

What Have We Learned So Far?

It's been a bumpy ride for the last two months – economic disruption, shelter and work in place directives, etc – and it's hard to see what is coming. I've been thinking about what returning to “normal” could be like. I think that the answer is that we will be inventing a new normal. In that case, what have we learned that we can use in the unknowable future?

We're More Adaptable than We Thought We Were

Everything has changed, and suddenly. That's been disorienting and often difficult, but what has mostly impressed me is that, by and large, *we have adapted*. That's not to say we like the changes we've made, but we have, mostly, found ways to adapt to the sudden changes that working together to stop the spread of the virus has forced on us.

I read an article recently that reported on the results of a work environment experiment. Several companies tried the idea of a four day work week; the experiment specifically examined the possible negative effect on productivity. The surprising result was that, not only did productivity not decline, it actually increased. It seemed that constant supervision was not as effective as simply giving employees a clear goal, the tools to accomplish it, and then leaving them to it.

This is encouraging as we think about how productive we can be working at home and under physical distancing guidelines.

We've Learned to Think More Flexibly about How to Solve Problems

Good ideas can come from anywhere, and one of the things I've seen in the last two months is that, more and more, companies are listening to less traditional sources of ideas. I saw this many years ago in the US Marine Corps, which used to be a much more hierarchical, top-down organization than it has evolved into. Used to be the officer issued an order (objective), the sergeant told his squad members what to do to achieve the objective, and the troops carried out the order. At some point, some bright officer had an idea: let's ask the troops, whose job it is to deal with the problems that our orders create, for their solutions. It turned out that the people dealing first-hand with the problem often had good, common-sense solutions.

During the last month, restaurants that are closed to the public have found ways to keep staff on the payroll by cooking for food pantries and non-profits. That's an example of

flexible thinking, and I see it all around me. It's a good lesson for the new normal we are going to create.

We've Learned to Appreciate One Another in New Ways

It's basic human nature to make assumptions about one another based on the roles we see other people in, but my experience of the last two months has reminded me of the usefulness of setting those assumptions aside. How many of us consciously thought of the work that sanitation workers do every day as essential? We have learned, during this pandemic, just how much we all rely on one another. But there's an even deeper appreciation that many of us have experienced, as we have observed other people step out of their previous roles and show us unexpected depth and gifts.

A few years ago, I conducted a leadership exercise on a full-day ropes/problem-solving course. The exercise amounted to a series of physical challenges that the group had to solve. The group was composed of key people from an advertising/public relations firm and, as you would expect, they were mostly energetic, out-going, and eager to face challenges. However, one member of the group – let's call him Charlie – was noticeably quiet and introverted. Late in the morning, we encountered an exercise that had the group stumped; no one seemed to know how to even get started. All of a sudden, Charlie piped up: "I know what to do...." and he started making assignments and showed the group the way forward. From that point on, Charlie leaned more into leadership, not just on the course but also at work. Others in the company learned to listen to, and appreciate, even to the quietest members of the team who had not previously seemed to have anything to offer.

We're All in This Together

By far the most significant lesson I've re-learned during the last two months is how large the meaning of the word community is, and how all of the communities that we belong to overlap and depend on one another. And it turns out that we are stronger, more generous, and more appreciative than perhaps we thought we would be. This leads me to think that, regardless of the challenges we will continue to face, the future looks brighter.