



Distress In A High VUCA Pandemic

By

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I've had many conversations with clients over the last few days about the coronavirus pandemic. Each was working from home and described the complexity of trying to focus on work while dealing with a range of confounding issues. The physical dimensions of their work culture have been disrupted and it's affecting them in unexpected ways. Children are home because schools and day care centers are closed; working spouses and partners are ever-present and competing for the same workspace; and, the interim connectivity – computers, internet, phones, etc. – to work is not as reliable as one would want.



One client said, "I've not spent this much time with my husband since our honeymoon ... I'm not sure that we like each other." Another said, "How can I get anything done when my children need attention? I can't ignore them ... dealing with the guilt about not enough attention on work versus my children is overwhelming." Yet another commented, "My wife lost her job and I think

we can pay the bills, but we've lost nearly a third of our net worth in the stock market – and that's got me seriously worried." And lastly, a client said yesterday, "I'm cranky and I don't know why, and it feels like a cloud has moved into my brain – I can't seem to focus on anything – my productivity is the lowest it's ever been."

We're all dealing with a massive disruption in our lives. Social distancing and shelter-in-place orders have required us to think through the minutia of our lives that is normally dealt with by the reflexive part of our brains. Just being aware of the surfaces that we touch and trying to avoid them is taxing the limited capacity of our consciousness. As a result, the cognitive space for higher level thinking is impaired.

For those who have attended one of my training programs you will recognize that we're dealing with a high VUCA situation. That is, it's (V) *volatile* because the spread of the virus is constantly changing, (U) *uncertain* as we don't know when the crisis will end and if we or people close to us have or have not been exposed, (C) *complex* due to the chaos and confusion about protective gear, vaccines, other medical treatments, and altered access to basic needs like food and toilet paper, and (A) *ambiguous* due to the lack of precedent for the virus and the debate among medical professionals about its severity.

Most of my clients have addressed the mechanical aspects of the high VUCA situation. They've been proactive with risk assessments and have put contingencies in place. Employees have been redeployed to safer locations, processes have been modified accordingly, and temporary organization structures have been used to keep critical assets operating during the crisis. The one area that is worrying is the mental health of employees and that concern is reflected in my client's comment above: "... feels like a cloud has moved into my brain ..." That feeling is a manifestation of stress, or distress to be more specific, which neuroscientists tell us is the worst form of stress.

Here's a refresher about distress from my training program. When a human brain is exposed to a high VUCA situation (i.e., a stressor), cortisol is secreted from the adrenal gland to maintain mental equilibrium. The brain cues

the body for survival which creates a state of fight or flight. In this state, body functions that are not essential for fight or flight will pause. So, for example, digestive and immune systems will take a time out. A surge in adrenalin and glucagon occurs which is okay in short durations, but not for as long as we are now experiencing with the coronavirus. In long durations, these surges along with cortisol will impair memory formation, decision-making, and self-control. This causes poor goal achievement, harsh attitude, lack of clarity, and an overwhelmed state of mind, i.e., “cranky ... in a cloud.” Such situations can also lead to physical illnesses like diabetes through the impaired functioning of the pancreas.

In times like this leaders must be extra clear about objectives, priorities, timelines, and accountabilities. Vagaries or conflicts among these will exacerbate the distress. But there’s something else to consider. We know that the physical aspects of company cultures have been disrupted, but so have the conversational patterns. Simply stated, the pattern of conversations among employees has been altered and it creates empty space among them. We know that it does not take long for people to “awfulize” situations and become mentally hijacked when empty space exists in their conversational relationships with others. What is less apparent is that a company’s culture can also become hijacked. The conversations among employees create the context that is socialized within a company and become, at a macro level, it’s effective culture. When these conversations are suspended or altered for a few weeks, a company’s culture can morph to a different level (that might be positive) but most likely will degrade in the near term.

Given the interrelated issues of distress and possible cultural degradation, I’m suggesting the following actions to my clients:

- Starting at the most senior level in the company, create a cascading “stress check-in” with the organization. Using whatever technology is available for virtual meetings, have managers engage their direct reports in group conversations about stress. Just having the conversation with employees will mitigate some of the distress. It’s amazing how calming it can be for employees to know that their bosses are concerned about their well-being during times of crisis.
- It’s essential that these conversations are not a downloading of views by the manager but dialogues through which employees and managers collaborate to achieve a shared understanding, revealing how they feel, and ultimately discovering new ways forward.
- Managers must be careful about judgements of people as these are readily apparent to others and signal a fixed mind set. They must listen with compassion whereby they seek to feel for their employees. It’s not about actually feeling other’s emotions; rather, it’s being able to make rational decisions about the situation that consider the happiness, thriving, and suffering of employees.
- Read *No Hard Feelings* by Liz Fossline and Mollie West Duffy. It’s an excellent guide to getting access to embracing but not becoming overwhelmed with the emotions of others at work.

One of my clients said that she misses the occasional cocktail with her colleagues after work. She plans to modify my suggestions to use ZOOM for a virtual cocktail party with the group. What a great idea!