



A Leaders Guide to Leading through Disruption – what lies beyond the crisis?

Much of the focus of leadership in the first few months of 2020 has been to act quickly in the face of an emerging crisis. While immediate action is essential at times of crisis and danger, unless organisations and governments are well prepared and have pre-planned for a variety of scenarios, initial action is likely to be more reactive than responsive.

This can leave us with a myriad of complex consequences that emerge as we move beyond the immediate crisis. To navigate this complexity requires robust and multi-levelled leadership capabilities.

To begin navigation, it can be useful to take time to understand and make sense of where we are right now, and in what ways our reality has changed. How has the crisis changed us, our relationships, our ways of working and our systems and structures? What have we learned through these disruptions? What opportunities have been created through disruption, and what kind of humanity, culture, organisation or world do we now choose to evolve towards?

As we orient to the present and gain clarity on the future we would like to create, it is also useful to consider the type of leadership necessary to actualise this. We can then begin to integrate learnings and apply new leadership practises or work in new and iterative ways, learning as we go.

This guide is for leaders who are grappling with emergence from crisis and navigating the complexity that will inevitably unfold through this journey. The guide takes us through these various stages, exploring the following key themes:

1. Making sense of our emerging world

- How do we best make sense of the emerging world?
- How can we build insight and capability to continue to evolve our businesses, organisations and institutions in the face of current and emerging challenges?

2. Enabling deeper learning

- How can we balance the focus on business and organisational continuity with organisational reinvention, regeneration, adaptation and evolution?
- What new community and customer needs may emerge and how can we be at the forefront to co-create new ideas and solutions?

3. Embracing disruption

- How can we lean into disruption as an opportunity for evolution and co-creation, letting go of things that no longer serve us?
- What (authentic) acts of caring and service to our clients and community and support for our suppliers at this time may generate deeper trust and more strategic partnerships into the future?

4. Evolving new patterns of leadership

- What new kind of leadership is the world calling for? What new levels of thinking and being are necessary? How has the crisis amplified this calling?
- After the crisis has peaked, how can we continue to lead from a higher level of consciousness, rather than reverting to old ways?

5. Leading from purpose

- How can we amplify our sense of purpose and use it as a guiding light?
- How could sensing into our emerging world and possible futures illuminate a more expansive purpose?

6. Overcome forces of reversion

- How can we establish new adaptive practices and processes that enable us to continually evolve?
- How can we pay attention to the forces of reversion, and recalibrate towards ongoing progress and evolution?

Using this guide

In our emerging worlds, with many complex challenges to address, there are unlikely to be easy answers or specific, correct actions to take. It is likely that we are going to need to feel and sense our way into the future.

While green shoots of a more adaptive, regenerative and sustainable world are already beginning to emerge, there are equally retrogressive forces likely to celebrate a return to what was and suppress possibilities for new systems and ways. A role of leadership at this time is to water the green shoots. It is also to build the ongoing capacities to lean into future disruptions and evolutions.

This guide doesn't provide easy answers – it offers broad principles and thinking frameworks to help leaders sense their way through. It provides ways to explore and progress within our context and markets, for the good of people, our industries and the world.

Some specific ways to use this guide include:

- Apply the sense making frameworks to better anticipate or synthesise emerging information
- Use the questions to understand what is emerging for teams or project groups
- Engage in personal reflection and leadership development
- Find ways to better navigate and utilise the complex challenges that emerge
- Identify the leadership and cultural attributes necessary to evolve your organisation
- Consider how to constructively co-create a more positive future

Please note that as you read this guide, when we refer to “leaders” we are not only referring to people in leadership “roles”. We all have the capacity to step into leadership and therefore this document is for any human being who chooses to lead.

1. Making sense of our world - sense making frameworks

“In a world with no time for sense making, nothing makes sense!”
 – Adaptive Cultures

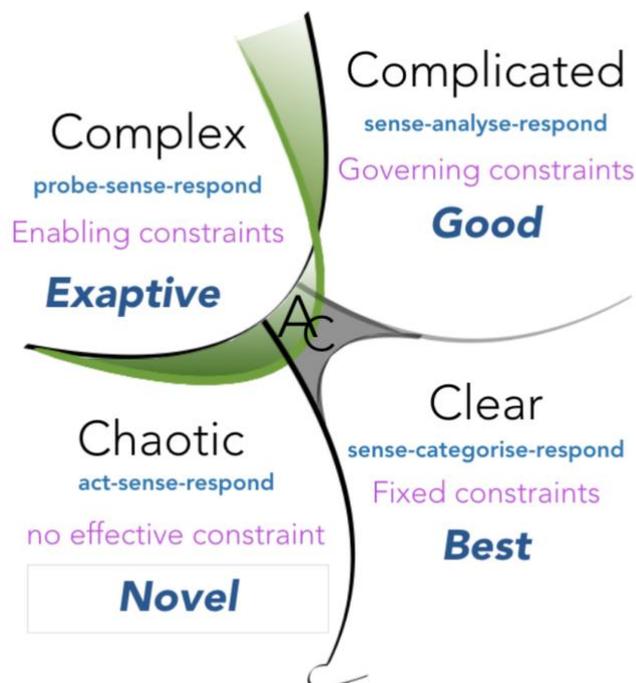
Principle 1 – Apply sense making frameworks in times of evolution and disruptive change

Many traditional tools and models help us to identify “technical solutions”. They help us to apply existing knowledge to diagnose and solve problems and challenges. However, they come with a set of (often very limited or unproven) assumptions and worldviews. Based on existing knowledge and expertise, they can limit capacity to develop *new* or *different* ways of seeing, being and behaving.

Frameworks for making sense of our emerging world

If we are going to use this opportunity (crisis) to help our organisations and systems evolve, we need to get better at leaning into complexity and thus find new and emergent ways of being. A sense-making framework that is helpful in exploring this is **Cynefin**.

The **Cynefin framework** helps and makes sense of what actions are appropriate for a given context.



Applying the Cynefin framework in the current context

The early stages of a crisis can be chaotic, typically require immediate action & are often accompanied by novel practices. Novel practices emerge at times of crisis as traditional constraints have been disrupted and there is no one right or wrong way. The acceptance of not knowing can also ease the leadership “burden” of having to have all the answers.

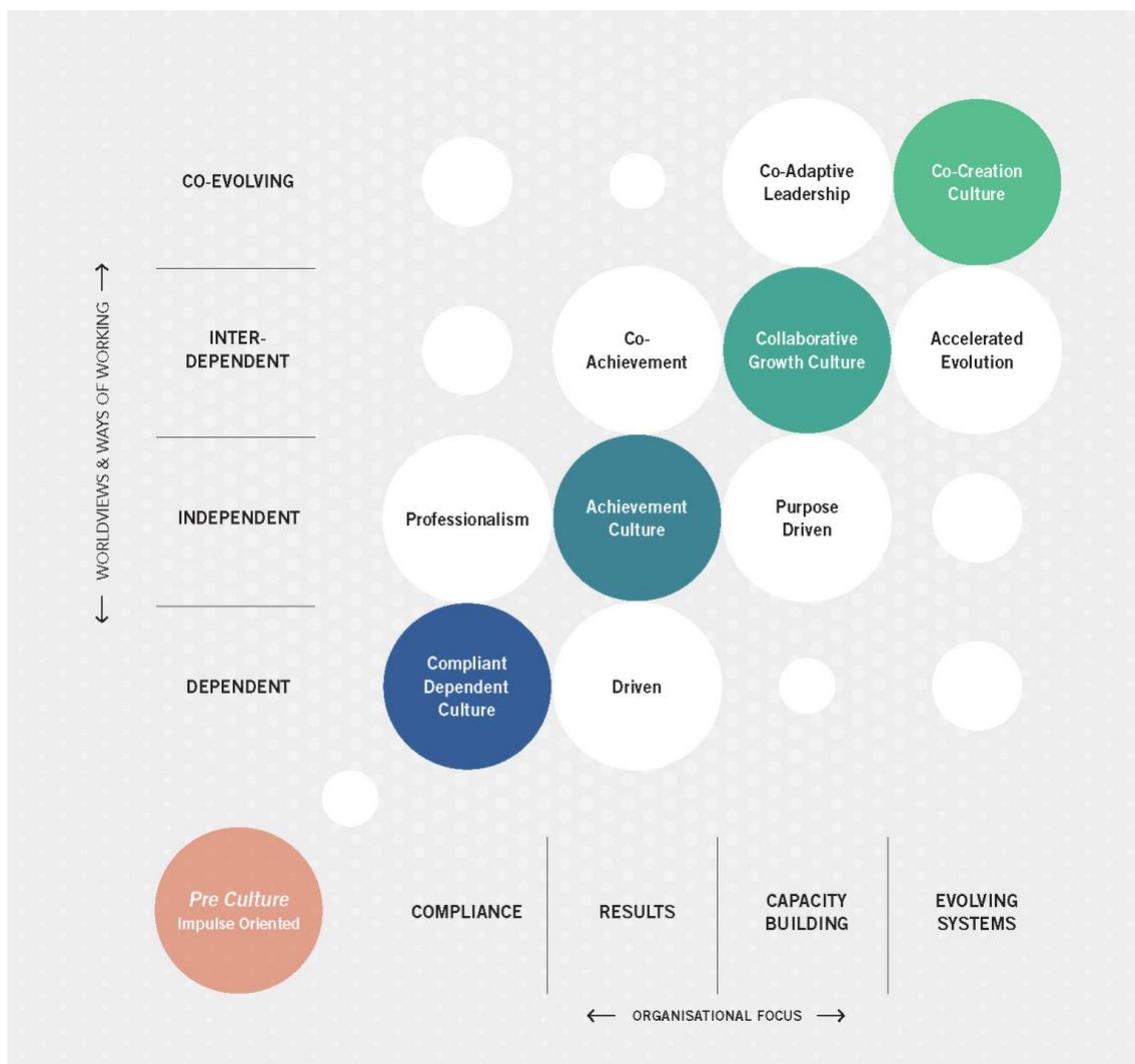
Taking immediate action and traditional problem solving may also trigger the dopamine “reward system” and can become addictive. Having long-term activation of the stress-response system can disrupt almost all our body's processes. This puts us at increased risk of many health problems, including anxiety, depression, heart disease, weight gain, sleep problems and memory and concentration impairment.

To move from chaos to complexity we need to support spaces of reflection alongside cycles of action. Leaders do well to be alert to this and find ways to expand their sense of value beyond command and control and problem-solving defaults. As Ron Heifetz described, “The most common leadership failure stems from trying to apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges.”, providing “known solutions” to challenges that require new learning.

A very powerful framework to help us understand how to embrace these adaptive challenges and to evolve through this complexity is the **Adaptive Cultures Framework**. This framework helps us to make sense of how systems can evolve, from more reactive and isolated ways of being, to more creative, regenerative, expansive and adaptive ways of being. The framework considers two key criteria that go through distinct stages of evolution:

1. Individual and collective worldviews, beliefs and ways of working
2. What the organisation or collective focuses on as being important

Greater levels of complexity in our world require greater adaptive capacity and therefore that we evolve our stage of cultural evolution.



Applying the Adaptive Cultures framework in the current context

The framework supports people to make sense of observed leadership behaviours, ways of working and organisational focus, and the culture that these implicitly reinforce. The framework balances the role of the individual on the system with an understanding of the role of context and the impact of the system on individuals.

For example, we are observing many leaders that enjoy leading through chaos. Leading through chaos can support reversion to traditional leadership defaults including the archetype of the heroic leader. The heroic leader and other more traditional leadership archetypes have a role as crisis emerges in providing steadiness and security for many. Many leaders happily step into this role as a core part of their existing armory.

While heroism can be useful and even save lives in the immediate moment of crisis, relying on heroic leadership beyond an immediate crisis may create many unintended consequences and ripple effects. For example, if leaders’ default to command and control or overemphasis on the field of action for too long, we do not gain the benefit of our collective intelligence and heart in building a new world and instead suppress human potential.

Heroic leadership can inadvertently reinforce compliance and dependence on “the hero” for the answers. It can also default to protecting against uncertainty by creating the illusion of control – a paternalistic leadership. This can inadvertently suppress the leadership of those not in leadership “roles”. To meaningfully explore and progress emerging challenges require more complex leadership that enables greater collective sense making.

The Adaptive Cultures framework invites us to explore what ways of perceiving, leadership practices and ways of working exist beyond heroic leadership. These ways invite more personal agency and distributed leadership across an organisational system, and enable a more responsive, empowered culture.

It also invites us to explore what futures could possibly be created through these expanded ways of leading.

Some questions to explore:

- What is happening for you right now? What are you noticing about how you and others are reacting?
- How can your team or organisation use current disruption to engage in a greater quality of sense making?
- How can you consciously lead out of chaos and into complexity? Where can you actively experiment to find new and better ways of working?
- What are you noticing leadership is “reverting to”? What does this suggest about the default stage of evolution of the leaders and culture of your organisation?
- What have you noticed about where people are being more responsive rather than reactive?
- When you consider the culture and leadership work that your organisation has undertaken, how has that prepared it for this crisis? How has that made a difference to how people have responded and the outcomes they are getting?
- How have the emerging ways of working democratised team decision-making, and in what ways have they disempowered people from contributing?

2. Enabling deep learning - closer virtuous cycles of action and reflection

“In times of change, **learners inherit the earth**, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.”

– Eric Hoffer

Principle 2 – when we are called to evolve rapidly, action-reflection and triple loop learning is required

In order to enable sustainable evolution out of crisis, we need to be able to individually and collectively observe, question and evolve our ways of making sense, our assumptions and worldviews. This requires deep listening, inquiry that opens and expands what is possible, and respectful, open-minded challenging of, and building on other perspectives.

The combination of these enable us to synthesise collective wisdom into generative action. We have experienced major leaps in collective intelligence in groups when they develop the ability to pay attention to, have dialogue on and progress challenges as they emerge.

Leaders can help to create spaces where learning happens “in the course of action” rather than keeping reflection and learning activities in their own separate and segregated timeslot. To do this requires leaders to role model and encourage a suspension of all the things that traditionally get in the way of new possibilities emerging. For example, suspension of judgement, of existing worldviews, of expertise, of reinforcing processes and structures, of existing ways of working.

This kind of learning is called “triple loop” learning. It helps us to move beyond incremental single loop learning (behaviour change or tweaks to existing processes) or reformist double loop learning (behaviour and thinking change) and into transformational and evolutionary change (evolution into new and more expansive and complex worldviews and paradigms).

During our current COVID-19 environment, we are seeing these different ways of learning and reflecting playing out. For example, business continuity and recovery approaches are traditionally based on single and double loop learning. Rather than creating from a new paradigm, they typically seek stabilisation in a new norm, such as moving our current operations online and virtual as much as possible (single loop learning). In the process, we might observe with self-awareness how we might collaborate more effectively or even change some of our existing processes once the immediate crisis has passed, based on our learning (double loop learning). For some, we might be imagining how we might view ourselves and our worlds differently, challenge existing paradigms about what is possible and re-create our world on the other side of the crisis (triple-loop learning).

As an example of possible triple loop learning in the finance industry, banks might support borrowers by deferring payments for 6 months with interest accrued (single

loop). They could move beyond this to fundamentally re-consider the role of banking in enabling healthy economic growth (double loop). Or they could, in partnership with regulators and other stakeholders in the system, examine the economic system and the assumptions and beliefs that underpin it. This could open up to other ways of perceiving and then nudging a new economic paradigm (triple loop).

Enabling the space to observe ourselves, our interactions, our world

While certainty, clarity and reliance on expertise may allow us to initially respond to the crisis, these ways of being and doing become an inhibitor to evolving beyond crisis. In order to evolve individually and collectively we need to hold our assumptions, thoughts, emotions and experiences very lightly, as data points for exploration rather than as undeniable “truths”. To do this requires reflection and exploration.

Through a practise of intentional action-reflection we can learn to participate with and co-create possible futures, rather than being subject to past patterns and current patterns that are disrupted in crisis. It can help us to create NEW patterns.

The data points we pay attention to or include may evolve as we make sense of the practices and context emerging beyond the current crisis. Rather than just holding more information (and exhausting ourselves and our capacity in the process), we need to pay greater attention to how we can more rapidly convert information to useable knowledge through the application of reflection and wisdom.

For example, we observe that in the current crisis, some decisions have been made very rapidly, many actions have been taken from one context and applied unthinkingly in another, much focus has been on “survival” rather than “enabling healthy systems” and many projects with longer term benefits have been cancelled. Some of those decisions are already being questioned. As we pay attention to the type of leadership and world views that gave rise to the reactivity and the need to act immediately, what can we learn about the nature of leadership, and about the kind of leadership necessary to take us forward?

Some questions to explore:

- How can your teams and organisations provide space to continually iterate, and to expand and evolve perspectives as new information emerges? How can you celebrate and value this as a strength?
- What radically new perspectives and multiple sources of insight can this open up?
- What have you learned about yourself in the recent months? What have you learned about what you pay attention to, what triggers you, when you may default to auto-pilot, when you may take time for reflection and sense making, how you learn?
- What has caused you to disrupt your existing belief systems or worldviews? What have you found yourself challenged to accept in relation to the disruptions?

- What could be possible if you were able to hold your existing worldviews more lightly and more readily synthesise new information with existing knowledge? How willing are you to question and let go of ideas that no longer serve you?
- What are you learning about sense making, about leadership, about yourself as you read through this guide?
- How can you synthesise and pay attention to short and long term needs and the need for both action and reflection over many leadership horizons?
- What cultural attributes are necessary so that your organisation can readily and effectively engage in triple loop learning?
- How might you develop these cultural attributes and create spaces to engage in triple loop learning? What might this mean for you, your communities, workplaces and worlds?



3. Embracing disruption – letting go of control to enable a new world to emerge

“When it is darkest, you can see the stars”
– **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Principle 3 – True progress relies on being able to free ourselves from our current ways. It is only then that we are able to see and co-create new possibilities

A measure of how dark the sky is on a given night is determined by clouds, dust, haze and light pollution. In moments of crisis, many of our existing processes, archetypes and relationships are suspended. Suspended with them are much of the cloud, haze and pollution that we carry with us through our worldviews, our perceptions, and our associations. This opens the door to possibilities yet unseen.

However, disruption is often perceived as getting in the way of, rather than enabling, generative change. As humans, we have the potential to get better at embracing disruption rather than avoiding it at all costs. By embracing disruption, we can balance the need to ameliorate immediate consequences with an increased capacity to learn from and grow through them.

What if we formed a new human identity based on a capacity for leaning into disruption and change, embracing these forces and learning with them? We imagine we would have a far more robust and resilient world.

In disruption, a laser focus can emerge as we become much clearer on what is truly important. However, we need to be very intentional in what we focus on, and not move too quickly to a decision, without considering other possibilities or unintended consequences.

What is likely over the coming decades *is* increasing disruption and a need to re-invent and regenerate many of our ways of perceiving, thinking, being and becoming.

If we do not use early crisis to let go of what no longer serves and embrace the opportunity to co-create a better world, we will continue to band-aid over systemic impacts and create greater experiences of pain.

Some questions to explore:

- What are you and the people in your organisation currently attached to (behaviours, mindsets, worldviews, processes, ways of working, pet projects etc.) that may need to be let go of to progress and evolve?
- When and how can you enable your organisations to let go of these things?
- What has already been taken away that opens the way for new possibilities?
- What may people still be holding on to that is stopping them from seeing as clearly as they could?
- What novel practices are you seeing emerge in your organisation that are liberating energy and creativity? How can you bring use these to co-create your future?
- What has the crisis allowed you and your organisation or communities' people to achieve – that you might have previously thought not possible, or not ready for? What lessons are there? What assumptions drove these previous perceptions?
- As you look upon the new landscape, without the hindrances or weights from before, what new possibilities have been generated or unveiled?
- What stories or narratives would people be sharing, and how would people be talking about disruption, if it was truly embraced in your culture?



4. Evolving new patterns of leadership

“We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking with which we created them”

– Einstein

Principle 4 – through disruption of existing leadership paradigms comes the potential for new ways of leading

Leadership is not a static concept. The kind of leadership required evolves as our context and the world around us evolves. For example, while Henry Ford’s brilliant innovations gave voice to efficiency and controlling the means of production, they were set in the context of a largely uneducated workforce and a consumer market with limited choices. While celebrated at the time, this paradigm of leadership is now clearly holding us back and may even have contributed to many of our current challenges.

The kind of leadership the world is calling for today

The world has changed dramatically in the last 100 years and continues to do so. Our current environment has been sufficiently disrupted that there are many ways of leading that are beginning to emerge in response. The following are a few:

- The acceptance that no one has an answer to our current crisis, and that the power of possibility lies in not knowing, rather than attributing a false sense of

certainty. This is leading to a move away from deterministic view of the future towards a deeper understanding of multiple possible scenarios

- Working from home (in some cases) is shifting the power dynamics so often held in organisational spaces. The synthesis of our whole lives inside and outside of our working day is leading to a deeper and richer appreciation of humanity
- The total disruption of existing business rhythms and processes is leading to a more intentional setting and re-setting of boundaries to enable spaciousness, clarity and guiding principles. One example of this is through an understanding of current economic disruption, less focus on short term results and performance metrics has enabled deeper customer-centricity and community care.
- The rapid spread of the virus across multiple continents and the various responses from each country that have myriad impacts on us has led to a richer appreciation of the interconnectedness of all systems
- Concerns about social disconnection have heightened attention on psychological wellness and a deeper appreciation of the need for social sensitivity and checking in. This includes paying greater attention to inducting new people into the organisation and caring for the “whole person”.
- Many of the traditional attributes of leadership (drive, competition, execution, certainty) make little sense in the current world. There is a deeper calling for more humane leadership attributes such as emotional sensitivity, compassion, and collegiality.

Some questions to explore:

- Who is the leader that you are being called to be in the current context? Not the leadership that people want (clarity / certainty etc.) but the leadership that will enable the system to move forward?
- How can you support deepened awareness in each person you touch as a leader?
- What are the cultural attributes needed in the emerging world for your organisation? What kind of leadership is going to be required to be able to enable and nurture that culture?
- As you reflect on the Adaptive Cultures stages of evolution framework, what kinds of leadership could potentially emerge to create these new landscapes?



5. Leading from purpose

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

– Margaret Mead

Principle 5 – An orienting purpose provides a holding space through any circumstances

When people act from a seemingly unimaginable level of courage, it is rarely in the absence of fear. It is almost always from the grounded space where purpose is so clear, that action becomes so obvious, that we are lifted up and beyond our fears.

Focus on Purpose - liberate energy to create new possibilities

In times of crisis, a focus on purpose can lead to entirely different outcomes than those driven by fear and self-protection. Purpose can provide a navigating light to support decisions that consider the whole and encourage actions aligned to the interests of sustainability and systemic evolution.

In disruptive times, people often invest their energy in self-protection and in image management – what Robert Kegan calls the second job that everyone is doing. A connection to purpose, aligned to what we know is important and is reflective of the essence of the organisation, helps people to liberate energy previously spent in self-protection and image management. This can be liberated towards creating a new kind of organisation.

While visions and strategies may be shattered or recalibrated through major disruptions, purpose often becomes illuminated. As disruption occurs, adaptation of strategy to better illuminate and progress purpose can create a positive holding space for organisational evolution and adaptation. This also works at an individual level,

helping us to lift above survival or fight flight responses and into more self-actualised responses with a foundation of collective care.

Some questions to explore:

- How can you and your organisation connect people into meaning and purpose at time of disruption?
- What are the dangers of specific guidance and certainty in an uncertain environment? How can purpose overcome these limitations?
- How can you enable purpose as a holding space, particularly when people are facing into fear and security needs? How can you hold purpose as a guide through the fog?
- How can our sense of purpose and identity be expanded through what we have learned and how we have developed through disruption?
- How might organisational strategies and goals be adapted to further illuminate the purpose and make progress through the current environment?
- How might your organisation need to think differently about strategy and strategic processes in order to make it more dynamic and adaptive to market forces?
- How might leaders/leadership teams continue to harness the connections between purpose, strategy and culture to build adaptive capacity and thrive?

6. Resisting the forces of reversion

“Evolution ever climbing after some ideal good, and reversion ever dragging evolution in the mud”

– Lord Alfred Tennyson

Principle 6 – a crucial aspect of leadership is to make it as easy as possible to evolve and as difficult as possible to revert to old ways that no longer serve us.

Going towards new ways

During the crisis, there have been numerous stories of emerging creativity and leadership that has been a revelation for many. For example, the CEO who re-set boundaries in virtual leadership meetings that hadn't been clear in regular team meetings, and thus created a much more functional team dynamic.

However, there have also been examples of reversion to earlier ways during the current crisis. Divide and conquer strategies, stopping access to senior people, command and control leadership and so on.

Some of the language used around the crisis has also run the risk of reinforcing a paradigm of reversion. Examples include ‘put everything on hold’, until we can “return to work”, or “go back to the way things were.”

Above and beyond the linguistics, there are a number of reasons we have observed why reversion happens during and beyond a crisis:

- A return to what we know and are comfortable with, even if it is not fit for the emerging context
- We have not truly embedded prior adaptive learning and therefore revert rather than evolve through crisis
- New ways of being may need to be adapted as we feel our way through. They can be opaque initially, and may not provide the clarity that many people desire
- The time and space needed to integrate new ways of being, and the awareness of how much effort is required are often underestimated
- There can be a whimsical nostalgia that can romanticise the past and blind us to the limitations of previous ways
- Reversion can be subtle, can be easily forgiven and readily justified
- Complacency - sometimes we believe that the “job is finished” and we may relax before creating a genuine new way of being

For these reasons, reversion may, in many ways, be a much easier path than evolution. To hold to the path of evolution, and resist the forces of reversion, there are some core principles we need to pay attention to:

- Articulate the aspirational culture and purpose as a way to progress the organisation

- Pay attention and provide resources and energy to the things that help us evolve
- Starve the energy and resources of reversion
- Nurture the green shoots (leader as gardener) –nurture and build on the spaces that “hold the evolutionary intent” within the organisation.
- Identify new synergies emerging – if you get the right companion plants, you don't need to weed!
- Celebrate and acknowledge progress and evolution; remove incentives that may (unintentionally) encourage reversion
- Recognise that reversion is a natural part of progress. When reversion occurs, stay curious, observe and engage in collective learning – then reset towards your evolutionary pathway
- Bring together the forces that drive evolution – sense making, embracing disruption, seeking new patterns of leadership, deeper learning patterns

The current situation provides an opportunity to practice these principles through cultural experiments, step change and innovation. To enable this requires us to give power to and hold space for new practices to emerge and grow and create solid boundary conditions to prevent old practices (that no longer serve the organisation) from re-emerging.

Some questions to explore:

- How can we solidify the footholds of the healthy new practices and ways of working that are emerging?
- What rhythms, rituals and routines can be created to embed these healthy new practices and enable these to spread?
- If reversion to an earlier stage of leadership is evidence that the current stage is not fully embedded, what does that suggest about the work needed to fully embed new ways of leading?
- What new measurements are required (and what existing measurements need to be adapted or stopped) to pay attention towards desired new practices and ways of working
- What new language or narrative is necessary to reinforce the direction of progress?
- How can you identify the social groups that reinforce and reinvigorate each other and nurture each other?
- How can you introduce deeper conversations about the aspirational culture and purpose that can enable your organisation to move forward?

Acknowledgements

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