

# Lessons from Covid-19

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2020 has been an incredible year for everyone. Our families, teams, schools, workplaces, communities, and governments – across countries, industries, and age groups – have undergone tremendous disruption requiring new ways of thinking, being, living, learning, educating, traveling, and working. That said, Covid-19 can be thought of as only symptomatic of challenging situations, crises, and disruption. What have been the lessons from the past months?

The changing nature of education, the varying appetite for anything digital (education, marketing, operations and supply chain, leadership, and so on), the varying preparedness of various internal task forces and the resources at hand, have forced us to reimagine our present educational and business models, reflect on what from the past would still be relevant, and have greater preparedness for the future.

In this article I will share with you a few actions we put in place as part of our preparedness – preparedness for questions from stakeholders (be they parents, students, staff, faculty, alumni, corporate partners), preparedness for better teaching and learning, and preparedness for managing in the new normal.

## Preparedness

2020 has been a challenging year for us across campuses and across programs. The silver lining is the continued positive retention of students, successful launch of digital initiatives, and a renewed workstyle – online – with our employees. While we are separated by distance we are connected by a sense of community.

Our preparedness took into account short-term and mid to long-term actions involving various task forces to understand needs and ensure organizational capability. We had task forces each for recruitment and business development, program experience, career and professional development, faculty pedagogy, executive education, infrastructure and facilities, employee wellbeing, and managing stakeholders.

While many of our activities under lockdown moved online (the Talent Day, Career Fair, Open House, Webinars and Masterclasses, Staff Meetings, and teaching of course) we observed higher participation and engagement online.

We also conducted across campuses surveys of online learning. We found that there are some challenges and opportunities that online teaching presents: for example, the IT equipment at home or at school, the dynamics of the classroom (participation, mood, preparedness of students for courses, time zones they are in), multi-tasking faculty, adjustment to grading and assignments and of course the time that faculty have to prepare for such a situation.

The challenges also bring opportunities that we have seen based on surveys done among various stakeholders. For example, we observed that students who would normally not raise their hands were comfortable to type their questions in the chat box. Online learning also opens up strategic opportunities for the future – how shall we continue to deliver our pedagogy. Technical opportunities come about through research and provision of better infrastructure, learning of new tools. There are also practical benefits such as saving commute time.

In order to prepare for the next normal, we also offered pedagogical resources to students and faculty. For example, resource websites and tutorials dedicated to

online and hybrid teaching, online communities and forums to share experiences in classrooms, upgrades to all classrooms into video-conferencing mode, with more screens, speakers, and finally recording facilities.

Before arriving on campus, common concerns among students and participants across all programs included travel restrictions, visa process, quality of online learning, perceived limitation in interaction with faculty and other student, accommodation and post arrival adjustment, the fees and perceptions of ROI. Continuous communication with the students and participants on experiences of others, transition period and so on were helpful.

After arriving on campus, the student experience task force concerned itself with arrivals, quarantine requirements, team building under online conditions, induction into the program, assessing various formats of learning, social distancing in the classroom, libraries, cafeteria, and other gathering places for our various communities. There is also an impact on campus social life and company projects given the social distancing requirements and travel restrictions. Professional development is another area that needed adjustments to online delivery of coaching, training, workshops, alumni and industry talks, virtual field visits, meetings and so on.

The physical and psychological safety of our communities remains the first priority. In terms of student or employee wellbeing, to help deal with burnout, social and physical isolation, anxiety over the uncertainty of the situation, professional counselling has been offered.

## **The Leadership Challenge**

The pandemic has brought to fore the need for a special kind of leadership that embodies empathy, communication, connection, ultimately for a sense of community and hope. I believe there are no “new” lessons – this is indeed not the first, only, or last time the world has gone through upheaval. But rather, there

are reminders of what matters most in such situations. Here's what Covid-19 reminded me.

## **The Importance of Mindset**

I want to state upfront my biases: I embrace change, and don't mind for the most part to shake up the status quo. The lens through which I view the Covid-19 situation shows me a picture of opportunity in chaos. As much as the dark clouds have hovered above us for months and will continue to, I want to see how this situation will help me answer the new "what ifs" and the new "what else?". This is not always easy or natural for everyone.

Someone with another lens is likely to see the situation quite differently. That said, the mindset a leader brings to the situation influences the mood of meetings, the conversations, and the possibilities one sees in the situation for future action. Can we bring a more present and future oriented mindset? Can we bring a learning, playful mindset? Can we encourage ourselves and each other to have a growth mindset? What new conversations are we then able to have? What new actions can we then bring about?

## **Leading with Empathy**

Speaking of lenses through which we see the situation, success in our leadership comes from recognizing that the "other" is not like "me" and understanding what lenses they use to see the situation. We are very aware that each of colleagues and friends has different personal circumstances, different levels of support and resources at home, different learning and/or working styles. Perhaps they now have extra costs and inconveniences to work from home, deal with dependent children and relatives, not to mention a demand on already strained psychological resources. Leading with empathy requires that we understand and accept each of their personal situations, communicate that understanding and relate to the emotion they are experiencing – be it pain, fear, anxiety, frustration, boredom,

relief, or joy. Leading with empathy requires that we remain flexible in order to get the work done through our teams.

Indeed, our stakeholders (manager, colleague, customer, suppliers, client, and so on) continue to have expectations from us. How can we enable our teams to deliver despite the disruption?

## **Effectively Communicating Expectations**

Working from home, and especially under such unprecedented circumstances requires trusting, and building trust remotely. One could not have a limit on honest frequent communication. We need to communicate expectations from each other (your colleagues, or family for example), set boundaries (with colleagues, and family). These might be some new conversations that our colleagues, friends, and family members will need to have but this is the time to do so. When in doubt, talk it out. Asking our managers, colleagues, or family member for clarification or support, as the situation demands or allows, opens the possibility for new and critical conversations to not be missed.

## **Staying Connected**

When physical contact and the ease of walking across to your colleague's desk are taken away from us, the "out of sight out of mind syndrome" may be heightened. During such times, there may be a need to over-communicate and over-connect and be over-available at least, initially so that a routine may be established for connecting online. This also helps to resolve any misperceptions or misunderstandings about commitment, accountability, and so on. It is imperative we take the initiative to work it out with relevant colleagues the frequency and mode of connecting per day/week individually or as a team.

## **Staying Agile and Discovering Hidden Opportunities**

Agility is not just about speed, agility is mobilizing the team for responsiveness. Recognition of the urgency of the situation, the volatility and uncertainty of the crisis leaves no room for denial – our stakeholders are waiting for action and help to deal with ground realities. Clear guidance, access to resources, creatively innovating new solutions despite lack of resources, pivoting to new ways when the data direct us, using digitalization as a way to make personal lives and work-lives better...the nature of the challenge will demand a range of responses and the goal is not to find the quickest response – yes, in a way it is but the higher goal is to find an optimal response that aligns with our values and one that the team can buy-into, engage with, and implement. The need to be agile may open up conversations about opportunities to reimagine the “old ways”.

## **Building Trust and Accountability**

Such crises also lead to discovery about team members, who can handle uncertainty and ambiguity, who can be accountable, who are the catalysts for change, and who are the keepers of the culture? Situations like Covid-19 amplify the existing dynamic within teams and shed the light on challenging pathways in the organization. If a team has trust and works well, a crisis situation can amplify that trust and synergy. For a team that is already challenged by its dynamic, a crisis situation can amplify those challenges, making team members diminish trust, and assume bad intent. Whether a team falls apart or comes together in periods of strain very much is anchored in the initial mood and dynamics. It is of particular importance to enable the smooth coordination of teams that are more likely to struggle in crisis, working and building back the trust remotely.

## **Taking Care of Oneself**

We all react to change differently. Be patient with yourself and your colleagues and assume good intent before any judgments are made (of yourself or

others). Beyond work hours, taking the opportunity of the situation to step back, disconnect and reflect, or reconnect with loved ones, our hobbies, or activities that energize us – whatever the need of the situation, these have held me and my team members in good stead.

