Emergency kit for the "new normal" virtual leadership

In such uncertain times, navigating a sudden and widespread crisis, like a global pandemic, where individuals and businesses are struggling to adapt to the current conditions, a level of calm fortitude, resilience and a growth mindset, is more important than ever for leading others and sustaining businesses.

Our emotions are highly dominant right now, especially the one of fear, even if we don´t want to admit it. We all undergo an emotional rollercoaster, but many of us try to deny it and push it away. However in order to have a clear focus, to be functional and to fully activate our strategic thinking and plan for our next steps, we "need to embrace, recognize and accept this fear as a natural human emotion, not good or bad, but a normal, usually temporary response to a lack of control" (S. David, 2016)

And speaking of control, I would like to rather use the term "perceived feeling of control", since control is an illusion, at any time, it´s a mental construct in our cognitive brain.

Science offers us the concept of psychological capital, a term, coming from Positive Psychology, which can be defined as all resources and impact of positive attitude and growth mindset, that keep ourselves, our teams and the whole organization, positive, effective, responsive and agile. It is represented by the acronym HERO – Hope, Efficacy, Resilience, and Optimism.

In the current situation of physical isolation in order to contain the spread and impact of the COVID – 19 – virus, the above resources play a crucial role to help us to calm down, and successfully go through such an impactful and global uncertainty, representing the "new normal" of virtual working 24/7 from home, being restricted from our daily routines and being totally urged to come out of our "comfort zone" or at least widen its limits.

During the last 2 weeks of the current "new normal", I have spoken to many clients, colleagues coaches, have attended several webinars and conference calls, in order to exchange opinions, collect "best practices" and be able to support individuals, teams and organizations, to better cope with the current situation, to navigate the disruption, stay calm and even create new business opportunities and come stronger out of it.

Below I have summarized several "take aways" from the exchange with clients and peers in the past two weeks.

1. Let´s start with the **Psychological Capital**, HERO (Hope, Efficacy, Resilience, and Optimism)

   Hope: In a time of crisis we need:

   - **meaningful** and motivating **short-term goals**, however having in mind our **long-term vision**
   - to create at least **3 pathways**, how to achieve our immediate goals, as leaders
   - to **empower** our people in their handlings and beliefs, provide them all the resources they need to be successful on every step of the current journey

Efficacy:

- Maintaining a **positive, growth mindset** is a key.
- **Being present**, being in the moment, **having courage**. When we stop, just breath to calm down, accept our emotions as they are, and refocus on what is right in front of us – can be a certain situation, a beloved person, a pet, a flower, then we are able to make this mind-shift, from negative spiral to a positive thinking.
- Step back and **reflect**. **Be accessible** and help your people to reflect too
- Think of **possible positive outcomes** and how best to get there with your team / key stakeholders
- **Be pro-active** instead of re-active
- **Celebrate** and acknowledge each small step of your progress and **success**

Resilience:

- Adopt an **attitude of gratitude**. This is about "What is the one situation / event you are grateful for right now?" or "Who is the one peer-member / team-member you are grateful for?" "Why?"
- **Be aware** of and **allow yourself** to experience **positive emotions**. These are your "fuel for resilience".
- Take **good care** of yourself – **sleep** enough, **do physical exercise** and use **healthy nutrition**. "**Compassion**, grounded in self-care, becomes a contagion of positivity and a pillar of support, stronger than any virus." Only when you are in a good shape, you can be there as well for your team and your organization.

Optimism:

- Be **fully informed** and have a clear plan for the worst-case scenario, however, **explore** upside opportunities and new ways of thinking and acting.
- **Stop** consciously a **negative thinking**, and think instead of "What opportunities might be there instead?" "What new skillsets can be developed?" "What shifts in mindset, behaviours, and processes can improve the future of your organization?"

A healthy dose of optimism emerges from a healthy focus on the good that can emerge for people, teams, organizations, and societies. "Stay hopeful without denying reality" (M. Crabtree, 2020)

2. **Keep and re-create a daily routine.** It will provide you with a high extent of security and will calm you down. This is part of your "comfort zone" and it helps you to better connect to yourself and is a resource for going through such a major change and uncertainty.

   - Establish personal norms for yourself in regard to working time and breaks
   - Establish boundaries with housemates about noise and activity levels in the house
   - Build routines into your schedule to connect with others and recharge your batteries
   - Get dressed in office attire, it outs you in "working mindset" and it works definitely in your favour, when you need to join all these video meetings

3. **Community and connection:**

   - **Reach out**, people are so isolated.

   - **Psychological Safety** plays a major role in this context, and it starts with empathy. Once we are enough self-aware, we can make a powerful mind-shift: away from self-concern towards supporting others. Then any negative spiral of fear turns positive and we become **compassioned** and **empathetic** with others.

   - Take time to **select your main stakeholders** (e.g. make Stakeholder maps) and start, e.g. with your team(s): "What do they need from you?" "What are their personalities (introverts vs. extroverts)?" and "How do they cope with the current situation?" "How can you enable both to feel safe in order to be able to perform under the current circumstances?"

4. **Virtual connection:**

   - On the one hand there are lots of benefits to working remotely: increased productivity, a greater sense of control and autonomy over one´s work, a better work-life balance. The last is true, if you have a choice, if you don´t feel restricted and if you are able to

work from home without distractions (e.g. many are with their families, kids, pets, etc).

- Under the current circumstances, you need to know and have much more **understanding for the personal situation** of your key stakeholders.

- You need to take **time to re-create social interactions**, e.g. at the end of a meeting, a 5 min chit-chat and asking how the other person feels right now. A leader may ask: "What´s going to make them feel safe?" or "What would you need from me to be able to perform at your best in the current situation?" These questions should come on a recurrent term. Why? Some people, e.g. introverts, need longer to be able to answer. Showing a personal interest, gives a **feeling of inclusion** and **creates a bond**. As a leader, you need to create such an opportunities for yourself and for your team members to connect. Strategies can include a virtual team lunch or a join afternoon coffee or after-work drink.

5. **Clarity:**

- **Set boundaries** and **respect personal time**, especially by working virtually in different time zones and with diverse teams. Questions or topics to be addressed here include: "Are there specific "office" hours team members are expected to maintain?" *Virtual working* often *means* **working longer hours** because the work is ever present.

- "Is there a process in place for securing a backup for the team members, e.g. in case they need to be away?" "What media / platforms will we use?" "Meetings etiquette, e.g. attire, look, etc."

- **Be explicit** about the **new norms and rules** of virtual working. Your team needs **clear direction** about the **responsibilities and expectations** of working remotely. What norms are established or are there any at all, that govern "How the team makes decisions, communicates, and collaborates?" Don´t assume the *implicit expectations* of a leader or of a few team members working occasionally from home, are *explicit known* by everyone and are immediately applicable to the entire team function virtually.

- Create a **corporate culture of awareness and inclusiveness**. We are all humans and we are all together in this crisis. **Be there for each other and support each other.**

6. **Communication:**

   - *Clear* and *effective communication* is the key to working successfully in a virtual team. Therefore **setting rules** and a **communication framework** (see as well *5.Clarity*) is of primary importance and a key for **establishing trust** among team members.
   - **Trust** is build over time, through interpersonal interactions, which currently are physically strongly reduced. When working remotely we lose the most encounters that are important in fostering a personal connection, as well as the visual cues of our body language.
   - In response to the COVID -19 – virus, many organizations have the chance to recognize that remote working can be as productive and efficient, as working "on-site", if not more so. This is a fantastic opportunity for organizations to build trust with their employees in a virtual environment, as well as an opportunity for the employees to prove themselves trustworthy in response.
   - Therefore it is important to **reach-out proactively**, using **video** calls / meetings, to keep the **one-on-ones**, as well as the **team meetings**, in order to bring people together to combat loneliness and increase the sense of **team identity** and **belonging**.

There is much more, which can be add to the above. I personally give the advice to my clients to "stay present", to "be in the moment" and to ask themselves: "What do I have control over?" "What can I do to make the difference?"
This time of disruption is a wonderful opportunity for all of us to reflect and to stay as much as possible connected with our deeper purpose and meaning.
We are all humans, we are all together in this, we rely on each other and are there to support each other. Higher Awareness, good Self-care, Compassion and Empathy are the ways to stay positive, to keep our personal lives in balance and to be in the best form we can be in order to support our teams and organizations.
Stay safe and healthy,
Christiana Mitcheva

CHRISTIANA MITCHEVA, M.SC., MA

Executive Coach, Supervisor, Organizational psychologist and Trainer /

Senior Consultant / Business Development

Christiana is a financial services industry expert with over twenty years of international corporate and consulting experience. She is a change professional with significant practical experience in businesses and people transformation. Her expertise includes holistic Transformation and Supervision, Team Development, Sales Strategy, Stakeholder Management, Virtual and cross-cultural teams, Innovation Management and Change Leadership (PMI). Christiana is accredited systemic approach Business Coach (ACC), a certified supervisor and certified Marshall Goldsmith stakeholder centred Executive Coach, as well as an Emotional Intelligence Professional (Academy of Management). She holds Master degrees in International Business and in Business- and Organizational Psychology. Born in Varna, Bulgaria, living since 1999 in Vienna, Austria, she loves travelling, exploring different cultures and countries, sports, as well as spending time with her family.

For any feedback and comments, please reach out as follows:
Mag. Christiana Mitcheva, MA
Executive Coach, Supervisor and Trainer / Senior Consultant / Business Development

+43 650 54 19 276
christiana@lighthouse-od.at
office@allegraconsulting.at
www.lighthouse-od.at
Skype ID: chrismitch777
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/christiana-mitcheva-van-waveren-hogervorst-853a433

Lighthouse Organizational Development
Mariahilfer Strasse 1D/13
1060 Vienna, Austria

Training I E-Learning I LMS