



COVID-19: Are You Hearing the Emotions of Your Organization?

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Foreword

We originally published this article on March 17, 2020—the first Tuesday of the lockdown in Toronto. It has been eight months since COVID-19 forced much of Canada into isolation, and even longer in many other parts of the world. While this article was written at the beginning of our lockdown, [Barry Pokroy](#) and [Dave Stevens](#)' advice for leaders to take time to focus on the emotional shifts employees are experiencing still rings true.

What is the emotional pulse of your team? For many, the initial blitz of heightened emotion has developed into a chronic, underlying emotional current. While the pandemic fear may have shifted for some, the stress remains—both personally and professionally. It is as important now as ever for leaders to take the time to restore the psychological anchors of their team members, as well as their own.

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'What is your biggest fear regarding the coronavirus?'

This was the question that kicked off our first remotely held weekly team meeting. It's not the kind of question we

expected, but probably the only question that mattered.

Amid the bombardment of conflicting news and social media hype, we realized we'd been functioning within a bubble of self-contained fear. Once this question was posed, we could exhale our emotions and listen to others as they expressed theirs. It made us feel normal again—like we weren't so alone in our social isolation.

As many countries undertake drastic COVID-19 crisis management measures, this is something leaders must not forget—the human side of what is going on. In moments of crisis we tend to focus solely on solving the problem and forget the heightened emotion a crisis comes with.

Heightened emotion is exhausting and wears us down at a time when we need to be functioning at our peak. It's important, therefore, for leaders to draw on the rich lessons of psychology. By letting people vent and express heightened emotion, it allows them to gain emotional and psychological mastery over the events they are experiencing. It allows them to let go and move forward.

COVID-19 has shattered our individual, interpersonal and national [psychological anchors](#). The emotional and psychological fallout is on a global scale—it's no longer business as usual. This means leaders should avoid the temptation of simply turning their attention to the business and commercial decisions of the organization. These critical decisions must, and will, be made. Yet one should not ignore the emotional crisis sitting in their people. Are leaders checking in with how the crisis is affecting their employees? Are they letting their teams express their feelings? This is the first step to restoring normality—to check-in with individual team members and allow them to vent their heightened emotion.

The consequences of unexpressed emotion are twofold. Internally, there is a build-up of negativity leading to potential despair. Externally, anger is displaced in unhealthy ways. Both will have an adverse impact on the success of any crisis situation. If leaders want to get their teams through the crisis successfully, they must take responsibility for managing the emotional and psychological fallout.

In the end, we are all leaders—as colleagues, community members, and neighbours. The more we listen to each other without the need to fix the problem, the more we restore our psychological anchors. And it starts with a question—'what is your biggest fear regarding the coronavirus?'

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