

SUMMARY

As leaders find themselves leading in uncertainty, in a world where no-one knows very much anymore and all previous bets are off, this piece proposes the case for the leadership pause.

What is it like to be a leader and to find yourself in a place of “not knowing?”

Lockdown has provided many with an opportunity to experience more “being” and less doing. What have we noticed about ourselves, what have we learned? What might be emerging as we step forward into the new future?

Surely, we have not gone through this crisis for nothing – let us honour the opportunities and learning it has provided us with a pause to reflect, recover and move forward. What is now possible if you no longer have to know?



In the Thick of It

We are all in a great social experiment. One that has been foisted upon us.

As Damian Barr observed when he wrote recently, “We are not in the same boat but in the same storm”. The experience is not evenly distributed as many have suffered loss of income, jobs and loved ones, while many are experiencing an increased sense of collaboration, creativity and the space to take stock and pause. One thing is certain – we cannot predict what the future holds for us, our organisations and the people we lead. This is a problem since management and leadership training historically assumes “that a certain level of predictability and order exists in the world.” (HBR 2007).

Leaders are having to navigate your new normal, as a leader of self and as a leader of others. Who are you as this emerging leader?

There is much we can do with our living history of today to give spaciousness for the leader within us to emerge into this changed world.

We are all working with the unwelcome, the uninvited. For many it feels like.... **“I knew what I was doing, the system worked, my management skills worked and the processes by and large did the job.....all of this now feels like a distant memory”**. We no longer need to imagine a time when our leadership is challenged, we are in the thick of it now; in a space of dynamic learning.

As a leader, ask yourself;-

What has it been like for me in the last few weeks?

As you reflect on this, remember that no one has got this sorted. We have been catapulted into this “space of not knowing.” You are not alone here, we are all in this same storm, all at the same amazing point in time. How are you **BEING** in this precious time?

This is a time to be more present with yourself. What do you notice you need? What do you notice is important to you? What is it like for you not to be able to predict the future? How do you typically react to this state?

Only by caring for ourselves can we begin to be more available, as leaders, for those we lead.

Your people also require to be more present to themselves. This is not a time to rally them. It is a time to soothe. To be alongside them, letting them know that they are not alone in uncertainty and worrying and not knowing the future. This is a time to allow a little vulnerability to show through and perhaps share that “I don’t know either. I am worried too”. And invite their thoughts. “How might we move together towards the future and towards knowing...?”

Keep breathing

If you want to be a more effective leader, want to stop the hurry and the busy-ness, it is quite simple; choose to take a breath, step back, take stock, step back and consider, “what is the most important thing here?” and “what do I need?”, and ask your people “what do you need?”.

Finding your pause

Event (or Stimulus) → reaction

It is easy to be swept along, without even realising how we are automatically reacting to the stimuli around us.

By creating a pause, to breath and reflect, we allow an opportunity to choose our conscious thoughtful response.

Event (or Stimulus) + Pause → Response

The pause creates the vital moment to reflect and check in with yourself and respond appropriately, rather than react automatically.

Ask yourself: “what can I do to create a pause? What would it be like for me to have more pause than before? “How might I work with this pause?”

Some people tell us that it is the first time they have ever slowed down or stopped. The upside of this crisis is that they can spend more time with the family, make the most of the recovered commuting

time and connect with people in a new way. It can be an uncomfortable, guilty feeling to be pausing while the world is in crisis, yet it is also an amazing opportunity.

Who are you now?

We are now in a period in our history where one can no longer hide. And remember that is a major reason why people stay busy. They keep the attention away from what's inside them with displacement activity. Some people hope they can get through life without changing anything at all. *Spoiler alert*; we **cannot** get through this by not changing anything at all.

We are not the same people we were at the start of the crisis. We have grappled with the unfamiliar, created new habits, found new routines and perhaps rediscovered old skills.

As Byron Katie might ask “who are you without the thought that you need to have it all figured out?”.

We are all learning to live in real time and that can be disorientating. What are you uncertain about, confused by, discomfited by? – name it so as to acknowledge and normalise it – and in so doing create the space for that leadership pause and ensuing learning.

We are the innovators of our own lives

Wars tend to accelerate innovation as plans are compressed in time and real priorities heightened. Innovations are required to come forward and happen faster and impact sooner than expected. All previous bets are now off.

As a leader ask yourself:-

- what are the changes I want to make to go in a direction of my choosing?
- how might I use this pivot point?
- what does this mean for me?
- what and who can help me?

Start to vocalise these answers and dare to dream.

Listen to your inner wisdom

I invite you to check in with your inner wisdom each morning for a few moments – “What do I need today?”, “How do I want to be today?” Listen to the answers: it may come in the form of a feeling, a sensation, words or an image.

Check- out with yourself each evening – “How am I leaving the day?” Notice the wisdom within you.

If you are finding this article interesting and would like to explore being supported through these times in a group of similarly curious leaders, contact Liz and Doug who run facilitated reflective partnerships groups for leaders.

CSA Faculty: [Liz Nottingham](#) and [Dr Doug Montgomery](#)

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