

COVID 19: Mourning our loss, Reimagining our future

“Every human has four endowments - self awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination. These give us the ultimate human freedom... The power to choose, to respond, to change.”

Stephen Covey



Abstract

In the midst of the undulating pandemic, polarised experiences, exacerbated inequalities, and increasing unrest, the pain of loss in 2021 is coursing through us all. Loss of our old ways of working, loss of how we value ourselves given the ‘new normal’, and loss of our old behaviours challenge us at every turn. In this article, we shed light on the origins of this loss, discuss the process of mourning, and identify ways to use ‘CPR for the soul’ and ‘corporate defibrillation’ to engage our creative imaginations and restore hope in the future.

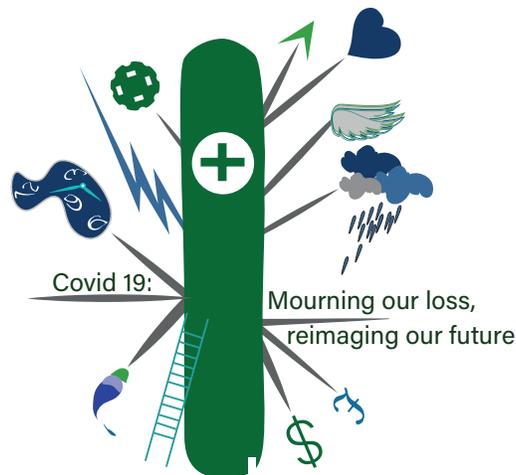


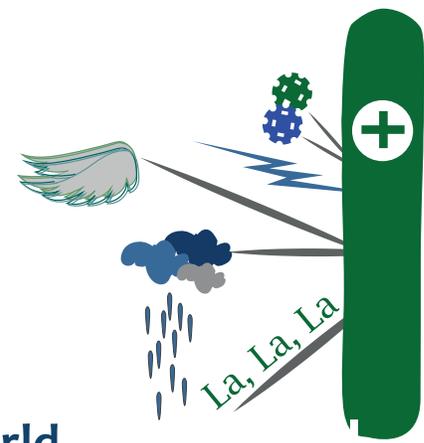
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Mourning the loss of our old business world

A tsunami of loss is what many are facing as we approach yet another wave of change due to the pandemic. This loss often propagates significant grief, challenges our assumptions of how the world works, and dramatically shifts our paradigms related to work and leadership.

One collective sense of seismic change

The loss of old patterns of work, business models of success that have been made instantly outdated, and vanishing pre-Covid ways of creating value can often result in a sense of deep grief and mourning.

As we work with clients around the world facing the effects of Covid on their businesses, we have discovered a common sense of loss that has profoundly affected individual leaders, their teams, and their business communities. We have all experienced loss, be it the death of a loved one, the inability to gather face-to-face and share comradery, or restrictions on live performance and team sports. Importantly, during all of the loss we have seen clients question their value as both business leaders and as humans trying to simply survive the change and afraid of what the new normal might look like.

Different Covid 19 experiences

Each of us experience the impact of the Coronavirus crisis in different unpredictable ways. Our lives rapidly changed as the disbelief of the pandemic took hold, we established home offices, and more than a third of humanity found themselves in lockdown. The crisis has altered the experience of being a customer, an employee, a member of a community, and a human. As such, our behaviours are changing.

The victim experience

There is a significant group of our clients who have found themselves not simply furloughed but have lost their jobs, been laid off, and had their businesses shut down. In short, many faced the destruction of their livelihoods and had their personal value questioned. Suddenly the world became technologically turbocharged, great people were impacted, and survival strategies deployed. We are in the throes of economic chaos and for many their economic reality has been turned upside down. The resulting human impact has taken its toll. Personal asset bases are eroded, proud productive people are in disbelief as they turn to food-banks and other social support services, and many are frightened with the prospect of facing an uncertain future.

The survivor experience

In complete contrast, other leaders have remained employed, are learning how to effectively work remotely, and continue to draw a paycheck, even if it is only 80% of their regular salaries. They may have to put up with home schooling and the restrictions of lock down but meanwhile their outgoing expenses are likely the lowest in years. By not going out for dinner, the theatre, and on trips they are preserving cash. They may represent premium consumers who, in a post lock down environment, will have a pent up demand to splurge. They will have survived the crisis and come out in a better financial position than pre-Covid so are optimistic and have a bullish view of the future.



The impacted experience

Although not mutually exclusive of the first two experiences, we find that a unique but large segment of our clients have felt the real impact of the virus. They have experienced sickness, been hospitalised, and lost loved friends and family. The ruthless impact of the virus has presented many with monumental loss by devouring people in its brutal assault with most suffering in different ways with varied levels of pain and distress. For some it has physically sapped energy and emotions and has been devastating. A quick bounce back to normal life is a challenge.

We are gradually getting to know people who fit in this group that are feeling increasingly stressed, anxious, and emotionally exhausted. They are continuously fearful and their relentless anxiety and pain has changed the way they see the world and the way they work. Many are suffering from depression, anxiety, stress, burnout, emotional distress or another mental health conditions. The effects of the crisis will be felt for a long time to come and for people who have been personally impacted their priorities for work and expectations for life will be fundamentally changed.

Additionally, there are leaders who have ‘survivor syndrome’ and not been personally touched by the illness, but nevertheless they feel guilty of surviving while others have been impacted. They tend to be paralysed by feeling depleted, low, and anxious, and may have apprehension and fear of the future.



Leaders suffering loss are seeking control

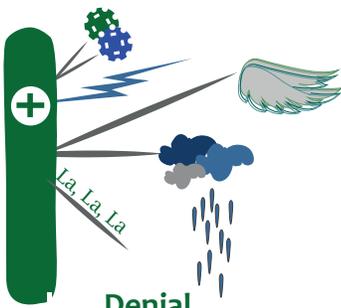
The thing that is truly different today is that we find ourselves in a situation that is not within our control. Yet our reaction, as keen business leaders, is to take control, take action, and work towards a solution – it is just what we do, it is what we need to guide our organisations.

It may be that the more we try to retain control, the more our emotions guide our attitude, thinking, and reactions. Based on our experience, we suspect that this ebb and flow of emotions, doubts, and fears may continue until we finally accept the situation and reach peace within ourselves.

Like us as humans, our organisations will move through a process of change and we will need to take the time to grieve and mourn our corporate loss. Forcing rapid and urgent change in an environment that is more akin to a marathon than a sprint can simply compound the impact of grief and make leaders and their teams even more anxious for the future. Having the space and time to work through the grieving process allows us to change, identify a new way forward, and accept and adapt to new challenges.

Control can be regained by understanding the process of mourning

Through reflection during the time of Covid 19 we have identified some insights on how organisations and their people may deal with loss and grief according to a model developed by Kübler-Ross. Although the research is now quite dated, we think that the findings are still highly informative. The initial research identified the key stages of grief and attitudes of people when they confront death but we have found that the model can be applied to the loss of our ‘old normal’. Here is an overly simplified overview of the key phases:



Denial

Denying or ignoring the impact of Coronavirus 19 on both us as individuals and on our organisations is typically how we initially react to a crisis. For example, one of our West End theatre producers took the view that “the problem will blow over in a month and we can open the doors again” – but the loss happened suddenly and unexpectedly – theatres were closed and have stayed closed. It can happen in a complete sense (“There’s no way we are not going to the office”) or a partial sense (“we can work from home, but it’s no big deal”) or in an abstract sense (“we can meet in pubs around Surrey as most of us live in the area”). Denial is largely a function of leader’s taking a defensive attitude to the situation trying to maintain power structures and roles, even in a situation where we are powerless.

Anger

When business leaders have to face an almost insurmountable obstacle with little control and diminishing resources, the emotion of anger can quickly surface. After facing devastating risks that derail our plans and activities, it is a common human reaction to try to solve things through pure power (fight or flight). As a result, this power can create anger targeted at victims such as the regulators, the government, employees, advisors, customers, and even ourselves. Given that so many people have lost their potential income and in some cases their jobs and their companies it is not surprising to hear people saying things like “why me”, “why my industry”, “why now” (it is never a good time for cash flow problems), “why did it not happen to some who are thriving off this disaster”, etc. Loss of control is a key driver of anger.

Bargaining

Once you see that anger can’t solve the problem, bargaining can emerge as a defensive strategy. You desperately seek trade-offs, work-around strategies, and anything that will make the problems go away and the old ways come back. It’s quite common for people to become “docile” out of a hope that “if I keep my head down I will survive” and “if I ignore and don’t watch our failing business fundamentals the business will come back”. Some may bargain by thinking “if I work as hard as ever I will be able to keep my role for another week”. They may think that their actions, even those unaligned to the issue, will change the outcome – unfortunately at times activity is founded on unrealistic hope.

Depression

Depression can show up when the organisation starts to fail, when the pressure of growth overwhelms capacity, or when the awful reality of enforced change becomes clear. Just picture the losses of 26,000 jobs from Boeing, 10,000 jobs from BP, 12,000 from BA, not to mention the tourist, arts, and entertainment sectors. Depression raises its head when you start to understand the reality of the implications of the situation. Leaders can easily fall into a serious depression because they, once again, feel deeply powerless. If there is any benefit at this point it is that fewer resources are expended on unsolvable problems thereby preserving working capital.

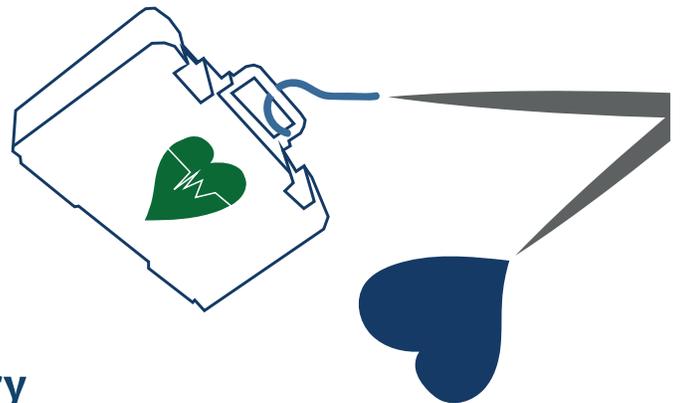
Acceptance

When leaders finally start to leave behind the feeling of being powerless they can more clearly engage their minds with accepting the challenge at hand. They can stop internalising everything that has happened and lift their heads to look forward, toward the future. Leaders who accept the true situation can start to reinterpret the meaning of the loss (both corporate and individual) in a positive light, albeit in a different form from the past.

La, La, La, La

Like any process model, these stages need to be interpreted for what they are, a theory. Any single leader will not necessarily move sequentially from one stage to another and may revisit one a number of times or even skip a stage. This model has helped us understand what stage our clients might be in and why they may be exhibiting certain behaviours. We found that discussing these stages of loss has helped others understand their behaviours, feelings, and anxieties during this time of transition and extreme pressure. Once they realise the implications of their current situation the challenge is now to move beyond Covid and look to the future.

We may find that we can't control things so the process really becomes one of coming to terms with ambiguity and change, making space to hold our lament, and making room for our attention to turn to optimism. We may find that real control is an illusion and our actual work is in managing a continuous flow of limitations, least we start to be derailed again. Leadership going forward may be an ongoing process of both consciously letting go while at the same time holding in tension the things we can't fix. Being aware of this precarious balance may allow us to direct our energy to what is within our gift to control.



Moving beyond crisis into recovery

Coming to terms with grief is something that we must ultimately accomplish as humans, both as collective workers in an organisation and individually for ourselves. However, this does not mean that we need to be complacent, as leaders there are things that we can do to speed recovery of both our organisations and ourselves.

Gain inspiration from our mourning while leaving the past behind

Helping our colleagues process their grief and speed recovery is part of our role as leaders. No matter how tempting it is to reassure others that things will return to normal it simply may not be true. We do not know which part of the old normal will be lost forever. We need to help prepare others to leave the past behind while learning from our experiences. At the same time we need to ensure that we do not deny both the structural changes that may be taking place and the emotional and psychological shifts that impact both us and our employees.

Our old organisations, typically structured with narrow divisions and silo'd functions restrict our thinking. The pain of escaping the markets we have served in the past, channels that we have dedicated resources to, and overturning traditional assumptions can make it difficult to broaden our thinking. We need to leave the past behind while learning from our process of mourning.

CPR for the soul can restore optimism

Covid has left some of us stumbling along working in low gear and increasingly unengaged. Simply going through the motions can be like Groundhog Day, every day! Covid may not have killed us but neither are we alive with great hope of the future – our souls are damaged and just not functioning as we would like. When this happens, we lose the capacity to identify, appreciate, and participate in life as something more than a series of responsibilities, accountabilities, and commitments. We may need to use an intervention akin to CPR to shock ourselves, jolt our minds, and reengage our hearts.

Shocks and disruptions in our lives often trigger the questions “what do I want to do with the rest of my life” and “where should I be taking my organisation”? In this environment both leaders and businesses communities are stressed and facing the questions of “what’s next”, “how can we accelerate opportunities”, and for some “how will we even simply survive”?

Crisis points force us to stop, take stock, evaluate options and select new directions. For us and the organisations in which we work the impact of the virus provides a catalyst for reimagining a future that we had not envisioned, until now. It can bring us hope in the prospect that life will be better.

Corporate defibrillation can revive our organisations

The fact that our business has not gone bankrupt is not sufficient proof that it is sustainable. Just as we may need to perform CPR on ourselves, it may be critical that we also perform corporate defibrillation on our organisations. The new demands and stress caused by Covid on both successful and failing industries is triggering many workers to become complacent and disconnected.

Whether it is the relentless pace of change and demands for delivering in an aggressively accelerating environment or the stillness and despair felt by the almost-unemployed, we can easily lose touch with the true importance of our work. Shocking our organisations into the future by questioning its value and purpose can revive our hope, engage our collective wisdom, and reimagine what could be.



Post shock reimagining demands creativity and time

Reimagining is tough work because it demands letting go of the old world, engaging our creative imagination, and taking risks.

The creative process needed in reimagining can't be hurried by an act of will and forced to come forth. The pressure to deliver a new vision for either yourself or your organisation is not a mechanical process but a dynamic process of incremental innovation that takes ideas from obscurity to simplicity. The early stages of reimagining will be rooted in our private associations that we connect to through our memories and experiences. It is critical that we keep thinking, analysing, exploring and persevere pushing ourselves beyond the easy answers.

Watch a Shakespeare play, listen to rap, groom a highland cow, read a philosophy paper, cook something new, go for a run in the rain - do whatever it takes to broaden your mind and force yourself out of your old paradigms. Our ability to see a unique range of potential futures for consideration is limited only by the barriers we impose on ourselves. Individual imagination must become our north star. Be bold and leave the past behind. Our minds must be put in gear before corporate imagination can ignite.



Creative imagination from collective wisdom

During this time of disruption and turmoil organisational norms, cultures, and process will be stress tested and small crevasses can quickly escalate into major issues. Tapping into the creative imagination of your people will demand that you focus on the ties that bind you together as a team. You will be challenged to look at opportunities that may exist in the white space in your organisation charts, explore new shared cultures, and develop a new identity to provide social cohesion and a sense of belonging.

New individual or corporate visions are seldom mysteriously created as a result of being hit by a bolt of lightning. Eureka moments will always be an important part of crafting new visions and strategies but logical disciplined processes of development will allow you to tap into the collective wisdom of your team and engage the broadest information base possible.

The ability for an individual to use creativity as a catalyst to challenge and change the world is a function of their imaginations. The ability to effectively craft the future path for an organisation is a function of the collective imagination of its leaders. We can't determine where our individual imaginations end and our collective imaginations begin as our creativity is anchored in social interactions and communal experiences.

Our challenge as both individuals and leaders of organisations is to delight in invention, pool our collective wisdom, engage our curiosity, see things that do not exist today and explore alternative possible futures in the pursuit of creatively imagining a future where hope drives our actions.

**“Imagination is everything.
It is the preview of life’s coming attractions.”**

Albert Einstein



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