

How are we cultivating culture while navigating a crisis

By Debbie Craig



As we enter week 4 of the Lock-Down (some of us week 5 or 6), many of us are busy re-organising, re-engineering and re-imagining how we work with ourselves, our clients and with our families in close proximity, we also have more time to reflect on our thoughts, dreams, possible evolving futures and our impact and contribution to life, work and people we know and love.

As we work closely with many clients on building enabling cultures, this has been top-of-mind. The big question we need to ask ourselves is: ***“How are we cultivating culture in this crisis?”***

This question can be asked of work teams, communities and families, all of which live within a “culture” or “the way we do things around here”, and directly impact feelings, engagement, confidence, connectedness and ultimately energy and motivation to contribute or give their discretionary effort.



A sailing analogy is useful here. The early stage of any crisis i.e. hitting some rocks, understandably is to focus on keeping the boat afloat, with all hands-on deck doing whatever they must for however long, without which there is no worthwhile future. Once back on an even keel, with people safe, safety equipment in place, tools and technology tested and new survival rules communicated, we can start lifting our heads to the horizon to see where we might be going, in which direction is the wind blowing, what options or routes are there, what are the risks and dangers along the way and how many resources do we have to survive the journey. Crisis meetings become scenario planning sessions with leaders expected to show up with energy, commitment and ideas and then investigate options at great speed through collaborative efforts. All this takes an enormous amount of energy and resilience. It is not only about

managing a business or a team but leading a family (often dispersed) through a crisis and the intense emotions that accompany such a global uncertain complex crisis with no clear way or timeline going forward. These can include amongst others, anxiety, frustration, anger, guilt, or grief for the loss of a way of life, an income, a plan, a dream or

even a friend. Imagine a crew on a damaged yacht in the middle of the ocean, feeling shocked, confused, and not knowing where they might end up.

Throughout all the busyness of basic survival, crisis management and scenario planning, everything we do is observed and experienced by those around us. In this time ...

“are we keeping an eye on our compass, our true north, and the values and behaviours that enable our survival and navigation toward a sustainable future?”

- If people **growth** and **innovation** are our stated values, how are we assisting people grow and create in this time?
- If we say that **communication** and **transparency** are cornerstones of our culture, how are we communicating and being open about our process and plans?
- If **care** and **collaboration** are the way we interact, how are we taking the time to check in with our teams and really listen to where they are at and brainstorm how we can collaborate together to get through this time of high stress and high change?

The way we prioritise and make decisions in times of crisis is often a reflection of the true values and mettle of the leaders and in turn the company they represent. It is often tempting in these times to focus on the task at hand, with a very valid reason to do so, but miss the opportunity to balance task with team. Everyone is taking strain during this time, and as leaders it is our responsibility to keep the boat afloat and sailing, AND also ensuring that the crew has the capacity, energy, health and capability to sail the boat for the long haul ahead.

Here are a few quick things that you can do to keep focused on cultivating culture as you navigate a crisis.

Care: reach out individually to your team members (or family) to check in with them at an emotional level. You ask questions such as: how are you doing today? How is your energy today? What is concerning you right now? What is on your mind today? How do you feel today? Your previous history will determine the initial level of trust to answer these honestly, however there is no better time to start than right now. The way you respond to the answers will help to build trust if handled with care, compassion, real listening, follow-up questions and the offer of any support that is possible within the time or resources you have available.

Connect: make regular time each week for a virtual team meeting (or family get together) that is not only focused on immediate operations but makes some space for connecting personally with each other. Most people have a need for social interaction and sense of belonging, and this can keep people connected. You can use some fun tools like take a home photo and share (what are you wearing!!), or share favourites such as music, meals, or movies as well as favourite social media post or videos. You can take this a level deeper with sharing such as: greatest challenge today? greatest highlight today? what is on the radar today? what are you most worried about today? etc. Keep it light and fun with good balance of honouring the person and a sense of humour to laugh WITH each other (not at each other). In between keep in touch on a WhatsApp or Telegram group with clear guidelines for interaction, so the channel is not cluttered with too much unnecessary “noise”.

Communicate: when you communicate to your team or organisation about the crisis, responses, changes or updates, weave in key messages that reflect your values. Include symbols, quotes, pictures to reinforce them. Encourage people to respond in particular ways i.e. care, connect, and collaborate and how this behaviour is building the culture and a great place to work. Balance the message with reality AND hope and optimism about the future, and what we can create if we do this together. As a family, be conscious of what you discuss at the dinner table or when you do sit together in person or virtually. Once again, encourage a balanced view of inputs and discussion, avoid reinforcing sensationalism or fake news, and rather keep an open, curious mind, than declare any rigid opinions from a place of uncertainty.

Coach: As a manager of others (or a parent with kids studying or learning at home), observe and listen out for the often-subtle need for help. Many of us try to put on a brave face and do not want to put any more pressure on an already busy and stressed leader or parent, and so will try to cope on our own. A few questions can help to

determine the level of help needed: what did you struggle with most today?, how are you feeling about your productivity/motivation/energy/work/studies today? how about we sit together and work through a few of those? Watch and listen for the less obvious signs where a little bit of coaching would be really valued. Sometimes it is not that much about the content of the struggle, but the care of the investment in time to sit with in person or on-line.

Capacitate: There are so many new things to learn during this time. We are using new tools, in a new space, with less than optimal working environments (possible noise, distractions ... or too much silence for those who live on their own). This could be an ideal time to pick a few of the new tasks, tools or technologies and create mini-learning groups to explore, experiment and then share with the larger team. This crisis will have a major impact on how we work in the future with many futurists predicting a significant shift to virtual and remote work and teams. Encourage the habit of 1-2 hours of learning each week, so that we are more skilled and relevant by the time the crisis is over. Set a task for the week i.e. create a 2 min video using Zoom and MS Photos; create a collaboration board using Mural and share it on Zoom; create a new project on MS Teams and invite team members. This encourages collaborative learning, connection, and a sense of urgency to learn.

Every day is a delicate balance of activity and energy to get through the day, and then the week and the months ahead. Set your day up right with some quiet time bringing in some positive intentions and affirmations about yourself and your day. End your day off well with tuning in to how you feel about your day, your thoughts, your feelings, and your impact on others. Strive for a balance of learning and continuous improvement with kindness and compassion toward yourself. It is ok to have lazy, unmotivated, or stressed out days. It is also ok to feel good about being at home with family without feeling guilty for not doing enough. Just take each day with some consciousness of your options and choices and make the overall journey count.

Everything will be ok in the end. If it's not ok, it's not the end.

