

COVID-19

A LEADER'S STORY

By Rick Williams

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**COVID-19 challenged Dr. Shikha Barman as a leader and as a person. She and her team saved her company. This is her story - the lessons she learned as a leader and a person.**

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Dr. Shikha Barman is CEO of Integral BioSystems located outside of Boston. Integral BioSystems is a R&D contract research firm, CRO, specializing in drug development and drug delivery.

## THE BEGINNING

In January 2020, Dr. Barman accompanied her mother on a return visit to India where her mom would spend time with her family. Dr. Barman had heard reports of a coronavirus in China but had not understood its gravity or related the virus to her mom's India visit.

Shortly after Dr. Barman's return to the US, India locked down and her mom could not leave.

## SAVING HER COMPANY

With her mother trapped in India, Dr. Barman's struggle to save her company began.

Like all leaders at that moment, Dr. Barman did not understand the scope of the crisis. She feared that regulators might require biopharma companies to shut down or the company might be forced to close because operations were impossible under the circumstances. She was also concerned that anxiety among the staff would materially reduce the company's ability to be an integral part of their client's drug development programs.

She admitted to herself that she, like many other CEOs, was thrown into a state of uncertainty about the future of the company and what she should do as leader of the company. Dr. Barman's first initiative was to call the 16 staff members together.

Their message was:

- *This is terrifying.*
- *Are we getting laid off like so many others?*
- *How do we not get sick?*

*She admitted to herself that she, like many other CEOs, was thrown into a state of uncertainty about the future of the company.*

Dr. Barman asked for their cooperation. She asked for their help figuring out a plan to keep operations moving forward while protecting each of them from infection.

## WORKING TOGETHER

She asked what they needed and what they could do to feel safe as they continued to work together meeting client timelines and expectations.

- *Free exchange of articles on COVID-19.*
- *100% masking, social distancing, and enhanced cleaning protocols.*
- *Work from home and staggered schedules minimizing facility occupancy.*
- *Quarantine policy if exposed to COVID-19.*
- *Transparency and communication.*

*Her role was to empower the team.*

## “GREATER PURPOSE”

Dr. Barman, together with Mass Bio and Fisher Scientific, created a hand sanitizer project as a way for the company and staff to engage with the crisis facing the larger community. Integral BioSystems registered with the FDA as an OTC Hand Sanitizer Manufacturer. The employees produced hundreds of liters of hand sanitizer and donated them to local hospitals and elder care facilities.

## LEADERSHIP LESSONS

I asked Dr. Barman what lessons she took away from her experience leading her team through the early stages of this crisis.

- *First, she was humbled by the experience.*
- *While she was the leader, the staff encouraged her and each other.*
- *Her role was to empower the team.*
- *She gave them a sense of purpose. She was not just giving them a job.*

- *She helped the staff understand the challenge they faced.*
- *No one knew what to do. She helped them learn and adapt.*
- *She led by example.*

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I also asked Dr. Barman if she would share what she learned about herself and her life experience going through this period.

- *To be the leader she had to be open about her fears and allow herself to be vulnerable during the most stressful times.*
- *She had to change from being a completely task-oriented leader to being engaged with the team on a personal level.*
- *She became vigilant about what was happening at the company and with the team.*
- *Her personal life became more solitary and inward looking. She tried to better understand her own fears and anxieties.*
- *Playing the piano and taking long walks became more important parts of her life and renewal.*
- *Talking with her mom in India every day tied her to her experience as a daughter and a mother.*

The specific challenges facing leaders during a crisis such as COVID-19 will be different. But successful leaders have similar experiences.

- *They do not know all the answers.*
- *They manage the process.*
- *They communicate clearly and frequently.*
- *They take care of their team and themselves.*

# About the Author

Author | Corporate Leader | Board Member



Rick Williams is an inspiring writer and speaker sharing his experience as a company founder, CEO, scientist, management consultant, and board member. His new book *Create the Future* is a guidebook for making more creative and better decisions for your company and yourself.

Williams engages with an international audience through his newsletter, published thought leadership articles, and speaking engagements for leadership audiences.

He also brings his insights and experience to his service on boards of directors. He has served as board chair of a medical device company and a bank/VC firm. Williams started his career as a physicist followed by Harvard Business School, management consulting with Arthur D. Little, Inc., and then founding and leading a real estate investment and development company.

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**Rick Williams** brilliantly delivers a leadership compass for high-performing companies. With his wealth of experience, Williams provides a clear playbook that's indispensable for leaders seeking a practical approach to shaping their organization's destiny. Packed with structured team exercises, this book empowers leaders to make choices that resonate with their goals and values. Like an in-house management consultant, *Create the Future* is your invaluable resource for decision-making in turbulent times.

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