



Williams
Advisory Partners, LLC

*Board and advisory services for middle
market, technology companies*

Helping Leaders Succeed

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 - and the lessons she learned.

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?*

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.

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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 important to her.*
- *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

Rick Williams is an advisor to and member of the board of directors of technology companies. He is a nationally published thought leader and speaker on challenges facing senior leaders and boards.



His new book is *Create the Future – For Your Company and Yourself*.

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ABOUT WILLIAMS ADVISORY PARTNERS

WilliamsAdvisoryPartners.com

Williams Advisory Partners, LLC, is a Boston based CEO and board advisory practice. Williams Advisors works with leaders when they must make critical decisions for the future of their company.

Broad business experience with a CEO and board perspective is brought to each client assignment. Building on tools developed in Rick Williams' book *Create the Future*, client engagement includes asking the right questions, defining the problem, developing options, and helping leaders make the best decisions for their organization and themselves.

Williams Advisors generally works with technology-based firms in the business to business space.