



COVID-19 NAVIGATING YOUR COVID CONTEXT FOR THE LONG-HAUL

How differently will we need to work in an ongoing COVID context?

1. Assuming you're a business employing mostly knowledge workers, like so many, it's probable that lots of (even most) work will be able to be completed remotely. Organisations (and individual staff) have coped remarkably well with remote working. If remote work is to be sustained, it's likely you'll need to intentionally audit aspects of remote collaboration, to ensure everyone can put their best foot forward.
2. A key area of focus is on individual wellbeing, especially in these early days where people may be grieving the loss of certainty of old ways. Some grief may arise from a sense of loss of connection, which was perhaps taken for granted when people were physically collocated. You may need to create opportunities for people to meet online less formally, rather than having only regular business meetings online. Also, try and avoid stacking back to back (no breaks) meetings in an ongoing way or meeting too often!
3. Clarify team and individual objectives – really helpful in non-COVID situations and more vital now! Work together on ways team members can support each another as individuals, including working in smaller groups as needed. Building and sustaining that sense of connection is a priority.

COVID-19 is here for the long haul

Like it or not, it seems as if the pandemic will continue as a 'clear and present danger' for the foreseeable future. With more than 6 months having passed since Case 0 in Wuhan, horizons have shifted. It wasn't unreasonable in those early days to anticipate a few months to a year of disruptions, maybe a little longer for a vaccine.

Now, while furious efforts in the search-for-a-vaccine still give rise to some hope of a positive outcome in the not too distant future, we probably need to accept that we're in it for the long haul. That was one of the scenarios suggested early on, but communities chose hope of speedy resolution over the more menacing prospects of an extended battle, with significant casualties, both health and economic.

In some ways, choosing to be hopeful in those early days was vital for sustaining mental health. The widespread and unprecedented shocks could so easily have led to protracted paralysis and inaction. Instead, though initially shocked, most people were able to pivot to a mindset of getting on with life, as best possible, under challenging conditions. In Australia, that meant coping with the toughest level of COVID restrictions, rewarded by infection rates that plummeted across the country. For most, the lower level restrictions that followed, seemed more manageable. Perspectives had changed.

Now, some 4 months after Australia's first big lock down, the dreaded second wave seems to be surging in Victoria and causing much concern in NSW. Selective suppression initiatives mean that swathes of the population are again on the highest level restrictions. Although still quite broad, restrictions are much more targeted, focusing on outbreak location, as well as much more effective tracing of both infected individuals and clusters.

Second wave restrictions haven't been welcomed by many of those impacted. This time, they know what they're in for is not especially pleasant. There isn't the novelty of wave one, neither the initial anticipation of reasonable suffering, to be followed by a 'snap back'. There is, much more generally, a sense that, perhaps at local levels, there will be waves of infection that prompt suppression interventions. It does seem now, 6 months into the pandemic, as if we're going to need to live with this well into the foreseeable future.

Moving forward

As happens all too often in this industry, there are plenty of smooth operators out there now proclaiming the need for only-just-imagined ways of working. Like the sudden switch previously, for example, from unconscious bias to inclusive

leadership, when the latter became more saleable. Buyer alert, buyer beware! While it may be the case that COVID-19 is novel, nearly all of the business practices useful in COVID times also existed before the pandemic struck.

The difference in context is that COVID-19 has quickly raised awareness and even provided impetus for adoption of fresh ideas, where organisations previously might have been reluctant to change. While there were challenges with old practices, they weren't sufficient to prompt action. But COVID-19 became that 'burning platform'.

Moving forward as individuals

Our first concern is for the wellbeing of individuals. To ensure that organisations can survive and thrive in the pandemic, the wellbeing and resilience of their individuals who contribute to those desired outcomes is paramount.

While not all stories of working from home are positive, given how unprepared people and their organisations were, take a bow "Working from Home". It is clear that there is a lot more comfort and confidence now in using the technologies involved with remote working. The sky did not fall in! For many knowledge workers, it was almost 'business as usual. The phrase 'bring your whole self to work' truly flourished, with rooms, partners, children and pets all making their debuts in some or other work meeting.

However, it is clear that, while many adapted well to these changes, there is nevertheless a sense that people need support, if this way of working is to continue for the long haul. Organisations will need to think carefully about how they will facilitate individual contributions in ways that increase the sense of belonging that people seek.

Helping teams succeed in the COVID climate

For many organisations, teams are the most vital business unit. This fact doesn't change with remote work, but it can be harder to collaborate virtually, especially without any training in how to work effectively but differently from before. Teams would benefit from focusing on how to collaborate well in a virtual context. In particular, getting better at virtual video meetings would provide a huge boost to productivity and a sense of belonging.

Taking steps at business level to adapt to COVID-19

Businesses will also need to adapt. One significant change would be to recognise the impact of VUCA and transition to more change agile ways of operating. Additionally, doubling down on clarity of overall purpose will help people engage. Finally, add being crystal clear about specific outcomes from individual effort to prime for solid results.