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## Feeling into the future – virtual roundtable – Thursday 19th November 2020

As organisations are having to respond increasingly quickly and with a relentless focus on performance, our roundtable aimed to provide a sense-making space for the challenges leaders now face. Of particular attention was how leaders are holding their emotional selves and relating to others - while in physical isolation from teams and colleagues, and experiencing more digital connection than ever before.

Attendees reflected on a series of questions as a guiding framework to the discussion. These covered areas including: managing personal emotions, including others' perspectives, balancing empowerment against control in a crisis. And finally, how to help build leaders' resilience and help them learn/grow through their experiences.

Several key themes arose from the experiences and noticing of attendees.

### **Context is key**

There is no one 'Covid experience'. The diversity of personal and organisational situations is stronger than any homogenous experience. Some organisations are retracting, in survival mode, while others are in growth and/or acquisition, and others have found business revenues to be largely unaffected even if the ways of working have altered materially. And 'homeworking' adds a dimension of difference, where some may have separate spaces, some not, some be unpredictably accommodating school age children, some not, and so forth.

### **Relational capacities are more important than ever**

Particularly noted was the intersection between how leaders manage their own emotional states and how they understand and relate to others. The integration of home and work life might make a personal dimension more visible, but what seems appropriate and how hard do people work to present an 'office' self? Senior leaders may be the ones more likely to have a protected office space in their homes and not properly understand others' personal challenges and experiences in working from home. Could this get in the way of 'seeing each other as more human than before'?



*photo by Emilio Garcia on Unsplash*

Then there is the question of leaders looking after their own wellbeing and that of others. Some are trying to be strong for the sake of their people, or the wider business. Others are having difficulty coping with their own issues and not able to support others. Navigating the polarity of self::others is a regularly occurring dilemma for all of us. Fitting your own oxygen mask before being able to help others seems a good metaphor. The consensus was that leaders are holding a tremendous amount; supporting team members operationally and emotionally and responding quickly to business problems. This is challenging leaders to find the space and time and to self-reflect and build their own emotional resilience. As one attendee said: *"leaders need permission to look after themselves."* Although actions are being put in place to minimise burnout, the impact is limited without leaders taking ownership of managing their emotional state.

### **Navigating the Empowerment::Control polarity**

Finding a third way through the polarity of Empowerment::Control is tricky at the best of times and exacerbated in the current situation. David Snowden's idea of 'enabling constraints' can be helpful – constraints around decision making may need to be drawn more tightly in high-risk crisis situations and loosened in lower-risk circumstances.

Not everyone in the discussion is moving in the same direction: some are trying to promote greater empowerment, having overused centralising control to manage the crisis; others are moving towards control

having been too lax. When we hear 'from' and 'to' it is often an indication that we're not in fact managing the polarity but rather solving one overuse by moving to the other end of the pole.

### Bottling the 'magic'

It was far from all gloom. We noticed that amid the Covid challenges, there were some 'magic' happenings. There was a keen desire to retain these in the face of the potential to revert to old ways. Examples included:

- Communication tone and styles shifting as leaders become more visible, helping diminish hierarchies between senior leaders and employees. The tone of communication has shifted from a 'corporate voice' to something more personal.
- Development interventions becoming more agile and leaders taking greater ownership in discovering the development opportunities on offer.
- An increase in appetite and gratitude for leadership coaching.
- Decisions being made at pace, circumventing traditional governance and facilitating greater agility.
- Short-term plans being "torn up" to make way for the longer range business opportunities being called for.

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*"We need to work out how to bottle these great things and not revert back to old ways."*

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### Strengthening collective trust and purpose

What more can be done to provide leadership teams with a psychologically safe and supportive space to make sense of things collectively but inclusive of individual needs? Although leaders are drawing upon individualised coaching and there are pockets of great teamwork happening, building strong collective trust across leadership peers enables support for personal and corporate challenges and the opportunity to 'decompress'.

Building clear collective purpose or bringing the "organisation's DNA into teams", can be challenging. The measurement of collective output was suggested as a means to help amplify collective leadership purpose, in recognition that *"what gets measured gets done."*

### Forget 'vulnerability', just be human

To build psychologically safe organisations, leaders are often required to expose more of their authentic self, ultimately being more vulnerable and open. This language is often seen as 'scary' and unhelpful in corporate environments. If 'vulnerable' has become so distorted in meaning, might it be more helpful to talk about simply being human?

### Wiser use of virtual delivery

Virtual development needs to be carefully thought through to get the best out of aspects such as peer sharing and networking, which happen more naturally on traditional face-to-face programmes.

Managing performance virtually was seen as another area of focus for giving extra support - both to the leader hosting the conversation and to the employee receiving the feedback, when neither has the support of colleagues in a physical workplace. Are leaders nervous of giving a candid message over Zoom?

### Noticing and nudging

Amid the uncertainty it still seems hard to let go of the fallacy that things may be controlled. Rather than reach for levers of control, can we nudge those aspects which are most helpful and dampen the less helpful? Might this open ways to lead through constantly shifting contexts.

In a spirit of encouragement, we introduce you to the poem by David Whyte:

<https://onbeing.org/poetry/everything-is-waiting-for-you/> which along with many others, can be read or listened to at [www.onbeing.org](http://www.onbeing.org).

With sincere thanks to all our attendees for their reflection and active participation.

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