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LEVERAGING EMPATHY: A GAME CHANGER FOR THESE DYNAMIC TIMES

At this time fraught with myriad challenges and endless uncertainties, we've all been operating under exponential stress for an extended period of time. Both personally and professionally, we find ourselves adjusting as we go and facing an array of emotional ups and downs that seem to have no end in sight.

The overwhelming confluence of issues produces high to extreme levels of emotional and physical stress that deplete our internal resources. This leaves us feeling fatigued and anxious precisely when we need energy and enthusiasm to maintain endurance and develop mental resilience. For leaders, the highest priority during times like these is to be facile, skilled and courageous enough to address and support colleagues who may be struggling on a number of fronts.

When tensions are high people do not behave or perform at their best. Leaders need to create the necessary time, space and opportunities for team members to interact in the most productive manner during this "new normal." But safe conversations don't come easy. They need to be encouraged and managed. Therefore, leaders must extend grace and empathy to ensure that their teams have appropriate outlets and opportunities to express the concerns, fears and anxieties that they may be experiencing.

How to identify stressor reactions

Stressors trigger changes in the human brain. Normally, the limbic brain interprets crisis from emotional stress, such as an angry remark from a close friend, similarly to the way it experiences being chased by a predator. It's a survival response that served our ancient ancestors well. But during a crisis situation, a neurological shift

activates the amygdala or primitive brain. This response often reveals personality traits that do not show up in someone's typical, everyday state. This in turn, negatively impacts interpersonal communication.

When faced with fear, anxiety and stress, the primitive brain employs two essential survival tactics. First is to assess the situation. How serious is the threat? And second, determine the appropriate physical reaction: Flight, Fight, or Freeze. These reactions are effective responses that ensured the survival of the human species over millennia. However, in modern society they often uncover personality traits that are not productive in team environments like the workplace.

Here are ways that Flight, Fight, and Freeze behaviors might present in today's modern workplace:

Fight

- Assign blame
- Irritable and agitated
- Amped up

Flight

- Withdrawn
- Rationalize and justify
- Avoidance and escape

Freeze

- Numb
- Aloof and insensitive
- Stunned and inactive

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Creating a Safe Space to Recharge

For the wellbeing of an organization whose workforce is psychologically compromised and fatigued by all of the stressors, anxieties and disruptions, it is vital that its leaders continually recognize the psychological ramifications for the organization to move through and beyond crises. Leaders need to build resilience within themselves, their teams and their organizations in order to persevere through and beyond crises.

To build resilience leaders need to engage in four key behaviors:


- 1. Establish Psychological Safety** – create an environment that values candor, vulnerability and authenticity in relationships, meetings and across the organizations. To accomplish this, leaders must continually take inventory of their own behaviors, body language, tone and mood. Approachability is critical. Measure your effectiveness by inviting feedback from trusted advisors.
- 2. Demonstrate Empathy** – explicitly engage in conversations with team members that provide a platform to discuss their concerns and challenges and take the opportunity to validate and confirm their emotions, reactions and situations.
- 3. Acknowledge Emotions** – the identification of emotions that people are experiencing is vital for recovery. You have to name it to tame it. If you ignore emotions, they grow.

It's increasingly important to appreciate that our colleagues may be facing many issues at once (e.g., physical and mental health concerns; financial stress; e-learning with children; caring for aging parents; racism; social unrest) and to share in our common humanity.

- 4. Increase Connection** – enhancing community and connectivity, especially in remote or mixed office environments, will allow organizations to build a foundation for resilience. The transparent and vulnerable connections that people must make during the recovery is critical.

Speak up and make connections. Share your own concerns and fears, as awkward and uncomfortable as that may be. As Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman so eloquently recited at this year's Presidential Inauguration, "We've learned that quiet isn't always peace."

Traditionally, we've been able to successfully compartmentalize our lives, keeping personal issues at home and out of the workplace. But the pandemic has presented a significant disruption in our lives as so many of us have brought our workplace home.

Listen, acknowledge, validate and, most importantly, remember that empathy is perhaps the most powerful tool a leader has during these dynamic times. The importance of establishing and nurturing a psychologically safe organizational and team culture is crucial now more than ever before. 



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