

# MANAGING PEOPLE WHEN THINGS ARE REALLY WEIRD:

Two critical tools

In times of crisis and emergency, like now, our inbox and LinkedIn feeds are filled with “how-tos” for working from home, being isolated, and all the other things related to the current international pandemic.

It's a very big deal and a strange time. If your organization is able to shift its working operations to alternate modalities, you may indeed be managing your team and your people as well as possible during this very weird time in which every day brings a new round of changes, questions and uncertainties.

In the Influencing Options program called *Leading Through Times of Change*, we anticipate changes such as new leadership, mergers and acquisitions, or venturing into new industry markets. But we did not pick *international health crisis* as the framework within which we would need to navigate change.

There are two primary leader communication skills that we need to adopt when we're dealing with any type of change, and these are essential because people, though they may have very different personalities and styles, will move through a series of well-defined stages in response to change.

## THE FIRST ZONE OF A CHANGE JOURNEY IS THE EMOTIONAL ZONE

This zone can include shock, fear, anger, doubt, concern, anxiety, excitement, enthusiasm. The range is fairly wide, but it is indeed emotional. In times of high-stress change, people can get stuck, which means their performance will not only dip or decline, but they will be *unable* to brainstorm, troubleshoot, or problem solve, much less do anything remotely like being creative or innovative.

This is why it's essential for you as a leader or manager to practice two critical skills: *listening actively* and *demonstrating empathy*.

When we listen actively, we need to gather information and listen for the facts – the content of what someone is telling us about the situation or themselves. And when we demonstrate empathy, we need to listen for the emotional subtext or the feelings they are having or dealing with in regard to the situation or context.

In other words, it's not just that you've asked them to work from

home or that you've asked them to come up with new ways to reach out to customers when they cannot see them in person, it's that they have their own emotional responses to what is happening. When this emotional state is heightened, our fight/flight/freeze response, regulated by the amygdala in the brain, has kicked in and people act *strange*. They don't respond as they usually do – some small thing seems to be triggering or upsetting them. Things feel *off*.

## ONE THING THAT CAN REALLY HELP IS TO NORMALIZE THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

One way to normalize the emotional response is to simply say, “Of course we are all feeling anxious about this because there's so much we don't know,” or “It makes sense that we are doubtful about whether this will work because we've never tried it before,” or “Yes, it takes so much more patience to communicate when we are stressed and cannot see each other in our normal locations.” If you say it aloud, name it, we can often de-escalate our feelings about a situation because we feel understood – we feel heard. And frankly, we don't need a pandemic to get stressed about change – most people feel stressed about even small changes!

Practicing transparency at this time, by listening actively – by asking clarifying questions, summarizing what you've heard, demonstrating that you understand, and demonstrating empathy – showing that you understand what someone might be feeling and why they feel that way, without judgment – will not only strengthen these working relationships during this time, but will also allow you to move to the next level of dealing with the Change Journey, the Reflection Zone where we can brainstorm, consider options, and begin to identify creative solutions.

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