

# In the eye of the crisis – and now what? Recuperating into Resilience

The Corona virus pandemic has taken us all by surprise. Although some are more prepared than others, it has none the less set us under stress in one way or another. The loss of structure, control and social proximity, heighten the experienced stress, in addition to having to increase our awareness in order to reinvent and adapt our environmental sensors. However, for us as managers stress per se is not the issue. **How we respond to stress... is the issue.**



Under stress we tend to shift into survival mode. Like the safety instructions in an airplane, it is important that we attend to ourselves, and then help those around us. Management during crises is the craft of walking a thin line between ensuring one's own functionality, in order to enable others, and ensuring one's own functionality to merely focus on one's own result delivery.

Our competence to deal with stress, is defined by our resilience. Resilience is a coping process to deal with any level of arising disruption, expected or not - just like the current situation. The process of cultivating resilience is the same as that of strengthening our muscles. To build healthy and functional muscles we alternate between periods of working out and periods of rest and recuperation.

→ *Along the same line, resilience consists of tackling stress with skills (work-out) followed by using the available tools to rest and recover (recuperation). For example, a stressful call is providing us with practice, however after that call it is important that we do not automatically head into the next stressful call, but rather go for a few minutes into constructive rest position.*

Our employees, just like us, need the rest and recovery period. In these times it is imperative for us as manager not to unload unnecessary tasks onto our employees and to give them enough time and space to recuperate, and to find their own technique to swim through the current currents. Below are some guidelines and practices to strengthen our stress coping techniques and rest mechanisms to maintain our resilience.

## Guideline 1: Establish a daily rhythm

The precise terms of the necessary rhythm vary from one person / job to another. What many, however, have in common due to the current pandemic, is the unfamiliarity of working from home over an extended period of time. It is a double challenge to cope with constant virtual reachability while trying to establish new routines and thus a rhythm. It is important to establish as much automatism in our daily schedule as possible.

→ *Designate the same time slot every day for both business activities (conference calls, tasks, A-priorities, coffee breaks,...) and private activities (mealtimes, family/social time, and me time for exercise a.o.). Make sure to merit equal priority to breaks and physical exercise as we do to conference calls, meetings and deadlines.*

As managers, once we have established a rhythm and some stability, we need to turn to our fellow passengers – our employees – and make sure our needs are not superseding theirs. The art is in our ability to keep an eye on the needs of our employees, who then in turn can focus on the needs of our markets and customers.

## Guideline 2: Ensure focus and productivity

To ensure productivity and focus, it is important to establish a rhythm that alternates between dopamine rich and dopamine free activities. What do we mean by that? Screen time causes the production of the hormone dopamine in our bodies. It is great for short periods of productivity and focus. Dopamine is however the antagonist of the sleep hormone melatonin, so if it is not kept in check, it can reduce the quality of our sleep and in the long run reduce our focus and productivity.

→ *Establish a rhythm that alternates between screen time and screen-free time.*

We should not fall, however, into the trap of comparing the previous level of productivity or that of our employees to the current one. The previous level of productivity reached its peak with years of training and routine. We are now treading on uncharted terrain like a child learning to walk. No need for worry, as we will also be “trotting” in no time, key is to be patient, diligent, and not to give up.

→ *4 hours of focused work are better than 8 hours of a distracted one.*

### **Guideline 3: Rest and recovery**

The stress hormone cortisol damages cells in our hippocampus; the part of our brain that regulates motivation, emotion, learning, and memory. These cells can be best replaced by physical exercise and social activation.

→ *Use the position of constructive rest for 3-5min twice during your workday.*



→ *In addition to your favourite physical exercise plan and execute 1 to 2 activities that rebalance the parasympathetic nervous system every day – like walking outside, deep breathing, [screen-free] none-competitive play or practicing Yoga.*

→ *Activate your social support network to enhance the sense of empathy and cohesion - be creative by for example meeting friends and peers in virtual spaces like online for lunch.*

Last but not least, it is as important that we retain a positive and constructive outlook – in other words to manage our emotional resources.

→ *Consume [negative] news in moderation and rather capitalise on positive experiences and emotions by dedicating a time once a day to note down all the positive aspects this particular day has brought with it.*

Cultivating positivity alone is only half the fun. Introduce constructive AAR (After Action Reviews) with employees and team. Moderate those reviews to be constructive and positive. Such reviews can also offer an important additional sensor of our environment, both for checking in on our employees as well as gaging the conditions of our customers.

### **How do we manage all these little new habits without them causing us more stress?**

Firstly, we need to economise on mental space – plan those activities in the calendar as recurring series with a gentle reminder function. Ritualise the day as much as possible. The less we have to think about it, the better.

Secondly, accept that it is a process of learning by doing. Therefore, take the time in the evening to reflect on how well the day went and integrate all learnings in the planning of the following day. Change does not take place overnight; it is an ongoing process.

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