

HEALING THE HEART OF THE ORGANIZATION: HR'S ROLE IN CREATING RESILIENCE

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THIS PANDEMIC HAS WROUGHT DESTRUCTION

like we have never witnessed before. Lives have been lost. Businesses have shuttered their doors never to return. Our sense of well-being and security has been permanently altered, for some that comfort has been erased. The results include widespread fear, anxiety, and discomfort. Many people on the frontline are undoubtedly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. And yet here we are, having to resume business and commerce for the very survival of our economy.

HR professionals have a heavy responsibility. We are charged with healing the heart of the organization. We will not be in the fight for resilience alone. Each and every employee, whether senior leaders

or front-line laborers, have a vested interest in this compelling mission to rebuild the enterprise, restore hope to its employees, and protect its very core. This article provides practical strategies for building resilience at the individual and organizational levels.

Let's begin with a shared understanding of the concept of resilience. It is driven internally, can be learned and refined. It is a reflection of mindsets and attitudes. It is manifested in our thoughts and our actions. Resilient people have hope and can spread it, in spite of the crises they are facing. They are powerful actors in the world. That is what we seek to develop when we are working on healing the heart of the organization. We want to build a cadre of powerful actors committed to forging forward with optimistic intentions despite the adversity.



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MESSAGING MATTERS

The first job in healing the heart of the organization is paying careful attention to messaging. We have to acknowledge reality while not staying mired in despair. If we lean too heavily into joy, recovery and hope we will be deemed insincere, perhaps delusional. By the same token, if we only communicate about the devastation and destruction we will only be adding to the pain in the organization. The goal is to strike a balance between acknowledging reality and communicating hope for a better future.

This communication should be constant and widespread. Coach executives on how to deliver the same message about the anticipated future. They should have a key, consistent theme that they deliver using written, spoken and electronic mediums. Not only should executives deliver the same message, HR leaders, managers and supervisors should as well. Consider the messaging like the waves of the ocean. They never stop rolling. The significance of the waves cannot be understated because of the profound impact. The same is true of the messaging during and after adversity. It has to be targeted at gently uplifting people. The operative word is "gently." It is unrealistic to expect anyone to just bounce back. While resilience implies a comeback, that comeback takes time.

INCORPORATE IMPROV

As we continue to work to mend broken organizations it is necessary to teach people how to improvise. This means that they will not remain wedded to old routines, routines that may no longer be relevant. The need is to learn to test different approaches. The need is to open our ears to new voices, different voices, voices that may have been ignored in the past. Improv also entails creating new collaborations and committing to spawning interesting, never before considered approaches to the work. While it is tempting to try to return, getting through really tough times requires a willingness to adapt to new realities and test new approaches. Improvisation creates a range of new opportunities that cannot be surfaced if we stay rooted in patterns from the past. Frankly, many of those patterns will not work in our rapidly evolving world.

The question for HR professionals is how will we teach improv in the business units. It is not as simple as offering a workshop on change management. It is more complex. It requires that we first know what is really going on throughout the organization. We tend to get stuck in hiring, compensation, training, employee relations, and other fixed HR roles. Creating the capacity to improvise means that we have to truly be positioned as strategic business partners. Once that role is established, it is much easier to sit with business unit leaders and help them understand the principles of improvisation.

First, you will be asking them to collaborate with their teams on reimagining the objectives of the work that they do. They will then spend time collaborating with both their team and key stakeholders on reformulating the way that they deliver their products or services. This means that they will need the courage to completely reframe their modus operandi. This is a tough call for many. It shakes up the identity of the business unit. In some cases, it shakes up the identity of the leader. Finally, you will be teaching them how to test or pilot new approaches with a learner's heart. They will not be testing with a judgmental eye. Rather they will be testing to see what they have learned that is novel and can lead them into the future. Finally, leaders will be asked to integrate the new learning into how they operate moving into the future. This is not a static, linear process. It is a series of ongoing experiments that keep the momentum forward-focused in a realistic, responsive manner.

CREATE NEW MEANINGS

Every organization has symbols, important traditions, and rituals. They may be as simple as awards for tenure or a company bowling league or birthday celebrations. They can be more complex and imbedded. This includes things like mission, vision, and values. All of these artifacts are woven into the fabric of the organization. In addition to creating meaning, they matter deeply and guide the ways in which the organization functions. They also directly and indirectly impact employee commitment and engagement.

HR professionals are responsible for guiding the organization into creating new symbols, traditions, and rituals. This begins with a mental reframe on what matters, why, and how it can be recreated. It extends to attaching relevant meanings reflective of what the organization has morphed into as a result of the adversity. For instance, a mission may be changed to reflect the future that organization envisions. Core values may not be as enduring as they were once thought to be. Post-adversity they may need to be reconsidered from a different perspective reflective of a new reality.

Traditions will surely be altered because of social distancing, teleworking, and other changes forced upon us by the current pandemic. This challenges us to create activities that connect employees' minds and hearts to the organization. Invite employees to create their own practices that have meaning for them. Encourage them to be innovative and to make the most of tech tools so that they stay connected to each other and to the organization.



DEMONSTRATE UNWARRANTED OPTIMISM

Probably the most difficult work that we have to do to is to be optimistic in the most bleak times we could ever imagine. What, exactly, is unwarranted optimism? It is the ability to see beyond the present and believe deeply in a better, albeit different, future. This is not being unrealistic or living in a fantasy. Instead, unwarranted optimism is undergirded by faith and hope.

The goal is to build unwarranted optimism into the fiber, the very muscle of the organization. Work throughout the enterprise to get people to come to terms with the current reality. Help them develop an understanding of the fact that we will all be on a roller-coaster and we are not at the controls. This means moving people from denial to an acceptance of reality. Once they are able to accept what is, with all of its instability, they can begin to see themselves as agents of positive change. The changes may be small and very localized, but if they are positive changes, they are impactful. The goal is to restore a belief that life is meaningful and each of us have the potential to be contributors to that meaning. Ultimately, we are all responsible for seeing possibilities in spite of problems. This is not denial of the issues at hand, rather it is acceptance without resignation. Unwarranted optimism fuels the ability to see and create options while others are bewildered and confused.

SUMMARY

As we continue to be buffeted by the storms that don't seem to stop raging, it is important to the psychological well-being of each of us, to the survival of every organization, that we assume responsibility for restoring hope. This is how we will heal the heart of the organization. The work for HR professionals begins with crafting messages that acknowledge reality without being mired in the despair of the moment. These are messages that consistently focus on keeping employees committed, trusting, and willing to continue to invest in the organization. Messaging moves us to teaching the skills of improvisation. This entails collaboration, crafting new ways to reach objectives, and forming new partnerships. It also means that leaders throughout the enterprise will become skilled at experimenting. They will develop new levels of intellectual curiosity and the willingness to reinvent their business units. Lastly, we are all charged with demonstrating unwarranted optimism. That means holding on to hope, focusing on faith in the next iteration of our lives and knowing that we are survivors who will thrive again.



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