



awaris



## BEING CURIOUS AND ENQUIRING MORE

### Key points

- A broader range of stress levels than we are used to
- Many have more work - more to-dos - and fewer work boundaries
- This is less visible to us - and will lead to segments of the workforce having a much higher burnout rate
- We need to consciously enquire and make it transparent - some people embarrassed to share their situation
- We need to care for our teams and help them set real boundaries
- Compassion in leadership is important in times of high stress.

### Tools and practices

- A team assessment tool
- A compassion practice

The range of experiences with virtual work varies enormously - some take to it like a duck to water, others more like fish to dry land.

Sociability, type of work, technological infrastructure, stress levels, home situation, and many other factors contribute. It is not as simple as the technophile vs the technophobe. Some technophobes, suddenly in a quiet room with no hourlong commute have shown themselves to be remarkably adaptable - whereas other technophiles with work-life balance challenges and difficulties concentrating have been struggling. Let us for a moment ignore those who have already worked virtually for a long time and are habituated to this - but focus instead on those who have had to get used to it in recent months.

Those who quickly managed to get to a **feeling of self-efficacy** and **control** (good infrastructure, decent home situation, and not overwhelmed by workload) took to it well and have generally had a good experience. Those who were not able to get to a feeling of self-efficacy and control, who struggled with focus, missed the social resonance, and faced other obstacles, have had a more difficult time. It is how people FEEL that crucially determines how willing they are to learn, engage, try new things out, and settle into a new way of being. If they do not FEEL well, they will not settle into this mode of BEING well.

## Normative nature of office life has advantages

It is important to understand that there is a massive increase in the range of stress levels. Coming to an office site is normative. We have similar commutes, similar office environments, similar lunch in the cafeteria, we wear similar clothes, our days have similar rhythms, and we infect each other with our mood – both positive and negative. In adjusting to COVID and working from home this normative characteristic of work is no longer there – so people have a broader range of factors that contribute to their mental and emotional state:

- **Workload** – almost all have experienced 2-3 weeks of heightened hectic in adjusting to virtual work. Following that some have faced significant increases in workload, others significant declines. On average most have experienced increased workload.
- **Personal situations** – some have had to contend with working on the living room couch, sharing bandwidth with a partner, homeschooling a children and taking care of the shopping for parents, while others have their own office rooms, overlooking green fields, and no health or schooling concerns. Some are alone – and feel lonely – whereas others feel loved and secure in their families.
- **Anxiety levels** – some people themselves face a higher risk from COVID or care for a loved one who does, others do not at all feel threatened by the virus. Equally, some people face much greater financial anxiety – loss of a majority of their work, or are caught in the middle of building a house, while others face little increase in financial insecurity.
- **Technical challenges** – some have poor equipment, bandwidth problems, lacking the necessary tools for virtual work, and are perhaps somewhat technophobe, while others might be more technophile, solitary in nature, have excellent IT infrastructure and tools and feel competent.

Such stress takes its toll. We estimate that a lot of this is not visible yet – hidden under the rush of adrenaline, the heightened alertness that comes with adjusting to this new situation. But as time passes, and especially the long-term financial uncertainty grows, this will take its toll. A recent survey in the UK from the Mental Health Foundation and LinkedIn found that people were working an average of 28hrs more per month now that they were working at home <sup>(1)</sup>. A survey in Italy found that 80% of the population needed some kind of psychological support to overcome the consequences of the lockdown<sup>(2)</sup>.

As a leader, a lot of this will be invisible to us unless we enquire more. There are six questions we think you could ask your team – to get a sense of how much they might be struggling with the current situation.

- **Working situation** – do you have a good working situation for virtual work – including light, privacy, silence, sufficient space to move, and a good physical set up?
- **Technology** – do you have the right technology, virtual tools, bandwidth, and skills for working virtually?
- **Care for loved ones** – do you have to mix your work or have additional demands on your time to care for your loved ones – children, parents, other family members, and in particular homeschooling young children?
- **Anxieties** – do you or your loved ones have health, financial or other concerns that are affecting your state of mind?
- **Workload** – do you have a heightened workload because of the pandemic?
- **Nature** – do you work well (focused, effective) and feel well when you are working alone or in your family, or do you work better in an office environment?

Please be realistic about this and actually enquire. In our experience, many have given up asking after the first weeks and just make assumptions. We have landed on a new shore – and need to take stock of our provisions first. This includes your own – so please also share your results to the above questions with your team to let them know your resources and potentially your vulnerability.

Think about this. If you asked each person working in a normal office environment to score the above 6 questions, each from 1-10 (1 - all is well, 10 - the issue is a struggle) you will probably get a score of 10-15 on average from your team – whereas now you would might get a score of 10-40, with a huge range between people. Try it out yourself. Ask your team to score themselves pre and post COVID.

So our teams are facing a bigger range of issues, MUCH OF IT NOT VISIBLE to us. We have to enquire.

Acute stress quickly becomes chronic stress. Someone who has concerns on all the above points might be seeming to cope for a few weeks – and suddenly not be able to function normally.

Also, if we are not sensitive, we will not see that the above does not just affect people’s wellbeing but actually seriously impacts their performance. If we take the above 6 questions and ask our team how much their working hours are impacted by this we can quickly see that many individuals are trying to operate as normal while actually only have 40-70% of their normal working capacity available to them. This is a certain path to exhaustion and dispiritment. This interestingly is a particular issue once we settle into the new normal – while there was some joint sense of “we are all in this chaos together” at the initial phase of the pandemic, we are hearing managers are increasingly pushing for a normal level of productivity while being completely insensitive to the fact that many in their team simply do not have the capacity at their disposal to deliver this, or have accumulated 8 weeks of stress and are close to a breaking point. Research by LinkedIn, in partnership with the Mental Health Foundation, found that 56 percent of 2,000 UK adults surveyed said their mental health had deteriorated since lockdown began in March<sup>(3)</sup>.

Being sensitive in this manner is not being touchy-feely. It simply means we are in touch with the realities of people's work and mental situation. There is a justified concern that we will be facing a wave of mental and emotional exhaustion or burnout as we return towards a new normal. Most of the above points will be invisible. We will need to enquire more. This is the basis for leading people well.

## Cultivating compassion and empathy as a starting point

Research on leadership in crisis times highlights not only the importance of effectiveness in leaders – but their empathy and compassion<sup>(4)</sup>. This allows leaders to really FEEL and SENSE what is going on – far faster and in a more inclusive manner than our logical mind can do this. Leaders who try to navigate turbulent waters without a real connection to the felt realities of the situation will lose a lot of people – in terms of their energy and engagement. Numerous studies have shown that in difficult times, compassionate and empathic leaders are better able to help their teams regulate stress and shepherd everyone to clearer thinking and a more collaborative working style<sup>(5)</sup>. The degree of your compassion as a leader – for yourself and your team – will be a central skill in this new normal. Interestingly enough compassion starts with ourselves, something many of us easily forget. Take stock of your own situation first.

### You might try the following practice

1. Settle down, sitting upright, or walk in a quiet place in nature
2. Use the breath or the rhythm of walking to settle your mind
3. Tune into your body and emotional state – what does your FEELING sense tell you about the last months and your own mental and emotional resources.
4. Ask yourself what you need to navigate the coming months – identify three things that would nourish you and support you. Hold that felt sense of nourishment and support for yourself for a minute or two allowing yourself to be suffused with a good feeling
4. Now reflect on your team members – what is likely to nourish them? Hold that felt sense of nourishment and extend it to them.
5. See if you can connect to this felt body sense the next time you have a team meeting.

Sources:

(1) Mental Health Foundation: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/coronavirus-mental-health-pandemic/covid-19-inequality-briefing>

(2) The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/21/italy-lockdown-mental-health-psychologists-coronavirus>

(3) Mental Health Foundation: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/coronavirus-mental-health-pandemic/>

(4) Harvard Business Review: Resonant Leadership – Boyatzis and McKee

(5) Annual Review Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior (2014) “Compassion at work”