LEADERSHIP

6 Ways a Crisis Can Help You Cultivate a Growth Mindset

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Disruptive, stressful experiences are often opportunities for growth. Research has shown that crises can help lift the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mantra that pervades many organizations, creating new opportunities for people to voice their ideas on how to do things better.

For example, when the pandemic forced an insurance company we advise to go fully remote, the challenge of remote work prompted several teams to explore better ways of tracking progress. Field employees proposed new metrics for tracking sales contacts with customers, as well as new ways to integrate these metrics with existing key performance indicators on the Salesforce platform. Leadership liked the new system so much that it's now being scaled nationally.

Similarly, basketball and hockey teams often show improved performance after losing teammates to injury, because the remaining teammates are able to discover new ways of working together. As teams are forced to take on new challenges, face new uncertainties, and recover from mistakes in the Covid-19 era, they begin to internalize that both their own abilities and those of their peers are not fixed, but rather can be developed.

This growth mindset can serve us — and our teams — well during this crisis. Below, we offer six suggestions for managers looking to leverage the transition to remote work to nurture a growth mindset in themselves and their teams.

Be patient. While it may feel like a long time, we are still only a few months into the widespread shift to fully remote work, and we are still learning. By now, most everyone knows how to share a screen or a run a breakout session on Zoom, but it may take longer

to reshape deeply ingrained work practices for a remote environment. Be patient with yourself and your people. Remember to recognize effort, even if outcomes don't yet live up to your expectations.

While it's nice to talk about the benefits of a growth mindset, learning a new practice is challenging and the lack of immediate, measurable progress can be discouraging. Forgive yourself, and be generous with others — try to focus on the effort being put in and the valuable insights you're learning from that effort, rather than the lack of immediate results.

Teach the growth mindset to others — and reinforce it in yourself. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella spent his first months on the job teaching people the value of a "learn it all" culture rather than a "know it all" culture. He led by example, sharing monthly videos where he reviewed his top learnings and prompted groups across the company to discuss theirs. Consider doing something similar on your team, though perhaps on a smaller scale. For example, you might dedicate part of a weekly or monthly team meeting to a discussion of what team members have learned during the crisis so far.

Send the right signals. Both what you say and how you act send critical messages to others. For example, in a recent study, leaders asked newly promoted executives, "What have you done since we last talked, and what if anything have you learned from it?" every two weeks. Fairly quickly, *because they knew he would be asking*, they started to pay more attention to their own growth and were astounded by how much they were learning.

You too can send signals to your team. You might ask about learning, or informally reward progress made, lessons learned, and recovery from mistakes as much as star performance. To model what a growth mindset looks like in action, you might share not just your final triumphant plan, but also the setbacks and potholes along the way.

Reset expectations and revisit established practices. The shift to remote work provides a perfect excuse to reset your team's expectations around giving and receiving constructive feedback. If you're a team leader, try asking, "What three things would you

try to change if you were in my role?" Modeling openness to feedback will make it easier for your colleagues to accept feedback themselves.

This crisis is also a good time to encourage your team to assess and improve established practices. Online work is significantly less forgiving of coordination and leadership failures, so it's a great opportunity for involving others in implementing immediate course corrections. This might involve starting meetings by communicating what you know, indicating that much is still unknown, and inviting teammates to share not only their knowledge, but also their concerns and questions. By getting things out on the table, more issues can be addressed.

For example, a team leader we advised shared that after just a few weeks of remote work, an open conflict broke out between two of her employees. The tension, as it turned out, had been simmering for months. As the team leader started to sort out the situation, she realized that the root of the problem was that one of the employees had a rather terse and direct communication style, which the other employee found offensive. When work went remote, the tonal ambiguities in their emails coupled with the pre-existing tension in their relationship caused the problem to escalate quickly, resulting in a major conflict.

In trying to learn from this episode and revise team practices, the team leader facilitated a session with the entire team to brainstorm how best to communicate in a virtual environment. One new practice the team developed was the "two email rule": if two emails sent to a colleague are insufficient to resolve an issue or reach an agreement, you are expected to call or video conference with that colleague. After implementing this rule, the team both had fewer misunderstandings between employees and was able to more quickly resolve complex work issues.

Get to know your teammates better. Working remotely, we're coming to know our teammates in a different way. We see their workspaces, their children, and their pets. One executive jokingly commented that before Covid, if a cat jumped onto a teammate's laptop during a (rare) virtual meeting, the typical response was embarrassment, apologies, and a hastily disabled video feed. Now, he said, people just laugh it off. Studies suggest that

being less worried about social evaluation and embarrassment stimulates experimentation and creativity, both of which are key to growth. Additionally, other research shows that personal identity expression at work can also boost employee creativity.

While the Covid-19 crisis presents a variety of new challenges, it also creates new opportunities for leaders to cultivate a more expansive growth mindset in themselves and their teams. Though it won't be easy, the right mindset can help teams to better coordinate, innovate, and own their own futures, making it possible not only to weather the crisis, but to come out of it stronger.

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