

Not every dramatic event causes trauma!

Leadership and managing fear in times of crisis

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In these uncertain times we are talking to many leaders about what the crisis is bringing out in them as individuals and in the organizations or departments they lead. The very first question is how to handle fear – and sometimes even panic – in employees in a healthy way. Leaders too recognize feelings of fear and panic in themselves. Reason enough to pause and think about it.

Our brain, fear, and how we respond

Nothing sparks our collective fear more than a crisis situation and there are as many different responses to fear as there are people. This makes it challenging for leaders to respond appropriately and to keep things together while at the same time making sure that they themselves remain healthy and resilient.

The human brain hates pain and it instinctively tries to avoid situations of stress, fear and loss.

It does this by trying to regain control.

But fear is an important emotion that helps us save our lives in dangerous situations. Without fear, we would soon die. So fear can be a good adviser. It makes us alert and triggers us into action before our rational brain has thought about the best course of action. Our adrenaline makes us push down hard on the gas and take action such as fight or flight.

If it transpires that we managed to tackle the danger and we are safe again, or the danger has subsided, our antennas retract and our bodies start relaxing. We still feel that we are in control.

But fear can also stand in our way. It could be anticipatory anxiety, for example about what an invisible enemy such as the coronavirus could do to us, or a fear from a past event that resurfaces. In situations that we experience as extremely threatening, fear turns into panic.

When this happens, access to our rational brain closes down,

words fail us and we respond instinctively. We hit the brakes and turn around really fast. We may be physically present, but we are not in contact, we have checked out and our bodies freeze. We have lost all sense of control.

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Should we be afraid of trauma?

The word 'trauma' is often used these days without a clear definition of what is understood by it. The question then arises whether it is the right term in every situation as it creates its own reality. We see trauma as an overwhelming event in which the person does not have the means with which to process the event in their nervous system. In general, we see that employees have lost contact with themselves and their personal and professional circles. This could lead to isolation and paralysis, or to obsessive behavior, including obsessive work. The same event will affect one person much more deeply – and possibly indeed more traumatically – than another.

It is important that leaders handle this carefully and not stick the label 'trauma' on an event too quickly. Each event, including those related to the current coronavirus crisis, should be assessed as to whether it is or may become traumatic in itself.

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The role of secure bases

The impact of a potentially traumatic event largely depends on two main factors. The first factor is whether employees have access to a secure base or a network of secure bases.

In other words, do they have access to people who offer security and proximity, help with emotional discharge, and encourage them to get back on their feet and learn from the experience?

The second factor is whether the employees are also able to see themselves as a secure base. What we mean by this is whether they have had enough positive experiences in profound and potentially traumatic events that could serve as a powerful mental memory. If so, they may be able to build on that resilience.

A significant proportion of people who work in health care and in many other sectors, often experience strong emotions. Most of them discover that they are resilient enough to handle these emotions, now and in the near future. A network of secure bases helps them calm down and retain their connections through which they can learn and develop. The combination of these two aspects allows the brain to relax, widens the circle of influence and creates the new, healthy feeling of control that our brain needs.

One danger of using the word trauma in most stressful situations is that it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and lead to unnecessary fear. It also creates unnecessary distance and a reluctance

to act, thereby creating the conditions for paralysis.

The severity of the experiences or the degree of disturbance do not necessarily belong in the realm of doctors, company social workers, psychologists, coaches or psychiatrists.

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That these professionals are there is hugely comforting. But they cannot and do not have to solve what is primarily the task of the leader and employee. In general, these are normal responses to unusual situations in which leaders can become meaningful by remaining calm, close by and in contact. In doing so, they help normalize situations. This type of preventive action can help avoid trauma and create the space for the professionals to help the employees that need specialized support.

What leaders can do for their organizations and their employees

The most important endeavor is for leaders to create safety and trust; be present; take and keep the initiative; and communicate clearly and in a way that unites people. What we mean is the following.

Leaders must be able to unify people in circumstances other than 'normal' circumstances. If they are unable to do this live, they must do it with some kind of video system. On top of hearing their voices, being able to look people in the eyes is supportive and reassuring. The 'check-in' at the beginning of a working day or shift becomes more important than ever. It means explicitly creating the space to first share something about the here and now, about specific experiences and various questions.

Examples of questions include 'what concerns do you have at home'; 'what do you find inspirational in the current situation'; and 'how do you feel now at the start of your shift'?

The leader invites the employees to briefly share a few words. The employees, as well as the leaders themselves, should not

get lost in their stories, but share the essence. Leaders should not take over from or suggest solutions to the others, but trust the resilience of the employees.

Make connections and offer choices

This requires leaders to move forward, while they will initially intuitively want to take a step back. It calls for facing the fear, taking that step forward to stand with and behind their people, and being tangibly present. Say what you do and do what you say is hugely important in uncertain times and reassures employees.

Leaders encourage autonomy and resilience by asking questions and remaining attentive. Questions could be:

- + What can I do for you now?
- + What do you need at the moment?
- + What or who is helping you feel safer/better/calmer?

If an employee has no words to answer, the leader may offer options. In this case, closed questions may be better. Do you want X or is Y better? Is it better for you to go home this afternoon or is it better for you to be here? Is there someone at home for you when you get home?

Apart from offering space for feelings of fear and not suppressing or belittling them when they emerge, it is also important to create space for humor. Even in the most fearful circumstances, apart from tears, movement and humor can be a huge release and could just be the push that someone needs to get going again.

Checking out is just as important as checking in. It is a powerful ritual that eases the transition from work to the new reality of home. Here too, leaders create a point in time for reflection. In an unforced way, they share the good experiences or achievements that have stood

out, and also shares their own discomfort and vulnerability. They do this with a personal and human touch and do not 'preach'.

What leaders themselves need

The hurdle is high for every leader at this time of uncertainty. They need to draw on everything they have. It is also important that they can trust secure bases, can ask for enough support and have a buddy. It is important to remember that 'I need to do it myself, but I do not need to do it alone'. Asking for support shows strength and courage.

Stay focused on learning and developing

When painful and unpredictable things happen, it is only natural that the human brain tends to focus on the potential doom scenario.

But research shows that a different energy and spirit emerges if the Mind's Eye (the part of our brain that determines what we focus on) concentrates on positive experiences, however small they may be. They may be the silver linings, the big and small successes. Or something that was learned or that was already known but is suddenly understood. Positive experiences stop people slipping into powerlessness and give them the feeling that they are worthwhile. The leader explicitly facilitates the sharing of these at the end of the shift or working day. Thinking back over the day, these positive happenings could be: that a patient opens their eyes again; a client calls to express their support; a grateful telephone call; the simple solution that a colleague has come up with; a talent that someone did not know they had; the bunch of flowers that arrived unexpectedly. Zooming out to the greater whole gives the courage needed to go on and to deal with the difficult things.

About the auteurs

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