



WHITE PAPER

Emotional and Mental Wellbeing: Crisis as a Turning Point

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This article explores the leadership qualities needed to guide us through the present crisis. Leaders need to 1) prepare for the complex challenges in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2) focus on people's physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, and 3) build their own and the organization's capacity to embrace change. What can we learn from the past that can help us prepare for the unknown? While we redesign the workplace, are we addressing the social aspects of recovery? Uncertainty poses a particularly difficult problem when trying to implement change. How do we embrace it as leaders, and support others in that process?

By researching the answers to these questions we came to the realization that the leadership skills critical to managing through crises are essentially the same as those implemented every day. These include transparent communication, empowerment, moving from control to co-creation, and creating a culture of trust and mutual respect.

The COVID-19 crisis has emphasized every individual's need for a sense of belonging, security and purpose to be fully productive and innovative. This provides leaders a unique opportunity to re-examine their priorities. Are they meeting the social needs of employees in order to create a new normal that leads to higher performance and greater emotional and mental resilience?

Complex Challenges of the Crisis

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders and safety and health professionals find themselves having to solve numerous complex problems in historically uncertain times. The most pressing external threat is the economy. The U.S. economy is projected to shrink by 5.9 percent this year and the euro area is expected to lose 7.5 percent. China will grow slightly at 1.2 percent¹. There are fears that this may be just the beginning, as a decline in the global economy may permanently eliminate many more jobs.

¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020>

Internally, the biggest threat is the deterioration of employee wellbeing, which will affect their ability to focus and engage. The impact of wellbeing was already a well-documented cost for businesses before the pandemic.²

- > Depression is among the leading causes of disability worldwide – *World Health Organization*
- > Stress levels in the workplace are rising, with 6 out of 10 workers in major global economies experiencing increased workplace stress. With China (86%) having the highest rise in workplace stress – *The Regus Group*
- > Australian employees are absent for an average of 3.2 working days each year due to stress. Workplace stress costs the Australian economy approximately \$14.2 billion – *Medibank*
- > An estimated 442,000 individuals in Britain, who worked in 2007/08, believed that they were experiencing work-related stress at a level that was making them ill – *Labour Force Survey*.
- > Approximately 13.7 million working days are lost each year in the UK because of work-related illness, at a cost of £28.3 billion per year – *National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence*
- > Norway reports that lack of predictability is the main cause of stress in the workplace.³
- > According to a Kaiser Family Foundation poll, nearly half of Americans report the coronavirus crisis is harming their **mental health**. A federal emergency hotline for people in emotional distress registered a more than 10-fold increase in April, compared with the same time last year.⁴

Stressors include social distancing, fear of contracting the disease, economic uncertainty, and high unemployment. The crisis has amplified other stress factors such as strained relations between employees and managers, workloads, and deadlines. The employee-manager relationship is the biggest source of anxiety.⁵ Leaders, therefore, have the most leverage to affect these issues by consciously building trust and providing direct reports strong support.

2 From the Global Organization for Stress (June, 2020)

3 <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/article/2008/lack-of-predictability-main-cause-of-stress-in-workplace>

4 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/05/04/mental-health-coronavirus/>

5 [https://www.stress.org/42-worrying-workplace-stress-statistics#:~:text=Research%20conducted%20by%20Statista%20in,and%20job%20security%20\(6%25\).](https://www.stress.org/42-worrying-workplace-stress-statistics#:~:text=Research%20conducted%20by%20Statista%20in,and%20job%20security%20(6%25).)

6 Rozovsky, Julia. (2016). Five keys to a successful team. Downloaded 9/22/2016. <https://rework.withgoogle.com/blog/five-keys-to-a-successful-google-team/>

7 Rock, D. (2009). Managing with the brain in mind. *Strategy + Business*. <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/09306?gko=9efb2>



Figure 1 Steps for leaders to follow through the crisis.

Cultivating Mental and Emotional Wellbeing

Although some existed before the pandemic, many stressors have now intensified. Lost workdays and monetary loss due to poor emotional and mental health expose only the tip of the iceberg. Employees working in stressful conditions may experience fear, depression, or absence of purpose. These factors can add up to huge losses in any business.

If we believe the data from Google's high performance teams, **psychological safety** is the foundation of innovation and retention of the greatest talent.⁶ Team members attribute their success to being able to be themselves and speak freely. Why? Because being part of a social group that accepts us as we are, fills our need to belong (which is equal to our need for food and shelter) and reduces fear.⁷ If this seems like an exaggeration, research states that people excluded on a regular basis experience blood pressure that stays high during sleep and disrupts the normal circadian rhythm.



This puts people at risk for many illnesses, including cardiovascular disease.⁸ Traditional operations and management systems do not adequately address the socio-emotional needs of employees.⁹ Leaders may find themselves having to sharpen their skills to meet these important needs.

A 2018 study revealed that workers suffered less emotional harm when they had a manager who was supportive.¹⁰ What does it mean to be a supportive leader? Will it be harder to fill this role from a distance if people work from home? Businesses will most likely have to offer this option to employees with children because childcare will be scarce until a vaccine is deployed. This raises another challenge. Can a leader adequately support employees virtually? Can they communicate support, trust or empathy without being in the same space?

This is important because the pandemic has triggered many socio-emotional issues requiring empathy and compassion from leaders. Those who keep their jobs may feel grief for released employees and concern for the future will remain. Some may have enjoyed working from home and might not look forward to returning to the

workplace. These feelings and emotions should not be ignored. Safe forums where people can express their feelings and discuss these issues can help offset some anxiety. Without such an outlet, negative emotions will otherwise intensify and eventually result in loss of focus, degradation of mental capacity, illness, absenteeism, or accidents.

Crisis as a Turning Point

The collective social experience through the pandemic can be one of great fear. Mindful leaders can see this as a turning point to create a strong sense of “we are in it together”. They offer clarity about what needs to be done to further instill a sense of shared purposes. The question then becomes - how do leaders maintain and encourage this sense of purpose to further the collective sense of “we?”

More and more research¹¹ is finding that leaders can create “we” or a sense of belonging by making people feel valued and respected and helping them connect with their sense of purpose. For this to

8 American Psychological Association, APA Working Group on Stress and Health Disparities. Accessed on June 22, 2020. <http://www.apa.org/pl/health-disparities/resources/stress-report.aspx>

9 https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-28/coronavirus-nursing-homes-state-inspector-covid-19?utm_source=sfm_c_100035609&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=News+Alert%3a+As+coronavirus+raged+through+nursing+homes%2c+inspectors+found+nothing+wrong+-+00000172%20fb&utm_term=https%3a%2f2fwww.latimes.com%2fcalifornia%2fstory%2f2020-06-28%2fcoronavirus-nursing-homes-state-inspector-covid-19&utm_id=9069&sfmc_id=2421706

10 Yanar B, Lay M, Smith PM. (2019) The Interplay Between Supervisor Safety Support and Occupational Health and Safety Vulnerability on Work Injury. *Saf Health Work*. 10(2): 172-179.

11 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-economics-happiness/202005/happiness-and-the-covid-pandemic>

become part of the “new normal” for leadership, more genuine inquiries and conversations about what makes work meaningful and how the employee’s values fit with the corporate social values will need to be had.

During a 2020 healthcare provider discussion, it seemed that the organizations dealing the best with COVID-19 share a strategy including psychological safety. People in these organizations value and respect each other. Leaders are both listening and speaking regularly and transparently so people are clear on priorities and the way to achieve them. Supportive leadership strives to encourage their workforce to co-create the “new normal”. It takes inclusive relationships where everyone contributes. While uncertainty cannot be eliminated, it can be met as a shared challenge in environments built on reciprocal trust and clear social support, as well as a sense of belonging and a shared purpose.

Non-supportive leaders, who manage their anxiety by trying to be more in control, shut down several conditions - such as security, certainty, autonomy, relationship and fairness - that are necessary for fostering psychological safety and problem-solving abilities.¹²

The task, of course, is not only to **lead well in a crisis** but to lead well during normal everyday operations. Consider what drives work satisfaction in a crisis— a clear sense of mission and purpose, increased autonomy, supportive teamwork, and the elimination of non-value adding bureaucratic processes. It is clear that those are the very same conditions needed in the “new normal”.

Embracing Uncertainties and Co-Creating Future

How do leaders instill the sense of “togetherness” to collectively navigate as one through uncertainties? How do they offer a safe space where people feel motivated to contribute their best? How do they engage and empower the individuals within the organization to envision, define, and embrace a future together?

McKinsey described **leadership behaviors** needed to manage this crisis as, “...displaying calm and bounded optimism; making decisions amid uncertainty; and communicating effectively.”¹³ As many authorities may experience their own challenges and anxieties during the crisis, delivering this type of leadership behavior - deliberate self-care as well as personal growth.

A leader’s ability to listen, to meet the needs of the various communication styles, and to create a common language across critical functions has become more important than ever for building a congruous team. Team cohesiveness further promotes psychological safety as well as mental and emotional wellbeing, which, in turn, instill calmness, focus, and the development of a collaborative energy for decision-making and execution. Transformative leaders continuously build this cycle of positive momentum and engage individuals to co-create the “new normal” amid the uncertainties and unknowns.

Although mankind has progressed in physics, science, and technology, we still have a long way to go to understanding the human side of organizations. This age of complexity calls for different approaches to problem solving.¹⁴ During the pandemic, for example, it was people who overcame equipment and human resource shortages and who broke through procedural and policy barriers to offer innovative ideas and manage the unexpected. Proving again that, in the end, people are an organization’s greatest differentiator.¹⁵ The ideas in this article point toward leveraging human systems which are the most complex and, yet, most rewarding. This is the new frontier. We need to invest in the emotional and mental **resilience** of our workforce, people who are critical for our readiness, survival and success in the next “new normal”.

¹² Rock, D. (2009). Managing with the brain in mind. Strategy + Business.

¹³ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/tuning-in-turning-outward-cultivating-compassionate-leadership-in-a-crisis>

¹⁴ Snowden, D. & Boone, M. (2007). A leaders framework for decision-making. Harvard Business Review. Nov. Downloaded 10/27/2015

<http://aacu-secure.nisgroup.com/meetings/ild/documents/Symonette.MakeAssessmentWork.ALeadersFramework.pdf>

¹⁵ Choppin, J. (1996), ““Our people are our greatest asset...””, Management Development Review, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 8-13.

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Mei-Li has over 20 years of experience in engineering, research and academics with a focus on integrating safety, environmental and sustainability goals into business strategy. She serves as the Senior Vice President of Innovation, Solution & Strategic Partnership at DEKRA. Mei-Li is responsible for leading her team to combine science, technology, and DEKRA's expertise and knowhows to create innovative safety solutions for the Industry 4.0 era. Previously, she specialized in operational risk management in conjunction with human and organization performance.



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