



Navigating the waters of pandemic transition

Adaptability and flexibility of leaders will be tested

IN EARLY MAY 2020, I wrote an article with a similar title, "Navigating the Waters of Pandemic Grief." We were a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic. Emotions ran high. Fear. Uncertainty. Grief.

The collective loss during these past months was unspeakable. Daily we watched on television screens, numbers of people hospitalized, on ventilators, and dying from COVID-19. To date, the number has risen to nearly 600,000 deaths in the United States alone.

We continue to experience collective loss, trauma, and grief. No one has been immune.

When the pandemic began, we anticipated that we would be on the other side of it within a few months. Instead, after 14 months, we are just now beginning to look forward to the possibility of returning to normal.

Except it will not be normal.

We will be asked again to change our patterns of work, to engage in person, to have our children return to the classroom with safety protocols including masks, distance, etc. And change, even good change, comes with corresponding loss. Ask any new parents about their sleep after one month with their first child.

We have navigated the waters of the pandemic and the corresponding loss with more courage than we may have realized. And while there is hope on the horizon with the number of people receiving vaccinations, there is yet another big wave of uncertainty coming.

And again: Emotions run high. Fear. Uncertainty. Grief.

Employees have adjusted to working from home. Some even prefer it. There are employees who have come to appreciate flexibility in their schedules, adjusting their work time as they integrated the responsibilities of family life. I spoke with an employee who said that, while working from home, he often responded to emails late in the evening, without giving it a thought, because he had control over his time. During the day, he may have taken a walk,

thrown in a load of laundry, etc. So, working late in the evening was not uncommon because he had control of his time.

As we anticipate this new transition for work, leaders will be met with varying stages of loss and grief from employees. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross defines the stages as:

- » **DENIAL:** "This can't be happening."
- » **ANGER:** "Why is this happening to me?"
- » **BARGAINING:** "I'll do anything to change this."
- » **DEPRESSION:** "What's the point of going on after the loss?"
- » **ACCEPTANCE:** "It's going to be OK."

WHAT WILL BE REQUIRED OF LEADERS IN THE NEXT TRANSITION?

Adaptability and flexibility will be characteristics of leaders that will be tested, strengthened and required in this evolving post-pandemic transition as leaders respond to the individual and collective needs of their employees.

Questions for leaders to consider are:

- » "How can I be responsive and adaptive to the needs of my employees?"
- » "How will I recognize the stage of loss/grief an employee is in, and how might I best respond?"
- » "How will I lead with compassion, empathy and gratitude?"
- » "What invisible agreements do we need to examine?" (Those behaviors that are repeated over time without conversation and agreement.) What agreements may still work? Which need to change? If we expect employees to return to the office full time, for example, will we expect them to answer emails, complete reports, etc. after business hours?
- » What is the necessary and effective communication to employees, stakehold-

ers, etc. if we change the invisible agreements that evolved during the pandemic?

- » What is my responsibility to create a "welcome back" experience that matters to employees? (Resource: "The Power of Moments" by Chip and Dan Heath)
- » And finally, "What is my Plan B for my Plan A?"

We can do hard things. We have and we will. We will navigate the challenging waters of our new normal with courage, creativity, compassion, flexibility and grace. We will stumble, but we will do it together.

"Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition."

- Steve Jobs ■



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