

Why Thinking More Slowly Will Get You Through April 2020

Introduction

Since the COVID 19 restrictions came into force we have all had to work incredibly quickly in order to meet the crisis and begin adjusting to the new conditions governing how we deliver our businesses. We've had our own ups and downs as an organisation and have tried our best to support everyone we work with over the past couple of weeks. After several fascinating conversations with clients across the public, voluntary and private sector we wanted to share what we have learnt and to help make your next steps as easy as possible. This paper is written to help us all make sense of what is happening, to support you to create an action plan for the 'new normal' and then take your organisation into a future beyond the current crisis.

If you want to read about actions you can click straight through [here](#), if you want a summary it's [here](#) and if you want the [thought](#) piece it's here.

Summary

Clear and definitive leadership emerged immediately in the early stages of the crisis at senior levels and below, supported by effective prioritisation, high levels of communication and a great deal of patience and collaboration within and across organisations. It has also become clear this is a crisis different to others: it's going to be longer, more sustained and there will be no immediate return to business as usual. We are now wondering if there will be any return to business as was and this throws up a bigger and longer-term dilemma for organisations and their leadership. Under a more immediate crisis we might expect to implement a short-term disaster plan, adjust normal working patterns for a fixed period and then get things back to normal. In the current crisis it will require a significantly different response that is less familiar and will be dominated by the need for 'slow thinking' over a sustained period of time. Slow thinking isn't to be mistaken for taking things slowly. Instead it's the ability of an organisation, its leaders and decision-making bodies to engage with a process of thinking that allows for greater consideration, deliberation and logic. It's a process of thinking that will allow them to avoid over- or under-reaction and to safeguard against approaching an unknown situation with pre-made solutions.

To aid this we have provided a simple framework to help leaders consider the state of their organisation and leadership throughout the crisis:

1. A sustained and proportionate approach to the immediate crisis
2. Immediate re-establishment of business as usual under the 'new normal'
3. Dealing with the life under the 'long-tail'

All of these areas will allow organisations to exert greater influence on the immediate crisis, to start to live with the 'new normal' and to eventually shape their future as we emerge from this period.

Three Stages of Change and How to Respond

Considering the Covid-19 crisis through different stages will allow organisations and leaders to create and respond in a more thoughtful and structured way, not only in how they develop new systems but also in how they lead their organisations at each stage:



Stage 1: Managing The Crisis

There will be a period of coping with crisis, where organisations respond to the environment created by the COVID 19 epidemic. Instant implementation of emergency procedures and contingency plans with the emergence of a crisis workforce in key industries has been the dominant priority. This includes arrangements for staff, customers and services as well as considering what the financial impact is going to be in line with the support packages offered by the Government.

The length of time is expected to be longer than a 'normal' crisis and it may have differing periods of intensity. It will be characterised by a need for urgency, clarity and extensive communication and for leaders to act now and direct operations to survive. The crisis will continue to dominate senior leadership's time and attention for some time to come and although it's too hard to tell how long this period of survival will last for, leaders will need to be conscious of when they start to pull out of this or to get the crisis element of their work contained.

This stage is likely to require decisive and bold leadership that can communicate clearly and align resources to urgent needs. Staff, customers and service users are all likely to be patient through the early parts of this period but it will be hard to sustain for both leaders and organisations.

Stage 2: The New Normal

This period of crisis will eventually make way for the 'new normal' as remote working and an adapted version of business as usual delivered through new channels becomes the norm. In some cases, whole areas of business have closed down entirely and in others the ability to deliver projected activity has been adversely affected so it's likely, even in best case scenarios, that productivity will have dropped. It's unlikely that this phase will have been considered in emergency planning, yet it will demand a high degree of resilience and adaptability from everyone involved.

Once you've dealt with the immediate impact of remote working, social distancing and new office arrangements there will be an urgent need to deal with the human challenges of an organisation now operating at a distance. For those staff whose work remains familiar there will be less change, however all staff (regardless of role) will be experiencing a significant change to working and personal arrangements and much greater uncertainty about the future. The challenge for organisations and their leaders here is tough. With a lot of senior leadership tied up in crisis mode teams will need managers and leaders able to find proactive and innovative ways of building capacity, managing and engaging the workforce and it may present an opportunity to shape how you want to be as an organisation. The slowing down and spacing out of key processes and the enforced 'staying in one spot' during the 'new normal' phase will mean that after an initial period of

time there will be more space for some leaders, managers and staff to adjust to different ways of working.

This stage is likely to require leaders to continue to show high levels of personal resilience as they demonstrate empathy to drive engagement. However, it will have to be balanced with continued clear communication, delegation and some difficult calls about where to prioritise resources.

Stage 3: Dealing With The Tail

Eventually the main restrictions will be lifted, requiring us to deal with the long tail of the crisis and shape the future as we emerge. Energy will be stretched, staff will want holidays and your organisation will want speed to make up for lost time. Key tasks here will include the re-integration of staff, rebuilding teams and reinvigorating projects and contracts. This stage may well be busier than usual with lots of catch-up, issues and re-normalising to take place.

This stage may offer some comfort and allow leaders and managers to return to business as usual, a relief from all the thinking and consideration of the previous months and with some hope that things can return to normal. However, less commuting, fewer meetings, more time at home, different processes introduced will have had an impact that people will want to be considered as you come back together. This will pose a challenge for leaders to consider whether to take this opportunity to shape their future or to let events unfold and assume normality will emerge. A degree of transformation will, to some degree, be inevitable because of the huge shift in how organisations have adapted to cope with the crisis, but organisations who come together to lead this transformation may come out faster, healthier and stronger.

This stage will be characterised by a need for leaders to empower staff and teams, to inspire, generate energy around new possibilities and a create a spirit of optimism.

How Long Will All This Take?

Each stage will see you having to introduce or accelerate certain aspects of leadership and management in order to make the right decisions, retain the confidence of staff and make progress.

Right now, people will need their managers to be willing to make decisions and show clear direction. Even if these decisions are difficult or painful, the removal of ambiguity and doubt around our workplaces is perhaps the biggest single feature that will help us to move forward in the short term. As you move through the stages – even with the added challenge of remote working – you will be able to distribute responsibility as you adopt a more hands-off role based on effective vision-setting, coaching and delegation.

In terms of timing, this will be driven by the nature of Covid-19 and your business, not the calendar. People may be tempted to fit how we might move through this in fixed chunks of time – one month for this, three months for that – but the factors that determine an organisation’s journey through the stages will more likely be unique, or determined by the specific environment it operates in:

Industry Sector	•Are there governing rules on how and where services can be delivered? Will customer behaviour be permanently altered?
Stakeholder Base	•How practical is it for customers to return? Is the supply chain intact and fit for purpose?
Organisational Readiness	•Have staff been retained or is recruitment required? Is any lead-in time needed to get products to market?

What Could You Do At Each Stage?

Stage	What Will We See?	What Do You Need To Do?
1: Managing The Crisis	<p>Implementation of business continuity plans;</p> <p>Surge in motivation and willingness to help with those in crisis roles working longer and more sustained hours;</p> <p>Significant numbers of people working from home or stood down; Business as usual, budgets and financial plans adversely affected; immediate switch to online platforms; services to customers altered / paused.</p> <p>Long crisis period anticipated;</p> <p>Staff and customers patient with changes.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide focused, visible support for making the quick adjustments required 2. Deploy resources to manage new priorities and making sure that decision-making and communications remain effective 3. Over-communicate and drive for clarity 4. Task-focused leadership that is decisive and able to get things done at speed 5. Be aware of vulnerable people and operations 6. Start thinking of stage 2 and 3 – don't wait and get caught out! 7. Communicate (current priorities).
2: The New Normal	<p>Organisation settles into new patterns of working (from home, distanced in the office) and new roles (crisis and adapted business as usual).</p> <p>Pockets of innovation from staff, teams and managers;</p> <p>Continued exploration of virtual resources; reorganisation of teams;</p> <p>Greater uncertainty and desire for answers.</p> <p>Organisational problems (task and people) surfacing/re-surfacing; Limitations of teams' abilities and capacity to work from home/at distance.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Step back to assess and understand the state of staff and the organisation 2. Provide clear guidance on timeframe and expectations for working patterns 3. Listen, understand and build trust and relationships 4. Affirm what the medium term will look like 5. Consider the balance between personal and professional approaches to the new arrangements with focus on giving staff and customers clear, unambiguous messaging 6. Understand the difference between working from and leading from home (train managers on how to extend their influence to engage and lead teams remotely) 7. Establish systems to enhance team and organisation wide working 8. Train staff on tech to maximise its effectiveness (beyond video calls to online collaboration and relationship building) 9. Start thinking of stage 3 – don't wait and get caught out! 10. Communicate (understanding of reality – supported by optimism about the future).
3: Dealing With The Tail	<p>Re-integration of staff into shared spaces; return to more regular routines and product / service delivery;</p> <p>Reassessment of financial position;</p> <p>Short-term planning and goal setting.</p> <p>Longer-term financial planning begins; confidence and optimism return;</p> <p>Air of caution and vigilance remains to balance and act as warning to ensure succession and contingency plans are made and shared.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop a shared picture of success for the organisation, staff and teams to actively shape the future 2. Facilitation of discussion and reflection in order to draw out key lessons and ensure that 'old ways' aren't immediately reinstated 3. Separate out the business as usual from the new. Get those areas that need relatively little change operating efficiently asap, allocate resources and time to the other areas where more change is needed 4. Set stimulating team activities to encourage engagement in organisational future, make connections across all levels and create genuine ownership 5. Communicate (vision, hope, optimism – balanced with understanding reality).

What Matters Now?

As the early impact of COVID 19 is being processed by the business community we have identified a number of key areas and interesting source material that might be particularly pertinent to focus on to support your work at all stages across the crisis:

Habit Forming - perhaps the most obvious change has been the enforced move to working from home for many people, which coupled with the presence of others being in the home who would otherwise be elsewhere has placed a huge pressure on people to adjust whilst still delivering results for their business. We think that you have to practice when forming new habits and routines and keep working at them until they become as natural as those that they replaced. Organisations and leaders can help by instilling new routines and checking on the areas they want to see people adapting in.

Find Out More: [‘Bounce’ by Matthew Syed; www.zenhabits.net;](#)
[Behavioural Change White Paper, Laura Mack](#)

Critical Thinking - with so much pressure to deliver results, many organisations don’t give themselves the space to think clearly and instead try to solve their problems using yesterday’s thinking. Right now, leaders have to access and use their slow thinking, taking more time to consider how they might tackle and overcome complex issues.

Find Out More: [‘Thinking Fast & Slow’ by Daniel Kahneman; Time to Think, Nancy Kline](#)

Leadership - right now we are enduring an unprecedented scale of unplanned, enforced, instant change. This is not the type of change that motivates most people as it creates uncertainty, mental stress and worries about the future. Managers need to be clear with leadership communications and instructions as people get used to new priorities and different ways of working. Whilst this might at first need to be very directive, it will also require managers to consider how they can best support their teams without creating unnecessary challenge or ambiguity. It will require a huge range of leadership skills and emotional intelligence.

Find Out More: [Leadership That Gets Results, HBR, Daniel Goleman](#)

Resilience - underpinning the more theoretical aspects of our work is a genuine interest in people’s behaviour. Now more than ever it is important to build a resistance to challenges and obstacles and develop the ability to bounce back from everyday challenges in order to maintain focus and motivation.

Find Out More: [TED Talk by Dr Lucy Hone](#)

Transformation - without getting too dramatic, after this is all over it’s fair to say that nothing will be the same again. After working differently for an extended period of time, to move forward we will all need to regroup and rethink the future. Organisations that choose not to do this might find themselves being left behind. While changes can apply to processes and activities, transformation requires a bigger shift in mindset to create the conditions for lasting impact. At this point you need your people to be brave and imagine what the future might look like, envision the impossible and then build teams and partnerships to work out where and how across the system things can change for the better.

Find Out More: [Leading for Transformation White Paper, Professor Chris Bones & Ollie Mack](#)

Where Can You Find Us?

We hope that these thoughts have given you some useful markers to compare with your own as we all cope with the extraordinary turn of events and its impact on how we work. We would love to hear what's in your heads right now, as by sharing our experiences and feelings we can all learn and become more confident that we will be able to implement strategies to get through this thing.

To stay in touch with our thinking please follow us on the various social media below. We will share articles and our thinking as the crisis continues:



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Please get in touch to discuss any aspect of this paper, find out about how our business has been affected and what we are doing to adjust or simply share your stories about how you are getting on with the changes:

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