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DISRUPTION!

Navigating change at
an accelerated pace

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Navigating change at an accelerated pace

Disruption is not only a serious leadership challenge, but a global challenge for all of humanity. How do you coach those who are experiencing unprecedented disruption in their industry, organization, and lives? How do you coach those who want to cause disruption? How do we as humans develop or enhance leadership ability during difficult times? What are the coaching distinctions of disruption and what can it generate? Examining the role coaching plays in helping individuals, leaders and their teams overcome disruption.

Navigating CHANGE

Leading effectively in a VUCA environment

By Michelle Chambers, MEd, CHRL, CTDP, CSODP, CTPC

COVID has accelerated the digital revolution and caused many leaders to face unprecedented disruption within their organization and industry. How can we successfully coach leaders navigating change at an accelerated pace? How do we enable them to successfully manage transformational change and to support themselves and their teams when there is no playbook to reference?

Many can relate to the challenges of working in a VUCA world (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous). As coaches, we can add value to leaders and their organizations by enabling them to shift their mindsets and behaviours now and in the future. For example, in the VUCA world, volatility can be countered with vision because vision is even more vital in turbulent times.

Uncertainty can be countered with understanding, which is the ability of a leader to pause, ask questions and listen while demonstrating empathy. Complexity can be countered with clarity, the deliberative process to make sense of chaos. Organizations that can quickly and clearly make sense of all the information associated with chaos can make better, more informed decisions. Finally, ambiguity can be countered with agility, the ability to communicate across the organization and to move quickly to apply solutions.

Let's put this into context by looking at it through the Coronavirus lens and the global pandemic. With the rapid spread of the virus, it became quickly evident that to keep employees and clients safe, organizations needed to enable their employees to work remotely, typically from their home. The vision and priority was health and safety while continuing operations.

Priorities became clear as mass efforts were put forward in technology, leadership and communication to enable employees to work from home. Then lockdowns were lifted and business resumed as usual. Leaders and their teams were soon overwhelmed trying to achieve all of the strategic priorities that were established pre-COVID. Coaching leaders to clarify purpose and priorities and provide a clearer sense of vision enabled everyone to focus on what was critical while minimizing burnout and stress.

One of the biggest shifts that many experienced was a more humane workplace. By providing support and coaching around empathy and communication, coaches enabled leaders to demonstrate care and concern for their employees. This became more critical as employees struggled to manage work and home lives, especially when children were doing home schooling.

By encouraging leaders to ask questions such as, "how can I support you?," ensured that they were asking questions and actively listening to better understand the needs of their team members. Furthermore, separated physically from their colleagues, clients and normal workplace, many found themselves socially isolated, disconnected and re-evaluating their lives. Understanding became critical to helping everyone deal with the uncertainty around them.
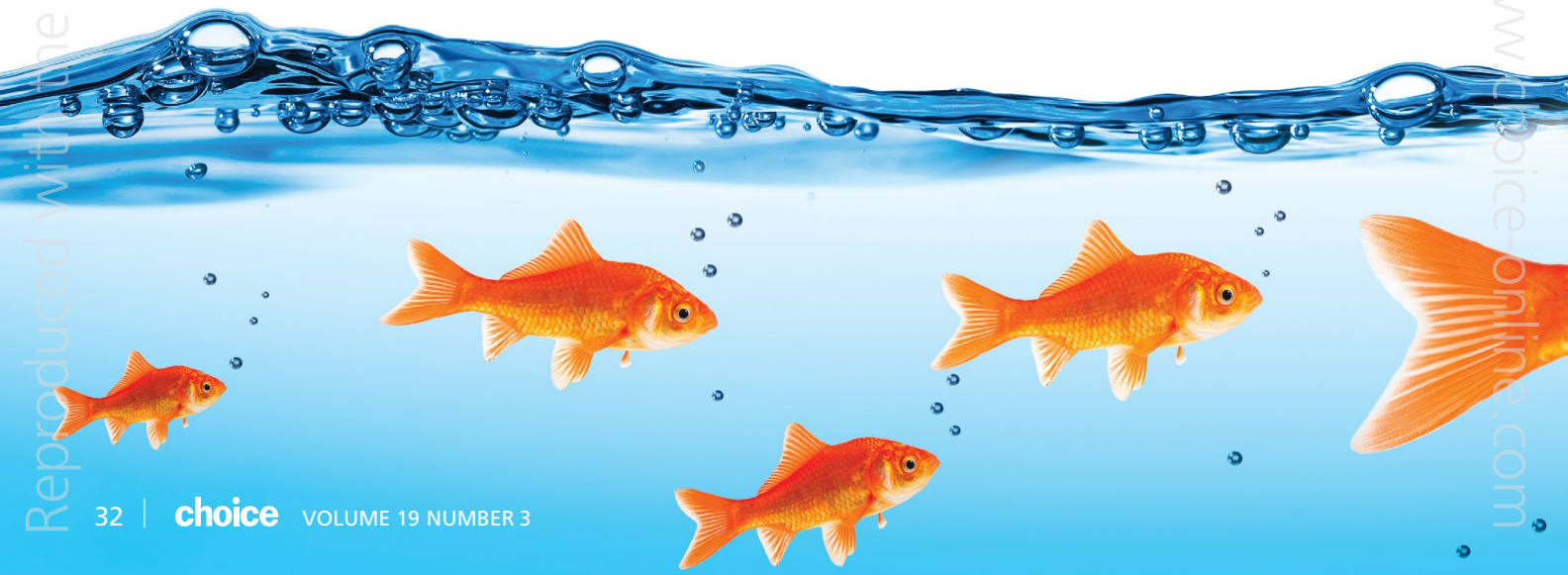
Coaches who encouraged leaders to adopt servant leadership styles enabled their clients to create a more caring and engaged team. It will also probably result in higher retention of talented team members while organizations whose leaders were not as successful in supporting employees will face higher turnover.

Leaders themselves experienced uncertainty, overwhelm and exhaustion. By providing a listening ear and helping leaders normalize their experience, coaches could enable their clients to better manage their own situations. So many of my coaching calls involved listening to stories of overwhelm; trouble managing priorities; challenge maintaining boundaries; managing new ways of working and supporting team members; exhaustion and longer working hours – the list goes on.

Often being in a leadership role can be lonely but in a virtual environment that can be exasperating. Leaders didn't have the informal opportunities to "bump into" other leaders and to collaborate across boundaries and share ideas. Many have shared that cross collaboration has decreased and that siloed efforts have risen due to working virtually.

Leaders who were able to make sense of the increasing complexity due to COVID, were also able to provide more clarity and to make better informed decisions. Coaches who encouraged leaders to take more systems thinking approaches enabled their clients to see patterns and trends across their system and to encourage different stakeholder point of views, all of which contributed to better decision making.

COVID accelerated the digital revolution and that affected organizational structure, job roles, the health and wellbeing of employees, and even the survival of organizations.

Agility certainly became an increasingly important skill to manage ambiguity during COVID. There was no playbook for dealing with this type of disruption. No plan guaranteed to work. By encouraging leaders to adopt more agile approaches, people were able to take more risks and try new approaches to meet things such as changing client demand and services.

Leaders who were able to shift mindsets and to "unlearn" some of their past experience were often more successful in creativity and innovation. In addition, we as coaches could encourage leaders to identify practices that enabled their teams to become more agile and to make more informed changes in response to the environment. Coaches could observe and provide feedback on team decision making and provides training on tools such as "after action reviews" and the need for team reflection and learning.
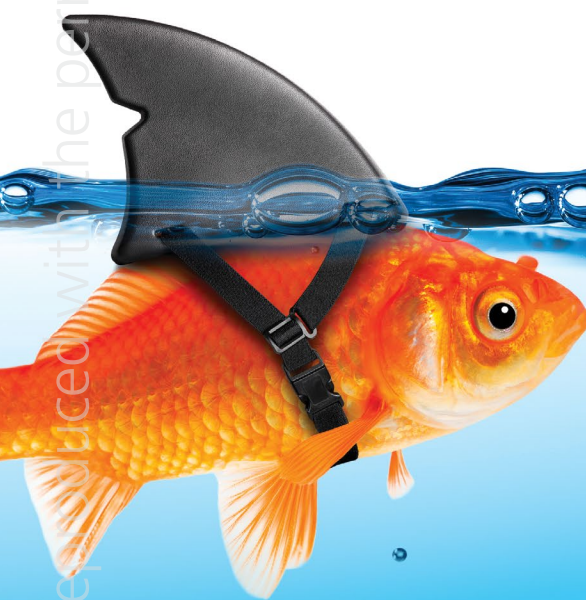
Furthermore, coaching leaders to collaborate across their system and to reduce silos was important. Encouraging leaders and their teams to identify practices that encouraged resilience, not just as the individual level but at the team and organizational level were also important for managing and responding to changing circumstances. Coaching leaders to develop and actively practice team norms such as actively listening to one another, assuming positive intent, and supporting one another by checking in with each other also benefitted.

There is no question that disruption has affected many industries. COVID even accelerated the rise of the digital revolution and sent many individuals and organizations into chaos. Yet through my coaching engagements, I was amazed with how well so many leaders have adapted to leading effectively during these disruptive times.

COVID may have accelerated disruption and brought many changes, however it has also brought many opportunities. Many leaders have become more connected with their colleagues; intentional effort has been brought to team building and relationship building; organizations have recognized the challenges of meetings and have encouraged core meeting hours; shorter meetings and even meeting-less Fridays to enable leaders to have more flexibility in how they support others.

We as coaches have the privilege and opportunity to listen to clients and ask them thoughtful questions to get them to reflect on how they are developing their leadership effectiveness amid growing complexity and disruption. I am inspired by the many leaders who are willing to reflect and adjust their mindset and behaviours to support others as transition into new practices and behaviors in the workplace. ●

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