



THE COVID ROLLER COASTER





MANAGING THE MENTAL TOLL OF EXTENDED LOCKDOWNS OR COVID WAVES

People were starting to feel hopeful. Vaccine rates were rising; travel was opening up; families were re-uniting. Plans to embed a new culture of hybrid working had leaders and their people moving toward a new future. We thought we were creating the next normal. And then, across the globe countries, states and cities have been faced with new spikes or accelerated waves of the virus. We have been through waves and moves back into lockdown before, but that does not make the reality of ongoing uncertainty and changing parameters of containment any easier. In fact, shifting back into multiple lockdowns or having restrictions extended for long indefinite periods is mentally more challenging for most.



LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

Our brains crave certainty. Certainty gives us a sense of safety. Many studies have shown that people will opt for certainty of a negative outcome, over an enduring period of unknown potential negative outcomes. It is this hunger for certainty, that keeps pushing us to articulate the next normal, yet, most regions are still in a holding pattern- an extended phase of uncertainty and it will be this way for some time. The enduring nature of the pandemic volatility has played havoc with our innate drive for freedom that most people have not lived with before. Having lived lives of abundance and more choices than we often need, many people have not developed the 'mental muscles' to thrive in an ever-changing situation. The growth opportunity in this difficult time is to develop these 3 mental muscles which will equip us to be able to adjust to an ever-changing world, beyond the fallout of a pandemic.



3 MENTAL MUSCLES

Acceptance

An important mental muscle to build is acceptance. For many, acceptance holds negative connotations of giving up, apathy or succumbing. But acceptance is a source of positive power. Accepting our context, allows us to acknowledge what is feeling tough and empowers us to have agency where we can. Without acceptance, our brains will keep trying to solve elements of our situation that are not in our control. This constant search for an answer, trying to fill in the blanks can keep our brains running when they are in desperate need of a break. It is exhausting. It depletes us. Accepting the volatility, acknowledging many dynamics in our worlds will stay ambiguous for some time allows us to focus on the decisions we can make, the actions we can take.

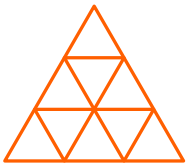
Emotional literacy

Historically, the business world has discouraged the expression of emotions. And yet, we know that suppressing your emotional response to challenges in your life just amplifies the emotion. Think of the emotions of a toddler – they will keep demanding your attention and will get louder until they are acknowledged. In the early phases of the Covid crisis, many leaders quickly learnt that showing empathy and seeking to understand their people's concerns was critical. Showing emotions was normalised, and leaders practiced greater compassion. This need has not gone away with time. We are all still adjusting to radical changes in every aspect of our life, and as we adjust to one version of day to day reality, it changes again.

For those dealing with second waves, extended timelines of curfews or restrictions, for many the sense of loss that comes after a taste of greater freedom is a harder adjustment to make. Tighter restrictions can make us feel like our worlds are getting smaller, and smaller. Similar to grief, one loss soon after another provokes a lot of questions. It often takes longer to process a second loss as it can be more intense. It can feel like things are getting more out of control, less predictable. No matter what phase of Covid management your region is in, as a leader, giving time to regularly process your team's emotions during enduring uncertainty is critical. Giving space to acknowledge how people are feeling, helps them to move through the emotion, or at least turn down the volume, and therefore the level of distraction. Leaders would do well to note that the experience is different for everyone. Some of your team members may be celebrating a delay in returning to the office, loving the comfort of remote working. Whilst others may be feeling despair of a prolonged period of confinement. Giving space to emotions is not the same as wallowing in them – this is where a positive mindset can help your people balance worries with hope.

Opportunity mindset

Our brains are wired to constantly scan for threats. In more stable times, this scanning helps us to anticipate challenges, plan for the future and motivates us to act. However, in volatile times it can become a destructive source of anxiety. It can drive addiction to news alerts and social media, looking for the information we need and fuel over-planning of endless business scenarios. Whilst we do not want to minimise or overlook the changing context, we need to shift the interpretation of all the changes as a threat to thinking of many of the changes as sources of possibility. As a leader, your mindset will set the tone for your team. Mindset is conveyed by the language we use - notice, on balance, are you talking more about concerns, risks and threats, than you are about possibilities? Again, it will not serve anyone well to ignore the volatilities – but once you've acknowledged the concerns move your language to positive change words such as opportunity, prospects, new alternatives or green shoots. Setting a tone where you anticipate positive outcomes from the difficulties will foster creativity and empower your people to evolve your business whilst still surrounded by uncertainty.



EQUIP YOUR TEAM

It was quickly realised after rushing into crisis mode, that the response to the pandemic was not a sprint to push through, but a marathon to undergo. There are many good reasons why running a marathon requires preparation and training. And yet, many organisations and their leaders ran the first marathon of their lives without preparation. Getting to the end of what feels like a marathon of remote working and curtailed, contained living, there is now a new realisation dawning that we are running an 'ultra marathon'. It is not physically possible for humans to be working through such volatility without some recovery strategies and the development of new mental muscles to adapt to ongoing pressures. We need to draw strength in the times of greater certainty, greater freedom but not fool ourselves that there is not going to be another race to be run.

For most of us, living and working through enduring uncertainty is an adjustment that will take time. To adapt, you need to understand the impact of ongoing stress and uncertainty, to not let it get the better of you but to move through it with learning and growth. You can do so, for yourself and your team, by accepting what feels difficult, creating space to process the emotional responses you are experiencing and intentionally developing new mental muscles to manage the challenges, and grow through the tough times.

Leaders don't need to have all the answers, but they can set the tone.

YOU CAN ENABLE YOUR TEAM BY:

- **Understanding your people's unique needs to manage changing goal posts.** They may need time to process their emotions when timelines change, or they may need practical support to think through what habits or routines they can put in place to manage another 3 months working from home. What do they need to accept about the current reality, that would help them focus their energy on the elements of their role and life they can impact?
- **Coaching them to re-energise in ways that work for them personally and practically.** Initially people found ways to replace their usual daily or weekly forms of respite. In prolonged restrictions, your team members may need a prod to ensure they are replacing their annual vacations, family events or sporting events with other breaks from work. Not only are these important for the brain to have a rest, but they serve as calendar markers to move toward. If uncertainty makes planning difficult, encourage them to identify what they will do within the next month to look after themselves.
- **Connect them to their learnings from the initial crisis phase.** When things feel tough, we deprioritise the very things that help us to maintain our resilience. Explore what worked for them, what depleted them and coach them to reset their rhythms. Remind them that research shows creating structures helps to minimise the demands on our brains at a time when we are processing a lot of change. You may want to do this as a team, to have collective wisdom and share strategies if people are struggling to feel motivated.
- **Pay attention to what hasn't changed.** When a lot is changing around us, we overlook that many things stay the same. This is particularly true in organisational life. As a leader, continue to focus your team on elements of your strategy, values and culture that remain the same. Appreciate what remains stable; appreciate what is consistent in your team in spite of the shifting landscape. Spotlighting what is constant balances the chaos.

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