

## Empathy During a Pandemic, Part 2: The Weirdness of Work for Now

[In Part 1](#), we explored how personality differences can cause us to act out during a time of uncertainty and stress. Let's face it: **It is just weird right now.**

As we try to continue being productive, we need to recognize the complexity of the shifting sands beneath our feet when it comes to workplace engagement. On top of that, some of us have toddlers beneath our feet at the same time. Many of us are asking questions about what post-pandemic life will be like – and whether or not we will have a job (or the same job) as many organizations will re-structure.

Still, we press on. And work is work, which means that there are still the normal differences of opinion, misunderstandings about the expectations of our supervisors, and the “normal” ups and downs of the business side of life.

But the complexity of navigating day-to-day business just ramped up because virtual work highlights the sometimes-stark differences in life stage for some of us.

In my experience so far, some who are empty nesters have even a more uncluttered workspace without the natural interruptions of being in a physical workspace. No one “drops by” to say hello or chitchat about the weather or their favorite baseball team. Heck, no one is playing baseball anyway. These are the people that can actually stay focused for more than a few minutes at a time. This is not so for many.

Again, let's consider some reminders that can give us the empathy we all need to get through for a while longer:

**Stage of life affects work now more than ever.** Another aspect of what has surfaced recently is that people respond according to their age and stage of life. There are plenty of differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers in terms of their prioritization of family, work-life balance and more. This is less of an issue because most work environments level the playing field. We all come to an office and are operating in an environment that is free from the things that distinguish our ages. But now there is a massive difference between people who are dealing with the challenges of infants, toddlers, school age children and college kids at home. Most of us got thrust into a home office environment that is drastically different than our normal work life and has a level of chaos. Then there is another group of us who do not have children at home and have even more time to concentrate and ramp up our efficiency, wondering why others are not in 5<sup>th</sup> gear with us. And still others have concerns that characterize middle to late career – the stock market, long-term health care, and aging parents. Again, normally these things don't hang around our necks when we arrive to the office. But today, everyone's context and stressors are decidedly different.

**Leaders have a difficult job.** Under normal circumstances, leaders are expected to provide clarity and direction. They are to point out the vision for our future, and then align us to help see

that vision turn into reality. Every leader has a different capacity to deliver this guidance in a healthy way, but everyone is simply guessing right now. Under these new stressful circumstances, the weaknesses and strengths of our leadership will be on display. Leaders will respond according to their wiring and immediate context – some are in personal turmoil, some do not deal well with conflict or crisis, and so on. But this is usually smoothed out by the fact that they can communicate with each other (senior teams, executive committees, etc.) and come up with a solid game plan. These days even that is compromised as they may be struggling just to connect with each other. When leaders are disconnected and destabilized, the chaos is exacerbated.

**We are not sure if our work matters.** For our friends in healthcare and government it is very clear that their work matters. There are also some non-profits that were built for such a time as this. But for many others the questions about the future stimulate questions about the value of their work now. Am I doing the right thing? Am I doing enough? Is this actually going to mean something if the organization gets completely re-shuffled in the new order of post-pandemic life? Are the leaders not telling us something about our job stability? And, when we return, will I even recognize the organization as a place that I once knew and thrived in?

As we move forward in this “new normal,” how can we lead strong and get the best from those around us? What are the areas that are under our control? What can we do to build influence and goodwill in our organization? Here are a few recommendations:

**1. We can communicate with clarity.** Clarity wins in an uncertain time. A very helpful approach to communicating right now is to connect with people compassionately, empathize with the uncertainty, and tell them what you know and don’t know yet. Remember the old adage “under promise and over deliver.” Stick to the emotion in the room (or video chat) and communicate what you know and how you are expecting people to operate in the organizational wilderness.

**2. We can come up with ground rules for the new normal.** The rules and boundaries that are present will need to be revised in light of the changing circumstances. Perhaps an approach could be a “From-To” exercise where leadership expresses that we are moving “from” this “to” that. For example, we are moving **from** *three-hour weekly executive team meetings at 9-12 on Mondays* **to** *a 30-minute check-in Zoom call with the executive team from 9-9:30am on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday*. As well, there may be temporary processes established around other functions: decision-making, budgeting and spending, meeting rhythm, resolving disputes or conflicts, etc. Clear communication is key here.

**3. We can offer grace and latitude.** If there was ever a time to give people grace and latitude, the time is now. Apple has a customer service approach that is deeply embedded in empathy. They say that the first thing a person needs to feel is that you care about their situation or problem. Now is the time to mimic this and step into the humanness of each person with whom we interact. As much as the above observations and recommendations are about what to do when we see each other “off the rails,” the fact is that many people and organizations are modeling this beautifully. May we all find our way of doing the same.

[In case you missed it, here is part one of this series.](#)