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Psychological safety, emotional intelligence, and leadership in a time of flux

Two renowned scholars and two McKinsey experts illuminate the leadership imperatives of our time: bringing people together, energizing forward progress, and reimagining normalcy.

We are living through a period of extraordinary uncertainty—about our physical safety, our economic security, and the daily conditions in which we will be operating for the next six, 12, 18 months or longer. One consequence: an undercurrent of emotional disturbance characterized by rising levels of anxiety, depression, fear, and stress. At the same time leaders are confronting these challenges on an individual level, they also are responsible for supporting a wide cross-section of people, all of whom have their own range of experiences, emotions, and resources for responding— and many who are paying a psychological toll that is still poorly understood.

To gain some insights into what organizations are faced with and how leaders can respond, McKinsey senior partner and Organization Practice leader Aaron De Smet spoke with three experts: Amy Edmondson, the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School and author, most recently, of *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth* (Wiley, 2018); Richard Boyatzis, a pioneer in the field of emotionally intelligent leadership, professor of organizational behavior at Case Western Reserve University, and coauthor of *Helping People Change: Coaching with Compassion for Lifelong Learning and Growth* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2019); and Bill Schaninger, a senior partner at McKinsey who led the creation of McKinsey's Organizational Health Index and who is a coauthor of *Beyond Performance 2.0: A Proven Approach to Leading Large-Scale Change* (Wiley, 2019). The following is an edited version of their conversation.

Aaron De Smet: *Physical safety is obviously very high on everyone's list right now. Yet in this period where people are also experiencing some form of anxiety, depression, grief, and fear, does that make the challenge of creating a psychologically safe environment easier or harder?*

Amy Edmondson: Psychological safety means an absence of interpersonal fear. When psychological safety is present, people are able to speak up with work-relevant content. For many people during the pandemic, the explicitness of the *physical* lack of safety has been experienced as a *shared* fear, which has allowed them to be more open and intimate and more able to voice their thoughts and concerns with colleagues. This collective fear thus becomes a potential driver of collaboration and innovation, further contributing to an open environment for producing and sharing ideas that under normal conditions may have remained unshared. As counterintuitive as it might seem, in many settings I'm seeing more psychological safety during the pandemic because of the greater collective fear about something very real—and, by the way, very external.

This is clearly different for essential workers—many of whom may not feel physically safe while still being required to show up at work, and they may not feel able to speak up about that. So we have these two very different populations.

Aaron De Smet: *Recently, I joined a videoconference for a US client that had just reopened its campus to a few employees. What I found striking was that although they were all sitting separately in their own offices on Zoom calls and not actually meeting face-to-face with their colleagues, they had all shown up, on day one, eager to get back to their workplace. They seemed to take a lot of comfort that they were at least back in their offices. What do you make of that?*

Amy Edmondson: I suspect for many people, the days of the week are muddling together. And, whether or not you see people in a conference room face-to-face or on Zoom, simply being able to return to your workplace may become a reassuring step toward normalcy, even if it's not fully back to normal.

Richard Boyatzis: Interestingly, the stress induced—whether from the current uncertainty or even in normal times with the preoccupation on goals, metrics, and financials—can cause the activation of the psychophysiological state of the negative emotional attractor. This defensive state fills your brain with negative thoughts. And what becomes very clear in times like these is that once stress is aroused, even mildly, it can cause disorientation and cognitive and perceptual impairment. One study showed how our peripheral vision drops from 180 degrees to 30 degrees [during times of stress]. Which means we may soon start to see things as potentially threatening that aren't.

The disruption of our lives, the loss of normal familial interactions, and the economic and financial fears of losing our livelihoods all become a bigger source of threat than the virus itself. That's why going back to routines and doing things that were normal really helps counteract this defensive state.

Aaron De Smet: *To what extent is technology aiding or hindering our emotional and psychological well-being?*

Bill Schaninger: So much of our work life that previously led to belonging and identity has been disrupted and replaced with technologies like Zoom and Slack that have become our new tethers to connectivity. It may be that our interactions with our teams and colleagues need a different pacing and cadence. Even though face-to-face interactions allow for a level of intimacy and understanding that may be lost on a monitor, with video formats like Zoom you can still pick up cues and detect whether someone's in some period of mild distress. Leaping into task orientation too quickly may almost feel like a violation to the person on the other end of the call. Taking a pause to acknowledge where the person is and what they need can build trust and confidence over time and make the shared interaction emotionally less risky. Yet this might also make the actual exchanges themselves even more draining as you pause to doubt the interactions.

Richard Boyatzis: On the positive side, we are seeing greater adoption of these new tools by broader audiences that are finding it useful to reach out and connect with a wider network of friends and colleagues more often. This can help people feel part of a broader human experience and regain some sense of the human identity. Yet electronic means of communication—all forms of social media, email, texting, even Zoom—are more alexithymic[1] than face to-face interactions. So we not only have this greater uncertainty that arouses more stress, we're exposed to fewer opportunities to tune into the emotions of others. Ultimately, we are minimizing emotions from what we are used to.

Amy Edmondson: Another aspect of social media is that it sets up an evaluative context. When we spend our life online—as so many of us are currently, more so than in the pre-COVID-19 days—we are entering a more explicitly evaluative domain. And that creates another source of anxiety as well.

Richard Boyatzis: In fact, the neurological and neuroimaging studies of people while using various forms of social media and electronic media support that, Amy. They activate parts of the task-positive network, which is directly linked to the stress response. When we're in this social comparison or evaluative mode, nobody feels good. Even the top performers worry.

Aaron De Smet: *For decades, many leaders have taken to wandering through their workplaces or factories to chat with employees and get a better sense of the ongoings of the company. How can leaders re-create these informal and organic conversations when they are not physically in the space?*

Amy Edmondson: What makes management by wandering around so successful is the ability to make a genuine link between a task or job and a larger overarching purpose. For example, consider the classic story of the NASA employee who understood how his cleaning the floor helped to get a man on the moon. That link, which might not be

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[1] Alexithymia is the inability to identify and describe emotions. Used here, it means lacking emotion.

immediately obvious to a person cleaning the floor, can become exquisitely clear with a little bit of leadership that helps people look for, and then make, those connections.

And now, with tools like Zoom, communications have become more explicit and structured; leaders must ask direct questions about what's working and what isn't, and they must engage in thoughtful discussions on how—in a rapidly evolving context—the vision for what we expect to happen is shifting accordingly. Although not as spontaneous as walking around, these Zoom chats, when kept to relatively small sizes, can still develop the connective tissue linking actions to a shared vision for the future.

Richard Boyatzis: One of the benefits that I think was left out in Tom Peters and Robert Waterman's book *In Search of Excellence*[2] is the wave of positive affect that management by wandering around can have on an individual and organization. For example, when Herb Kelleher was still running Southwest, once a year he would show up at Boeing's headquarters and ask [to set aside] two hours to walk one of the production lines. As he walked, he would stop to greet different workers and ask them which parts they were working on. Whether it was avionics or a flap or something in the brakes, Herb would find a direct link to how that mechanism helped their customers live their lives better. As a former senior vice president at Boeing explained to me, "Walking with Herb down the production line felt like a tidal wave of positive affect." Workers walked away feeling heard and with a new sense of connection to a bigger network and purpose.

Imagine now the beginning of a Zoom meeting, when everyone is checking in on each other, and the only highlights shared are all horrible, negative things. This would drop everyone's morale. Leaders need to listen, but they are also responsible for adding positivity. It could be as simple as showing genuine excitement over something you're working on to lift the mood of the team even on Zoom.

Aaron De Smet: *We've argued that leaders have a responsibility to sustain a level of calm and positive resolve in times of crisis. Why is this so important, and how can they remain role models under prolonged uncertainty and distress?*

Richard Boyatzis: We know that human beings are hardwired to unconsciously pick up on the emotions of others in eight to 40 thousandths of a second. When you're in a more powerful position—such as a leader, a parent, a coach, a trainer, a professor—you tend to be more infectious. The interesting question is, "Are they likely to pick it up as much through Zoom as in face-to-face?" Probably not, but probably more than in a phone call, and certainly a lot more than in an email.

The degree to which leaders can manage their own stress and feelings, and the reason why emotional self-awareness and mindfulness are so important in times of crisis, is because leaders become emotional contagions, inflicting positive or negative feelings on others, whether it's family members, friends, colleagues, or subordinates. And, although sometimes leaders may want to induce some stress into a situation to insert new energy and momentum, most of the time it's better to engage people in positive pursuits to retain a higher level of creativity, productiveness, and engagement.

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[2] Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies,* New York, NY: Harper Business, 2006.

To sustain that level of positive outlook, there are a set of individual activities, like meditation, yoga, prayer, and exercise, that can activate the parasympathetic nervous system and help renew one's body and mind. Other forms of social interactions can also fill us with sustainable energy, like helping others less fortunate, being in a loving relationship, spending time with pets, and engaging in playfulness and humor. Studies have shown that we can't be positively infectious with others—and excite and engage them—unless we're feeling inspired and sustained ourselves first. I think that's what leaders managing high-stress positions need to do to take care of themselves and to then involve and take care of others.

Amy Edmondson: As a leader in this point in time, you don't want to be faking your emotions. There is an enormous need for genuineness and transparency. And that means some leaders might have to actually train themselves to be caring, curious, and positive, which is hard to do when you're in a state of threat or fear, when self-protection becomes an overwhelming instinct. There is a strong temptation to just dive right in to business without acknowledging what others might be up against. Best practice is therefore to stop, pause, breathe, and remind yourself to be genuinely interested in what's going on for others.

As a leader, if you're not role-modeling sustainable behaviors—taking care of yourself, getting enough sleep, taking necessary breaks—then you make it very hard for others to do the same. And that's vitally important to the whole company. Leaders may need to resist the urge to fall into the trap of the hero mentality, sacrificing themselves for the greater good because it may do more damage than help.

Aaron De Smet: *Does this mean we are seeing the end of the hero CEO?*

Bill Schaninger: We may be experiencing a 30-year hangover of the rise of the hero CEO. Many people who are leading organizations today would have started their careers around the time of rising CEOs like Jack Welch and Larry Bossidy who became the embodiment of the organizations they led. Even though we've seen over the last 30 years the evisceration of many functions in middle management, the leader—who is all things to everyone—has continued to rise, and I do wonder if, for some, it may be much a part of their own sense of self and identity.

And yet, we've seen COVID-19 accelerating the shift away from classic authoritarian leadership to new forms of distributed decision making, where decisions get pushed to the peripheries of the organization to meet the demands of faster business cycles. The current crisis has only made this shift even more critical to business survival. CEOs still trying to hold on to top-down mandates could very quickly become the impediment rather than the solution.

Richard Boyatzis: There is a greater need to help leadership and senior management realize that they're not supposed to do all the jobs. It's imperative they value their talent, not only for the purposes of retainment, but to step aside and let them succeed at their jobs.

Amy Edmondson: There does seem to be a fundamental reframing of the leader's role. If you have your finger in every pie, you're not doing your job. With leaders currently physically unable to be everywhere, this might be a good time to review working habits,

attend fewer meetings, make fewer functional decisions, and allow yourself the time to focus on the bigger picture.

Aaron De Smet: *One of the things leaders might be thinking about right now is, "How do we capture and bring forward the very thin, perhaps, but very real positive aspects of this shared experienced?" What advice would you give them?*

Richard Boyatzis: My research has shown how a shared vision or shared sense of purpose is the strongest predictor of organizational-leadership effectiveness, engagement, organizational citizenship, and even product innovation. In addition, neuroimaging and hormonal studies have been showing that the two ways to get into that physiological and neurological state where people are more open to ideas, more connected, and more engaged are when they make sure that the sense of purpose, not the goals, is clear and when people know that you care about each other.

This is a time for leaders to try to invoke or provoke a degree of reflection, spending the time to talk about a shared sense of purpose and core values while also spending the time to emotionally check in. In fact, it will have the dual benefit of helping people move past the present suffering and begin to envision and create their new future together.

Amy Edmondson: Purpose and vision are critical today, but only to the extent that both are recognized as updatable and reflective of a continuous learning process. Given this state of uncertainty, overconfidence and overpromising are likely to be perceived as disingenuous. Instead, leaders should explicitly frame the opportunity as a creative exercise. The problem solving that lies ahead is a team sport, and so you want to start by identifying and naming what the creative opportunity might be, inviting people in to help craft this journey together. You will be course correcting along the way anyway, so you will need to rely on each other to make forward progress.

Bill Schaninger: In our research with high-performing teams, we've asked clients to reflect on their "peak experiences," and many, particularly energy companies, would almost always reflect on coming back from natural disasters. Many describe a period when all hands are on deck, bureaucracy is stripped away, and the teams unite around a moral higher calling.

We would hear phrases like, "Refire the Southeast," "Get the power plant up and running," "Get gas in." And, for that period, the tie that binds would be collective, shared, and unanimous. It's an interesting dynamic that we are seeing now during the pandemic, but, as we come out of the current crisis, I wonder if it may start to fragment again, or if we can learn and retain some of these positive aspects. Q

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