

Context & Leadership Principles COVID-19

From Interruption to Disruption



Bunkering down and attempting to control things until they return to normal will limit our ability to serve people well and will rob us of the unique opportunity to develop personal and organisational capabilities



We need to discover how to humanely navigate discontinuous and disruptive change, and to help people to step into new realities and let go of the past, the familiar and what is known.

Andrew Day, 2020

How leaders serve employees, their families, suppliers, stakeholders and the broader community whilst navigating complex business choices will be a defining moment, both for organisations and society.

Viewing COVID-19 as a temporary (albeit extended) interruption to endure, after which things will return to normal, will rob us of a rare, perhaps even unique, opportunity to learn.

As we become accustomed to new ways of operating in response to COVID-19, leaders must discover how to navigate this extended period of continuous disruption and rapid change.

Episodes and cycles of this nature (although hopefully not of this scale) are set to become more frequent as we move into and learn to operate in increasingly complex environments.

This is not an unpredicted, one-off occurrence, rather it is shining an uncomfortably bright light on the impact of global social and political issues. It is also illuminating the kinds of challenges organisations will need to become adept at managing to both survive and thrive over the coming years.

When viewed from this context, we have a unique opportunity to rapidly develop individual and organisational capabilities both to 'humanely navigate' the current situation and to learn how we can operate effectively in this emerging new world.



We do not know where or when the next global pandemic will occur, but we do know that it will take a terrible toll, both on human life, and on the global economy.

Dr Ghebreyesusⁱⁱ, Director General World Health Organisation, 2018

The Fourth Industrial Revolution

The Fourth Industrial Revolution represents a fundamental change in the way we live, work and relate to one another. It is a new chapter in human development, enabled by extraordinary technology advances commensurate with those of the first, second and third industrial revolutions. These advances are merging the physical, digital and biological worlds in ways that create both huge promise and potential peril.

World Economic Forum

Understanding the global context, the opportunity for learning and some core leadership principles will help us to step powerfully into this defining moment.

The Global Context

On the cusp of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, we are facing a time of unprecedented change and disruption as we discover how the physical, biological and digital worlds will merge.

Whilst it may seem that COVID-19 is an unpredictable black swan event that has thrown the world into chaos, this is not accurate.

The likelihood of a global pandemic has long been known. Both the World Health Organisation and World Economic Forum have for years warned of the risk and of our global lack of preparedness.

The consequences of inequality, the lack of universal health care and our vulnerability to biological infections are now being widely experienced in a most brutal and heart-breaking light.

COVID-19 is amplifying the global challenges we will continue to face at political, societal and Organisational levels.

Rather than viewing COVID-19 as a temporary interruption that once over will allow us to return to normal, we should view this as an opportunity to develop our individual and Organisational capacity to respond powerfully to the current challenge and also learn how to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Age.

A learning opportunity: from interruption to disruption

The emergence of theories and language such as VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) environments; WICKED (seemingly unsolvable) problems and Complex Adaptive Socio-Technical Systems are all indicative of this new world.

We have been thrown into a dynamic and unpredictable environment demanding flexibility, agility and innovation, and where collaboration, transparency, informal structures and devolved leadership are called for now.

These ways of operating are critical for COVID-19 and completely consistent with what will be needed of us to survive in the future.

Prior to this pandemic we found ourselves caught in a battle. A battle between the old and the new; between the bureaucratic and organicⁱⁱⁱ; between traditional and new values^{iv}.



Rather than waiting for the disruption to be over, or trying to control it, we should lean in and disrupt the disruption

This is a Defining Leadership Moment

Four Leadership Principles

1. There are no rules
2. Micro-Experiment
3. Ensure good decision making
4. Honour the human impact

Craving stability and predictability and afraid to give up what we know, we've relied upon authoritarian governance and leadership, where power is held by the few who control information and make decisions on behalf of the many.

Our instinctive response to the current situation may tend toward bunkering down and attempting to restore order. Hoping to ride out the interruption as best we can and wait for things to get back to normal.

Whilst understandable, this approach is problematic. Firstly, the world will not return to normal. We don't know what will emerge, but it will not be a return to normal.

Secondly, this approach won't take hold of the opportunity to develop our personal and organisational capacity to operate in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

One Core Principle and Four Leadership Principles

There is a unique organisational opportunity to untether ourselves from the past. Stepping into the unknown and resisting our desires to control or return to the past will help us emerge more resilient and agile; more capable of operating in the new world that is emerging.

Rather than waiting for the disruption to be over, or trying to control it, we should lean in and disrupt the disruption.

We must learn how to embrace the values of this new world.

These include a move to informal networked governance and decision making; to collaboration and crowd-wisdom, and to radical transparency.

It is critical to ground ourselves in principles. They will endure where other structures (such as policies and procedures) will quickly become irrelevant.





Effective leaders are transparent, empathetic and create trust. They even energise employees.



How we lead during this time will determine whether we fulfil on the ‘promise or peril’ of this new age

One Core Principle

This is a defining leadership moment

Leaders must stay true to organisational purpose, values and culture. Effective leaders are transparent, empathetic and create trust. They even energise employees.

Four Leadership Principles

1. There are no rules

We are in unprecedented times. Decisions are being taken at pace on a global scale that we would previously have thought impossible.

2. Micro-Experiment.

Now is the time to innovate. Empower and enable multiple fast-to-fail experiments to deal with issues. Devolved leadership is crucial; let people try different things and quickly learn what works and what doesn't.

What works in one micro-experiment may not work elsewhere. The domain is too complex and dynamic to attempt broad standardisation. Rather, focus on sharing learnings and look for principles to emerge.

3. Ensure good decision making

Good governance and decision making could not be more vital. Instinctively we may gravitate to traditional hierarchical and autocratic decision-making processes.

However, the dangers of groupthink and bias in decision making need to be countered.

Rather than bunker down, ensure cognitive diversity, engage multiple stakeholders and practice radical transparency. Spend time framing challenges and look for the core issues behind the presenting problem. This might feel counter-intuitive but will lead to better decision making.

4. Honour the human impact

Bear witness to the unfolding human tragedy. Practice kindness and compassion, beginning with yourself. How we lead during this time will determine whether we fulfil on the ‘promise or peril’ of this new age.

About the author...

Gill designs and delivers bespoke change programs for large complex organisations and works as a strategic partner with C-suite clients.

A sought-after speaker and author, she edits a blog 'The Grenfell Enquirer' to bring the thinking of major accident prevention to the Grenfell Tower fire. She is working with the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at Cambridge University to understand the 'Policy Lessons from Catastrophic Events'. She has recently been commissioned to write a book on systemic change.

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About JMJ Associates

JMJ works with clients around the world, unlocking human performance to transform cultures. Contact us today to learn how we can collaborate together to help you transform your leadership approaches to inclusion and diversity, creating an environment where people adapt, grow and flourish.

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References

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