

## Leading in Troubled Times

### *How to Keep Your People Motivated, Engaged & Well*

#### **Workplace Innovation Europe CLG**

‘Working from home’ is now a fact of life for millions of people, while many others experience ‘social distancing’ in the workplace. Both can lead to a sense of isolation, restricting the day-to-day interaction that not only helps people to do their jobs well but which creates the feeling of being part of a team.

Yet we’re also seeing a remarkable surge of entrepreneurship and innovation. In our communities and businesses alike people are finding new ways of collaborating and helping each other. Many are beginning to argue that this is transformative and that the post-COVID world won’t be the same as before.

‘Social distancing’ is an unfortunate choice of expression in the current situation; while physical distancing may be essential, we need more social connectedness now than ever.

#### **We’ve been here before**

Of course remote working is not new. From the mid-90s onwards, home computing and the internet opened new possibilities for the way we work. Many companies encouraged people to work from home or in other locations for at least part of the time. Partly this was seen as a kind of privilege, enabling people to work in comfort and avoid the daily commute, but of course it also enabled employers to minimise their use of premium office space through hotdesking.

As early as 1996, concern was being expressed about the impact of ‘teleworking’ (as it was then known) on the isolation of employees:

“Some workers regard teleworking as an opportunity to be more creative in exercising their profession, although on the down side they view being isolated or being cut off from everyday life in their company as risks that go hand in hand with teleworking. Teleworking should neither be condemned out of hand nor glorified. The crucial question is how it will be organised — preferably in such a way that the ‘tele’ aspect of the work in question is placed in a complex setting that stimulates human skills and activities.”  
*(ETUC, Position paper on the Green Paper “Living and working in the information society”, December 1996)*

Likewise, subsequent agreements were put in place between European employers’ organisations and trade unions emphasising the importance of measures “preventing the teleworker from being isolated from the rest of the working community in the company” through social contact and access to information *(ETUC & UNICE, Framework Agreement on Telework, 2002)*.

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Since then, of course, ‘teleworking’ has been overtaken by a much broader agenda in which ‘agile’ working and ‘virtual’ forms of organisation have become quite commonplace. Significantly, and echoing these earlier insights, we have seen great examples in which the ability to work remotely is part of a mix that “stimulates human skills and activities”, yet others in which it leads to isolation, disengagement and even poor mental health.

### **We always have a choice**

We’ve been listening intently to our colleague Edwin Van Vlierberghe recently. Formerly Global VP at Bombardier, and with a long history of senior roles in large organisations, Edwin has now left the corporate world to share his knowledge and expertise as a member of our international workplace innovation community.

Edwin has faced many challenging situations in his leadership career, often in ‘crisis’ situations whose outcomes would be critical for employees and even for whole plants. At each key moment he has challenged orthodoxy and refused to accept the ‘obvious’ solution, arguing that there is always a choice.

That is no less true with the COVID- 19 challenge, and here is Edwin’s binary choice model:



Immediate Reaction: Focus on NOW	Future Orientation: Focus on OPPORTUNITY
<p><i>We see the company as a flow of money, so we focus on costs and cash</i></p>	<p><i>We see the company as a rich collection of competencies, entrepreneurial possibilities, creativity and passion – not defined as costs but as an investment with a huge potential return</i></p>
<p>Do you recognise these characteristics?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stop all activities involving external people/organisations</li> <li>• Stop supplies and push them back to suppliers</li> <li>• Send people home (let the State pay)</li> <li>• Stop or delay all investments</li> <li>• Focus on safeguarding cash</li> </ul>	<p>Do you recognise these characteristics?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From an internal focus to a focus on customers &amp; suppliers – strengthening the relationships</li> <li>• From product/service provider to a problem-solver for the customer</li> <li>• Create smarter, more agile ways of working for an unpredictable business environment.</li> <li>• Make our workplace innovations visible</li> <li>• Absorb and assimilate ideas, practices and emerging trends from many and diverse sources.</li> <li>• Use this moment to increase the speed of innovation</li> <li>• Reflect on: “what does this mean for me (as leader), and for us (as employees)?”</li> <li>• How can we change lost business into delayed business?</li> <li>• How do we want to position ourselves with our customers and suppliers for when the recovery happens?</li> <li>• Can we create synergies and partnerships with other companies?</li> </ul>
<p>Adapted from: Edwin Van Vlierberghe, ImpactBuilders</p>	

All the economic projections show that the COVID- 19 will lead to very negative consequences for business and the economy as a whole. We know from past economic crises that companies suffering the worst long-term loss of competitiveness are those that were driven by short term, cost-driven reactions. Others use the moment of crisis as an opportunity to take a long, hard look at their organisations and cultures, to engage workforces in reinventing dysfunctional ways of working, and be ready to leap ahead when the moment comes.

Of course many companies will also be straddling the two responses, struggling to move towards the right-hand column but unclear how to proceed.

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## Working in isolation: what does good look like?

‘Connectedness’ is more than a jargon word: it is what makes work meaningful and engaging for most people, and it is what makes organisations both productive and innovative. In good organisations our interaction with colleagues enables us to share problems, plan and schedule our work together, celebrate our successes, generate ideas for innovation and improvement, and help shape future directions and strategies. Even day-to-day gossip helps us to feel part of the work community. Above all, connectedness gives our work purpose – not just focused on a narrowly specialised task but aware of our part in a bigger product, service and organisation.

Remote working can easily become the enemy of connectedness. During the first few weeks of isolation at home, some people may even enjoy the novelty whilst others will experience a sense of dislocation and unease. Yet, over several weeks, there is a real danger that more and more people will feel disconnected and disengaged from their organisations, simply performing expected tasks within an increasing sense of disconnectedness.

But it needn’t be like that. The Corona crisis is an amazing opportunity to work in new and better ways – and in many cases doing the things we should have been doing anyway.

Everything we know – from decades of research evidence and practical experience – about what makes a productive, innovative and healthy organisation does not disappear until the end of the crisis. On the contrary, it is more important now than ever.

The challenge is to translate these well-understood principles into the new reality. You might find the following guidelines useful:

1. **Job Design.** People need fresh challenges and an opportunity to try new things in their day-to-day jobs if they are to learn, develop, and remain engaged and healthy. Does the current situation enable people to rotate jobs, cover for unwell colleagues and learn new skills? E-learning, and even virtual and augmented reality can be valuable resources in helping lone workers solve problems, learn and develop, and remain engaged.
2. **Teamwork.** There is an incredibly strong association between empowering teams to plan, schedule and improve their own work, and achieving high performance. Communication and relationship building lie at the heart of successful teamworking, and webinar technologies can fill the gap when people can’t all be in the same room. Planning meetings at the start of every day enable people to make decisions together, but don’t forget the importance of ‘productive reflection’ –
  - how did we do?
  - where could we improve?
  - what can we celebrate?

Think too about online coaching for your teams, helping them work and learn effectively together, avoid blame when things go wrong, and always search for the better argument – no matter who it comes from.

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3. Measure what matters. We've heard that some managers are asking: "But how will I know if they're actually working at home?" Wrong question! Firstly it demonstrates a culture of mistrust and secondly it suggests that they're more interested in measuring an individual's mere presence at work than their productive contribution. That's a bad idea even in normal times but it makes even less sense now. People's domestic circumstances vary enormously and they may need to work at different times, especially if they have children at home. Focus on coaching conversations that help each individual to achieve their best possible performance in what may well be unfamiliar and challenging circumstances. A member of staff from one company told us: "What was hardest to discover is that it's very easy to feel "unproductive" when working from home; however when you truly add up your time in the office, it's common to be unproductive in the workplace too – the "water cooler" moments take a few minutes, chatting to your desk-mate..."
4. Employee-driven innovation and improvement. The best ideas happen when we learn, reflect and experiment together, but we just can't afford to call a halt to innovation and improvement during the crisis. Online suggestion schemes and ideation platforms can be useful, but they work best when people have the opportunity to generate new insights and thinking collaboratively. There are many ways in which we can use webinars and other online technologies to create innovation labs and creative spaces that bring people together across the whole organisation – and create a great sense of engagement.
5. Employee Voice. This is a time of great anxiety for many, feeling that they are out of the loop and worrying that decisions are being made that affect their work and jobs without them having any say. Many organisations will be faced with difficult decisions in the next few weeks, but the real challenge is to minimise long term damage – to competitiveness and workforce engagement alike. Experience from past crises shows that the best decisions – those that help ensure longer-term sustainability – are made openly and inclusively, enabling everyone to contribute their own knowledge and insights. Connected communication systems and channels, available to all employees irrespective of location, enable real-time two-way dialogue and involvement in decision-making from the shop floor to the senior team.
6. Leadership in troubled times. Effective leadership in a crisis (and even in normal times!) requires self-awareness, reflection and sensitivity to others. Your own reactions and behaviours will have a profound impact on others – either by increasing their anxiety or by engaging with them as collaborators and addressing the challenge together. You need to be visible, open and reassuring – brief 'Welcome to Work' and 'Thank You' video calls each day can make a massive difference. Your role as a leader in these (as in normal) times is to help others perform well by listening and by helping to remove the obstacles that get in the way of them doing a good job. Peer-to-peer dialogue with people in other organisations can also be amazingly powerful at times like these: you're certainly not alone in facing these challenges. Start by considering your own health and well-being, seeking the support of friends and family, and finding quiet times for mindfulness and reflection – this is the subject of tomorrow's article.

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We have an exciting opportunity to use digital technologies in amazing and innovative ways – but always remember that the basic principles of communication and engagement still apply. For many of us, previous experience of video calls has been very transactional and focused on specific agendas – but now more than ever we need to embed ‘social bonding’ into our online interaction if we are to build and sustain effective virtual teams. If nothing else, start your meetings by asking “how are you feeling?”

A frontline manager from one company told us “I cannot advocate video calls enough – even just for a 5 minute chat. For some people, it may be the only conversation they have that day, so it’s important to ask how they are doing as well as whatever you need from them.”

But she also offered a note of caution: “We have a team “stand up” and “stand down” via video call every day at the start and end of the day, which I personally find really useful. It started off as a ‘what have you got planned for today/what did you achieve’, but as we’ve got used to working from home it’s become a check in on how we are and any joint projects, plus any updates from senior levels. *However it’s probably worth noting that some of my colleagues initially saw this as a lack of trust that they would be at their desk. . . .*”

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## **BOOTH WELSH** Making a Smooth Transition to Home-Based Working

Integrated Engineering Services

When Booth Welsh temporarily closed its Head Office in line with the Scottish Government’s COVID- 19 guidelines, the transition to home-based working was eased by the company’s previous investment in workplace innovation. A specialist engineering company, Booth Welsh has created opportunities for people to collaborate and innovate across the entire workforce during the last 3 years. Collaboration and communication have become part of the company’s culture and mindset, and its team leaders are now using video technologies to sustain their 9AM morning meetings, project meetings, and cross sectional improvement and innovation meetings. A Team Tea at 3pm has also been introduced - a virtual gathering to see how everyone is doing where work isn’t discussed – and where tricky quiz questions, quirky teasers and social chat keeps motivation high.

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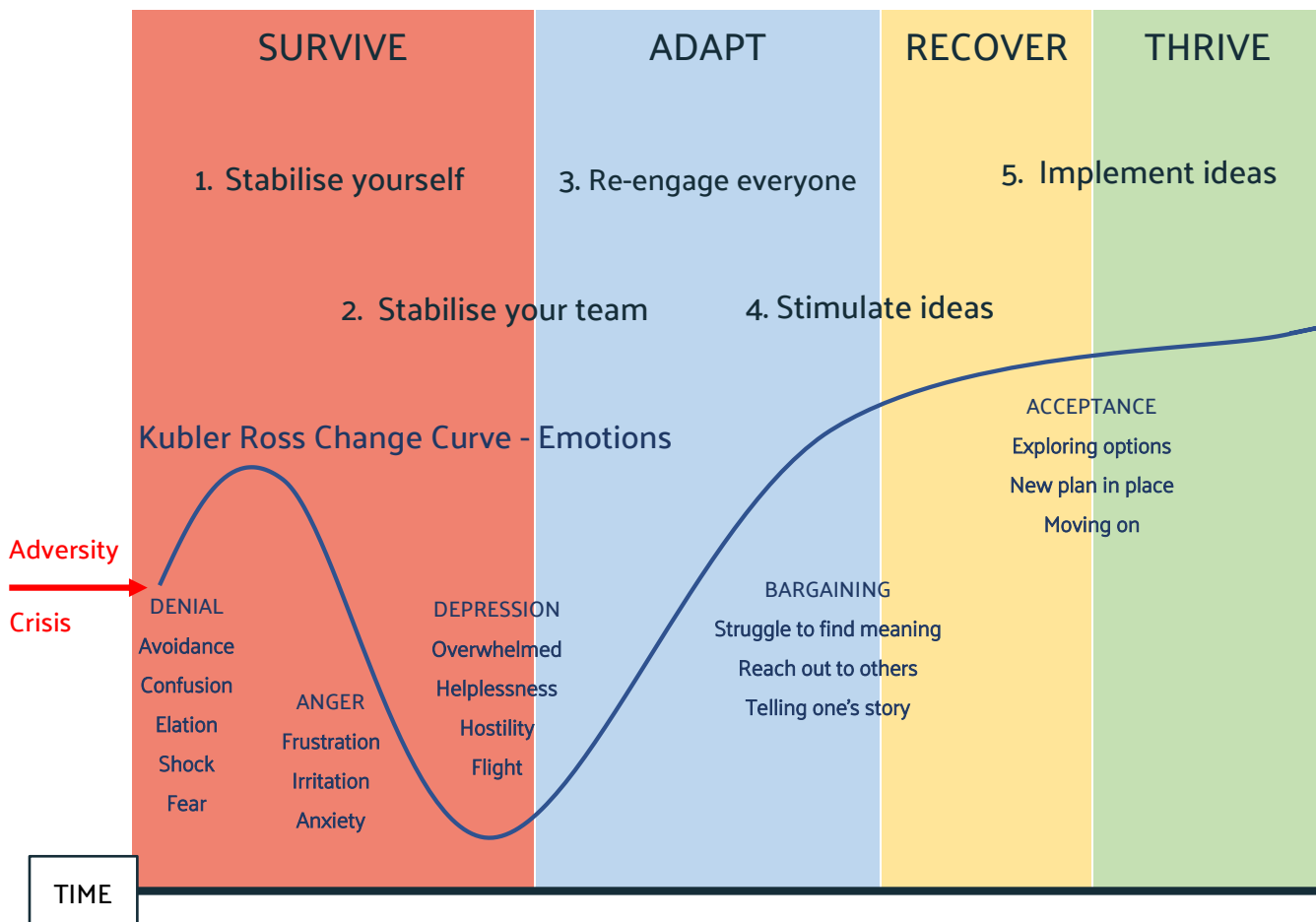
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## Look after yourself

It can be hard to take the time to focus on your own needs as a business leader or owner who is holding all this together. Yet this is the essential first step – stabilising yourself practically, emotionally and physically will give you a more solid base to work from to stabilise your teams and find new ways to re-engage them as the business adapts to the current situation.

### Steps to Resilience – Respect the Curve



Only then can you really start to stimulate ideas, explore disruptive models and test them. Your instinct might be to go directly to that stage, but it really is worth taking a step back to make sure you're in the right place to lead your teams and business forward into different ways of working.

When working with business leaders to implement major change programmes, we've noticed time and time again that it's those individuals with high emotional intelligence who are able to unlock the enthusiasm and creativity of their colleagues to make the change happen. And the opposite is also true – with behaviours resulting from stress and anxiety often acting as a greater blocker than any practical

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challenges. Just being aware of the difference between these reactive stressful behaviours and emotionally intelligent behaviours can make a huge impact on how you relate to your teams at this critical time. And if you can take the time to start applying some more mindful techniques, it should help create a more stable platform to move through the ‘adapt’ stage.

All this might seem like wasted effort right now, when there are so many immediate challenges to deal with. However, even if you can just take a little time each day to get yourself into a more reflective place and practice your most emotionally intelligent behaviours, that will help shape the organisation that you ultimately lead out of the current crisis.

### How are you doing?



We’re now a couple of months into the crisis but we know very little about its eventual impact or when it will end. One thing that COVID- 19 has brought is time, and it’s a good moment to take stock and consider the effectiveness of your actions so far. What else we can you do to build the resilient organisation and the resilient workforce that will survive the current crisis?

It’s also a very good time to take a much harder look at those less than optimal practices embedded in your organisation and to position yourself to stride ahead in the post COVID- 19 world .

Do let us know how you’ve been doing during the crisis – we’d be delighted to talk and/or to share your good practices through the EUWIN network – [contact@workplaceinnovation.eu](mailto:contact@workplaceinnovation.eu)

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