

Working in uncertain times: how to maintain a sense of purpose and wellbeing

Even in what we now fondly refer to as 'normal' times, we lived with uncertainty. Organisations - and that means the people who work in them - have to cope with the unknown all the time. I'm always surprised when I hear business leaders and commentators saying that what organisations need most is 'certainty'. That's a dreamworld luxury which for the vast majority of businesses simply doesn't exist. When I started my business seventeen years ago, certainty wasn't something I could rely on. And crystal balls just aren't available for anyone.



We exist in perpetual change. Not so long ago, when what now seems like the more trivial upheaval of Brexit was making waves, we made a video called 'Working in Uncertain Times'. Now we have the pandemic of Covid-19, which presents us with uncertainty on an altogether different scale. This article attempts to take the messages from the video and apply them to the new, more daunting uncertainty. We're making the video freely available to all organisations who ask for it.

The good news is that human beings - and therefore organisations - are good at coping. At adapting. At innovation. Positive messages and actions are inspiring.

It's business as *abnormal*

I'm certainly not pretending that we don't face a challenge the enormity of which our generation has never faced before. But we owe it to ourselves, our families, our work teams and our organisations to pull together and help each other seek a way through this. We need to carry on as best we can, using practical thinking based on the facts that are available to us. Now is the time to be creative in our thinking and to go forward - even if it's in a different direction than before. It might not be 'business as normal', but sustaining a sense of direction, of moving forward, is essential.

Focus on what *can* be done

The video highlights the need to

maintain a sense of purpose. Choppy seas in a rudderless boat means chaotic drifting and likely impending disaster. By focusing on what can be done, rather than worrying about things that can't, you channel energy into positive action. That means identifying the factors over which you have some control and deciding how best to change course and move forward. This applies at both organisational and individual level.

Focus on what *can* be done to channel energy into positive action

An obvious example of this is how organisations have very rapidly decided that huge sections of their workforce must move to home working. For individuals, it's meant reappraising the routine of their working day: how to adapt their home; how to accommodate the competing demands of home and domestic life; how to connect remotely with the people they need to 'meet' online - and so many other issues.

For those organisations like the NHS, care homes, the Royal Mail and retailers there has had to be a strategic rethink and massive, rapid change in operations. But one reason the people in those organisations have responded so magnificently is because they understand what has to be done, can see the role they need to play and have a very clear sense

of purpose.

Where that sense of purpose is less clear, and the immediate requirements less obvious, it's still essential to move forward and to identify a 'raison d'être'. It's tempting to feel despair and to be overwhelmed by a problem which seems too vast. But addressing the issues arising from uncertainty requires you to be clear-headed; getting upset or distressed won't help. Instead, think about what specific problems you need to address and set about addressing them logically. It helps if you can write down the specific issues you face and focus on addressing the ones you can influence. Dealing with practicalities is a good way to get started because you can see the impact of your actions. The move to remote home working is a good example of this.

In my own village, the local public house was, of course, forced to close its doors. But instead of retreating into despair, the landlord has focused on what he can do, despite the draconian restrictions. He's secured the lunch order for a company down the road where the retained workforce is manufacturing bottles of hand sanitiser and he's offering a central food collection point for villagers who want to order provisions through his bulk ordering facilities. And he's providing a Friday night 'fish and chips' service for villagers who come one by one to collect the meal left out for them

in his conservatory. This landlord maintains a sense of purpose through serving the village and local business. It's this approach which doubtless means the pub will survive.



George slaying the Dragon at our local pub

The importance of clarity

Clarity is essential. In any change scenario, people need to know precisely what you need them to do differently and they need to understand why this is required of them. We illustrate this in the Scott Bradbury videos on change and change management.

Currently we're being told to adhere to the policy of 'social distancing'. And this is leading to some confusion. Others have commented that the phrase 'social distancing' isn't clear enough and suggest that the phrase 'physical distancing' would be better. I agree. We don't want people to be socially isolated for obvious mental health reasons. What we absolutely do need is for people to be physically apart from one another. The distinction is important. The words we use matter.

When working in uncertain times, we need to think clearly, and we need to communicate with clarity. Everyone needs to know their role and what is required of them; and there needs to be a shared experience where the pain and inconvenience are suffered equally. That applies just as much at household level, as families grapple with enforced long-term proximity, as it does at organisational level, as employees adapt to huge changes in their working practices.

Our sense of wellbeing comes from how useful and effective we feel

The destructive effect of fear

Fear, like leadership style, is contagious. How managers (and parents) behave impacts how well teams (and households) respond to the uncertainty. When we are tired and distracted by worries, we are more likely to make mistakes. When things go wrong, and we feel overwhelmed it's difficult not to feel stressed. But we don't think clearly when we are stressed and therefore our wellbeing during times of uncertainty is vital. Some of our sense of wellbeing will come from how useful and effective we feel we are being. Communicating a collective sense of purpose, gathering information to help us take decisive action and implementing practical steps, all improve our sense of worth, and therefore our mental wellbeing. And when we are strong, we enable others to feel strong too, so that hope displaces fear.

Doing nothing is not an option

Don't let uncertainty lead to paralysis

When you don't know how things will transpire, it may seem counter-intuitive - or even risky - to take decisive action. But paralysis in the face of uncertainty is worse. Doing nothing is not an option. If you do nothing, events take over. By seizing the initiative yourself, you give yourself a sense of control which is empowering and affirming. And it can be inspiring for others.

Taking decisions means moving forward with purpose, and that's always preferable to waiting for something to happen. It's important to acknowledge factors over which you have no control, and to be honest and transparent about your expectations, but a clear plan averts damaging paralysis - even if it is short-term and limited.

Setting out a clear way forward, even in the wider context of uncertainty, leads to improved morale and wellbeing. And the results of your activities will give you valuable information to inform your next decision, even if the wider picture remains unclear.

Innovate and find solutions

The best way to gain a sense of purpose, a feeling of control and wellbeing, is to make positive progress. It's often said that 'necessity is the mother of invention'. This is true now more than ever. The current emergency shows human beings at their best. Ingenuity, innovation and resourcefulness are the watchwords of the coronavirus emergency. As I said at the beginning, none of us has a crystal ball. But we do have human spirit, inventiveness and the skills to find new solutions. We will find a new way of coping with working in uncertain times.



*Catherine de Salvo
Managing Director
Scott Bradbury Ltd.*

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catherine@scottbradbury.co.uk

Video: Working in Uncertain Times

The Scott Bradbury video 'Working in Uncertain Times' is made available free of charge to all organisations until the end of 2020, by request. Please note that this video was not made specifically in response to the coronavirus pandemic, but we believe its learning messages are useful at this time. If you would like to make this video, its accompanying learning guide summary and this article available to everyone in your organisation please contact Alice Hubbard alice.hubbard@scottbradbury.co.uk Tel. 01638 723590.

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