to the need so fast. Cindy helped me see the opportunity for TO THE MARKET to provide PPE, and she connected us to her neighbor. Her neighbor saw the need to bulk up on masks and connected us to her procurement team. Mary Susan recognized the impact that TO THE MARKET could have on fighting COVID-19, and came forward with cash.

Each of these women had the intuition, or foresight, or clarity to identify a vulnerability. Each took initiative to leverage their network to help address it. I've seen this all over the world: women noticing a real need, making the connections, and taking big risks that require change—especially in the service of others. Men do this too, of course, but women are often the unsung heroes in crisis, whether at home or on a global scale. This key moment in the crisis brought this truth home to me once again.

After we finalized that first order, and then the second for the hospital in Houston, I realized I could try to raise more money through similarly structured loans to allow us to deliver more orders without the same cash-flow issue arising again. I created a proposal and presented it to our other investors. They, too, seemed excited to be part of a project to help fight the pandemic. Most of them wound up participating. I think many felt powerless in the face of a crisis of this magnitude and were grateful for a way to help. We also made it a good business deal by setting up an interest rate higher than typical market returns.

It can feel awkward or embarrassing to admit a lack and ask for help, I know. But for us, making this request to our investors was necessary, and it wound up expanding the TO THE MARKET family. A few investors connected us to other people in their circle. This led to involvement and loans from people who hadn't been part of TO THE MARKET before, including some prominent business families such as the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation in Texas. These were great connections for a young business. I wound up raising just under \$2 million on promissory notes within sixty days.

The enthusiasm of our investors reminded me of when I first started the company, and people eagerly pitched in to make connections or help in other ways. In both cases, people were motivated by addressing a real need.

We placed that first order for 500,000 masks at the end of March. Then we started getting orders from hospitals all around the country, from Massachusetts to New Mexico. As word got out, more friends and friends-of-friends made connections for us. In the midst of this truly terrible time, it was gratifying to be doing something that could really make a difference in people's lives.

It was also anxiety-inducing. We'd never been involved in a product connected to a life-or-death need. What if something didn't work? The stakes were so high, and the global situation kept shifting. Our team felt a huge amount of pressure that was totally different from selling bags or swag. We were seeing these images of healthcare workers in Seattle and New York suffering. Before, if we failed to deliver a product to a client on the schedule we'd promised, it would not reflect well for our company and could interfere with that client's ability to hit revenue goals. But this was different. If we fumbled, we'd fail to deliver a product that could save a person's life.

We had far more expertise in dealing with challenging sourcing situations and selling to businesses than the average person or the typical company does. Still, there was so much that could go wrong, and many unknowns. Would borders be shut to imports? Would U.S. Customs seize goods? I had confidence in our suppliers, but what if they got sick? Or what if their country shut down exports after we'd laid out so much cash?

As we began processing more orders, we were repeatedly frustrated with how long things were taking to clear customs. And we were getting squeezed by shipping costs.

Fewer flights meant airspace was going for a premium. For one order of 130,000 isolation gowns, we got a shipping quote of \$500,000, five times the normal cost. Some hospitals were chartering private planes to pick up overseas supplies, and some donors were using their private planes. We were dependent on commercial shippers. Who knew what would happen next? Would goods stop coming in altogether? Meanwhile, the number of cases was rising.

I was so frustrated by these shipping issues in the face of the hospitals' needs. Why did we have to source from halfway around the world, anyway? Why couldn't we manufacture PPE right here in the United States? Our company wasn't focused on domestic manufacturing. We'd recently begun working with two small facilities in the U.S.—a veterans' leather maker in Kentucky and a screen-printer employing adults with autism in New Jersey—but we hadn't engaged with a traditional cut-and-sew factory that could produce the quantity of PPE we sought. Still, couldn't we? But we'd have to choose carefully. Workers are still exploited in certain factory situations here. I knew if we found a unionized cut-and-sew factory, we could be confident that the workers were treated in a way that aligned with our values. I decided to try.

Made in the USA

I reached out to a person I'd met while serving on the advisory board of responsible sourcing for the VF Corporation, who knew a great deal about unions. He connected me to a unionized cut-and-sew factory called Union Wear, based in Newark, New Jersey. This was exactly what I was looking for. Union Wear is a privately-owned company employing nearly two hundred unionized workers. The owner, Mitch Cahn, had a great idea for reusable PPE, but he was hitting obstacles when it came to selling them.

We'd been making the typical single-use, disposable isolation gowns overseas, but Mitch was exploring ways to produce reusable gowns with a special, coated material made in Alabama. The material was flexible enough for a gown and could be washed in extremely high heat dozens of times, remaining water-repellant or water-resistant. This was an innovative, important concept. The typical single-use, paper-like gowns get worn once, then get tossed in the trash. TO THE MARKET has always been focused on sustainability, and even though this was a crisis and our main goal was producing protective gear, I was concerned about the waste created from all this disposable medical wear. Mitch had found a way to pitch in during the pandemic without contributing to the global waste problem. I was so excited about this.

Producing gowns is one thing, but selling them to hospitals is another. Mitch's company was fielding inquiries from hospitals desperate for gowns, but the hospital paperwork and their inability to finance the production made it too difficult for Union Wear to close the sale. "It was a completely different industry, and a very chaotic time, and we couldn't get any traction," Mitch says.

I wasn't daunted by the prospect of trying to sell to hospitals. Mitch connected us directly to the fabric maker, Cotswald Industries. Because of the cash infusion we'd gotten from investors, we were able to purchase the fabric outright and supply it to Union Wear, eliminating the factory's mark-up and helping keep the final cost down for hospitals. Union Wear's operators took it from there. The final gowns cost hospitals \$18.50 each. This is \$0.37 per use, factoring in an average of fifty uses per gown. Hospitals were paying about \$5 to \$10 dollars for each disposable gown at the time, so this entailed huge savings for them over the course of wear. Still, not every purchaser could see that benefit right away. Some people reacted with skepticism, saying, "Whoa! \$18.50? I can get a gown for \$7." I'd explain that the gown could be washed and re-worn, representing huge savings, and it was a product made in the U.S. that didn't need to be imported.

I was pleased to be offering a practical and sustainable product. It's like a surgeon's gown, which has a lot more coverage than the paper, tie-on gown worn for a standard check-up. This relationship with Union Wear, and my frustration with the shipping impediments that led me to it, meant that TO THE MARKET became the very first company to offer reusable gowns to U.S. hospitals for the pandemic.

We got our first order from Vizient, a healthcare consultant. The State of Maryland had hired Vizient to help procure PPE. David Gibson, a Vizient buyer, immediately grasped the value of what we were offering—both in terms of cost and speed. He needed to find PPE fast. Maryland's two largest medical systems had set up a 252-bed clinic in the Baltimore Convention Center. People needed care immediately, but the state lacked a source for PPE. "We had everything ready to go, but PPE. Without PPE, we couldn't open the doors," says Gibson.

Hospitals around the country were facing a similar crisis, partly because of the lean-supply-chain philosophy that so many industries have embraced. In recent decades, companies of all types have adopted just-in-time delivery of goods. This means they hold very few reserves, which postpones expenditures and saves money and storage space. In the pandemic, it meant that hospitals didn't have stockpiles of PPE on hand. Also, the need had skyrocketed. Generally, doctors, nurses, and staff in the ICU use PPE. Now, everyone was wearing it, and changing it frequently.

Gibson ordered 19,500 gowns in April for the Baltimore Convention Center hospital. As he explains it, the reusable gowns were a game-changer. With paper gowns, you never know exactly how many you have or even how they work. With reusable ones, you have far more control. "You know what you have in terms of quantity. You can set up a laundry cycle and be self-supportive. This reduced the logistics burden significantly," Gibson says.

Reusable gowns made more sense for staff, too. "In the past, every order of disposable gowns was different. Each required new training.

Sometimes they were ripped. But these gowns were durable, comfortable, and well-designed,” he says. “The staff loved them, and the fact that they were reusable, meant they could take needed breaks. Before, some staff members weren’t breaking to get water or go to the bathroom because that meant having to use new PPE. They were just working without taking breaks, getting dehydrated and sometimes passing out. The reusable gown was a mental shift for them. They didn’t feel bad if they took a break to go to the bathroom or get a drink. They have to take care of themselves, so this shift was huge.”

As Gibson discovered, reusable gowns are not just better for the planet, but also for hospitals. The gowns allowed hospitals to function far more smoothly during the pandemic and allowed medical staff to take necessary care of themselves when caring for others. This was hugely instructive to me in terms of thinking about powerful pivoting. In times of crisis, we rush to meet basic needs, even at the expense of our other priorities, such as protecting the planet. This is natural. But if we strive to adapt with an eye toward upholding our longer-term values—such as sustainability—we may find real opportunities to incorporate them into our crisis behavior.

Within sixty days, we’d sold nearly 40,000 units of these white, reusable gowns to be distributed to hospitals across Maryland. We had one other initial order for reusable gowns, from a group of Franciscan nuns. We sold them the gowns at cost. I told them, “I need your prayers more than I need your money!”

Those two orders led to more. The partnership with Union Wear meant we could reliably produce and distribute crucial, reusable PPE in the U.S. with no threat of a customs lag or inflated shipping prices. This was hugely valuable. Orders for disposable gowns from overseas also grew. We continued to make and sell them. In many countries, including India, Bangladesh, and Kenya, factories could operate only if they were making PPE. As our partners wrote, making this PPE for our customers was critical in keeping their people employed.

From Wall Street to Wearables to PPE: Powerful Pivoting in Action

The unionized cut-and-sew factory Union Wear made its mark with custom-embroidered baseball caps, basically creating the market for high-fashion, branded caps. But when globalization hit the fashion industry, founder Mitch Cahn had to pivot.

Working in fashion was a pivot, itself. In the early 1990s, Mitch decided it was time to leave his job on Wall Street and move into manufacturing. He wanted to make something tangible and concrete, and employ people in the process. When a cut-and-sew factory in New Jersey came up for sale, he saw an opportunity—and a chance to create a new product. He'd noticed that skate brands and hip hop brands were just starting to sell logoed baseball caps as part of their clothing lines. Before that, baseball caps were strictly sporting goods. Mitch thought: why not pitch the idea of custom caps to high-fashion brands?

Mitch's vision took off, and soon Union Wear was making customized baseball caps for some of the nation's most popular brands, including Ralph Lauren, Izod, Neiman Marcus, and GANT. This was in 1992, when most apparel was made in the U.S. or Italy. Mitch had entered a new field and basically created a new fashion category.

His career change looked like a huge success. But within a few years, almost all the major clothing brands pulled their manufacturing out of the U.S. in search of lower-priced production, first to Mexico and then to China. Within a few years, all of Mitch's clients were gone. This global economic shift threatened to put him out of business.

Mitch had to figure out how to pivot again, how to use his factory and his workers' skills to do something else. "There are really only three or four factories left in the U.S. that produce caps," Mitch says. "There were more than a thousand when we started." He soon hit upon a solution: creating custom goods for U.S. labor unions, trade organizations, and companies that needed swag made in the U.S., not in a sweatshop.

This new approach worked. By the Spring of 2020, Union Wear had 180 employees and was turning out custom swag for organizations around the country. The company was on target to have a record year in 2020, with contracts to make custom products for the Democratic and Republican party conventions, the U.S. Olympic team, and the census. All of these major events were slated for 2020, and they all needed apparel, caps, totes, and other items made in the U.S.

But within a period of two weeks in the beginning of March, the alarming rate of COVID-19 infections changed everything. "All of our prospects disappeared," says Mitch. "Everything vanished instantly. Candidates dropped out of races. The Olympics were postponed. And the stores we manufacture for also were closing. I was like, 'What are we going to do? We don't have anything we can make. And we have hundreds of workers.' I didn't want to lay off anyone."

Mitch reached out to the international chairman of Workers United, the garment makers' union in the U.S. He asked to be connected to the Hospital Association, which is the union of hospital workers, to see what kinds of cut-and-sew products they could use. "We were desperate, and we wanted to help, to do something using the skills and people and capacity we already had," he says.

The hospital union liaison said hospital workers were running out of disposable isolation gowns for very sick, contagious patients. They were clamoring for something durable that could be sterilized and reused, a washable isolation gown for COVID-19 patients modeled after surgeons' gowns. He sent Mitch a photo of what the hospital workers wanted.

Union Wear pattern makers estimated measurements, based on the photo, and operators produced a sample. This first sample was nearly perfect. The Hospital Association requested a couple small adjustments to tighten the neck and the sleeves, and the factory got it right on the second try. "A couple of days later, we were in production, making gowns and face shields," says Mitch.

The hospital staff needed them, but the complicated procurement process at hospitals threatened to scuttle sales. Then Union Wear partnered with TO THE MARKET, and our sales team closed the deal. By the summer of 2020, Union Wear was back up to its pre-pandemic production output.

Making this switch meant staying in business during an unprecedented crisis, and keeping valuable employees on the payroll. For Mitch, the experience highlighted the value of having a national supply chain and a robust manufacturing sector here in the U.S. "Manufacturing is so important to this country. How many people died because we didn't have enough gowns and respirators? What's the cost of that? Purchasers need to think about the overall cost of their decisions, and we need to be creative about making our national supply chain competitive with cheap overseas makers; the \$20 reusable gown made in America is a better deal than the cheap overseas one. We have to resist short-term thinking, and consider what can happen if the international supply chain shuts down again."

By July 2020, we'd gotten orders for more than 4 million unique units of hospital-bound PPE, and millions more for other frontline workers, like farmers. Our company grew seven times in four months. We were sourcing products from more than twenty maker groups, including Union Wear. We wound up having a busy year after all, though certainly not in the way we expected. From a business standpoint, this was unbelievable. From an ethical standpoint, being able to pivot and produce these lifesaving items was incredibly gratifying.

TO THE MARKET got some press coverage for our part in the creation and distribution of PPE, which was rewarding and made it easier to raise more capital for the business. The spring and summer of 2020 were periods of huge change for our company. Once we stepped forward to help, we were fully committed. We just ran with it. Many people have had this experience—you're in a challenging situation and you respond. Then you continue along that path. I think my "fight-flight-or-freeze" reaction is fight. I activate. I compartmentalize and keep moving, without getting overwhelmed emotionally by what's happening. I think it's why I was able to do my previous work in counterterrorism and anti-human trafficking. That same approach enabled me to face the horror of the pandemic, and keep going.

I think that when you start something and are committed to it, that passion can take you places you never imagined going. There are many different ways to be a leader, to be powerful, and to make change. What this whole experience says to me is that you never know what you'll create when you pursue an idea that feels personally compelling. It also says that times of real crisis can be an opportunity to be a part of the solution.

Wish You Could DO Something? Yes, You Can!

We all can contribute in times of crisis. How we do so should match who we are and where we are in our lives—our economic resources, our comfort level, and our mental and emotional bandwidth. Be honest with yourself about your tolerance for uncertainty, for witnessing suffering, and for discomfort or even danger. Factor in your other obligations such as work and family (for example, homeschooling kids). Know that whatever you do matters. Here are some ideas.

Help Create Economic Consistency

People employed in many industries have seen their incomes shrink or even vanish during the pandemic, particularly those who make a living in high-contact occupations. Think about service providers in your life who may suddenly have no work. In some cases, you may be able to move a service provider online, such as a tutor for a child, a piano teacher, or an exercise instructor. If not, and you have the means, pay for the services you would normally have used.

You can also prepay for the help you'll want when things return to normal. You might ask a hairdresser, massage therapist, or personal trainer, "Would it be helpful if I bought a package now to use later?" Physical therapists, housekeepers, childcare providers, and dog-walkers also depend on small payments from many people. If feasible, keeping up your usual outlay can make a tremendous difference in their lives.

Maintain Subscriptions and Non-Profit Giving

Keep up your subscriptions to publications and donations to nonprofit organizations, if you can afford it. And continue giving to your place of worship, even if you can't go. Churches that generate operating funds by passing the basket every week suddenly found themselves without a valuable income stream when services were shuttered. If you're not sure what's appropriate or welcome, ask.

Be a Good Friend and Neighbor

Take time to think about who in your life might be struggling physically or emotionally, and reach out by phone, mail, or email. This includes friends, family, and colleagues who live nearby and those further away. Ask how they're doing, if they need anything, and if there's anything you might do to help. Connecting will generate ideas for specific actions you could take, such as picking up groceries for a neighbor, taking a much-needed walk with a friend, making time for adult conversation with a frenzied mom, or helping an elderly relative use ZOOM.

Giving time and attention absolutely counts as pitching in and can be hugely helpful to someone living alone, a person feeling frightened or overwhelmed, or someone exhausted by juggling work and family or by being home with small children every day.

Recommit to Buying Local

Buying local matters more in times of chaos and uncertainty because small independent shops and restaurants are more likely to lack the financial resources to withstand economic upheaval. Buying local doesn't mean turning your back on the world, but rather supporting independent restaurants and stores in your area. A local business may be connected to international communities, such as a bakery selling coffee from a Guatemalan cooperative of farmers. As in normal times, focus on your particular values; you might seek women-, veteran-, or black-owned businesses.

Protect Your Mental State

Small self-care actions can help you stay centered and productive, especially in times of crisis. Small steps, such as getting enough sleep rather than staying up late doom-scrolling on the Internet matter, as does making sure to have conversations about normal, positive, upbeat aspects of your life. Different things help each of us regulate our mood. Think about what helps you, and make time for it. It could be 10 minutes of meditation, yoga, reading, baking, exercising, or socializing (even online). Locking yourself in the bathroom and taking a bath can help fortify you for the next day. Set aside time for breaks and set boundaries.

Be Aware of What You Project

Your mental state can be contagious, as evidenced by a quick glance at negative commenting on social media. A lot of the mean-spiritedness comes from people's anxiety and fear. I've found that piling on in a social media boxing match doesn't make anyone feel better—yourself included. Check your gut to avoid spreading fear and anger. How you show up for others really affects the world we live in.