


When change is the only constant, how do you grow your employees during disruptive times?

 By [Brian Eagar](#)

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Humans are resistant to change. The brain has a protective mechanism that views change as a threat, in turn triggering our fight-or-flight response. Paradoxically, change drives our evolution as individuals and societies. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus's words, "Change is the only constant in life," are a stark reminder of the never-ending tussle between order and chaos. After the disruption of 2020, employers have had to cope with the uncertainties of the business world, while simultaneously dealing with the challenges of Covid-19. In a disrupted workplace, we must use the knowledge gained in 2020 to inform how we keep our people aligned, engaged and empowered, especially in the "new normal" way of remote working.



Below are useful strategies to successfully lead and grow your teams through these disruptive times.

1. Check in regularly with your people

In our current reality, the clear borders that used to exist between the home, work and school are a thing of the past. Remote work invokes a balancing act between running a household, making sure children's schooling is done and fulfilling work duties. This leaves little time and energy for personal and professional development, leaving many with a sense of isolation and being overwhelmed.

Take a moment to engage directly with remote employees at least once a day, whether through an email, phone call or video chat. The longer you go without reaching out, the more likely employees are to feel left out and become disengaged from their work – which increases the possibility of poor work performance. Consistent interaction with each team member [will ensure they feel motivated](#), included and valued.

2. Clarify role output for the remote worker

Working remotely has resulted in a loss of the traditional office support network – the “personal touch” – and requires a new approach to teamwork. This sudden shift can lead to staff feeling disconnected and lost. A big part of managing remote teams is making sure your remote employees know exactly what your expectations are – even more so when onboarding a new appointee. Providing clear expectations will give employees a much-needed sense of security and the ability to focus

on realistic development goals.

Start by identifying the minimum expectations required for the position, critical tasks they need to perform, and ensure that your staff have the necessary resources available to accomplish these tasks remotely. By letting your team know what you want from them upfront, you can make sure you are synchronised. For example, think of the employees' goals for the next week, the amount of work that they are expected to complete in that week, and whom they can go to with any issues. It is important to include your availability – when can people reach you and how. Depending on your organisation, you can schedule check-ins at set times, whether it be once or even twice weekly.

3. Continue with upskilling and reskilling – informally

Although now readily available online, formal training channels are more limited for remote workers. This includes the loss of personal interaction with the facilitator or teacher. Organisations need to supplement this gap with an in-house, hands-on training approach. This is critical not only for onboarding new people, but also to ensure institutional knowledge is retained. Processes, teamwork and customer service is severely impacted when a knowledge gap is left by a departing employee. Peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and coaching goes a long way to empowering new appointees and bridging the knowledge gap between experienced and newer employees.

As per the World Economic Forum report on the future of work, the most valuable skills in the future are not the technical skills but the soft ones, like innovation, leadership and emotional intelligence. The good news is that soft skills are trainable (unlike IQ, which is fairly static once we reach adulthood); emotional intelligence can be developed. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, the first step is to start with a training needs assessment to know where the gaps in development are. Next, you might consider employing a professional training and coaching company to address your employees' needs. TowerStone offers a course in Emotional and Social Intelligence.

4. Leadership coaching – remotely

Just as employees need to adapt to the realities of Covid-19, leaders' roles have changed as well, and it is incumbent on the new leader to drive adaptation. Leading a geographically scattered workforce requires a greater focus on emotional support and psychological safety, especially for those employees who are struggling without the personal connections and safety of the office. Leaders will further benefit from peer coaching and advising one another, sharing common challenges and ideas on how to improve feedback and inspire the face behind the video conference. Leadership mentorship circles or connect groups within the organisation for mid- level and senior leaders create a safe space for leaders to engage and discuss the challenges they face.

In essence, leadership coaching is an art to be learned and practiced daily – even more so in a remote working environment. The ability to hone your questioning skills and to listen patiently and with empathy is what your teams need from you. And in this remote world, with time being a critical asset, we cannot afford to waffle, be long-winded and ask inappropriate or irrelevant questions.

Dr David Rock's SCARF model is something that leaders need to embrace and understand. SCARF stands for the five key domains that influence our behaviour in social situations. These are:

- **Status** – respecting others and their roles.
- **Certainty** – clarifying expectations as much as possible when things are uncertain.
- **Autonomy** – providing a sense of control and a feeling of being trusted to perform responsibilities.
- **Relatedness** – finding ways of connecting with others and fostering an environment that encourages connection.
- **Fairness** – treating everyone equally.

This model is based on neuroscience research that implies that these five social domains activate the same threat-and-reward responses in our brain that we rely on for physical survival. When any of these elements are threatened, it stimulates the part of the brain that is triggered when our bodies feel pain, sending the danger signal and switching us off.

When we feel threatened, our brain releases cortisol, which negatively affects our creativity and productivity. Conversely, positive contributions to these domains switch us on. When we feel rewarded, our brain releases dopamine (the happy hormone). So, we seek out ways to be rewarded again.

If leaders can apply the above to all their interactions, including with management and other leaders, it leads to far more productive dialogues.

The way forward

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that adaptation is necessary for our survival. As you have likely experienced yourself, this is true for business as well. Checking in with your employees, clarifying outputs for remote workers, upskilling and reskilling, and leadership coaching are only a few suggestions to grow your employees in times of change. The key to business survival and employee development will rest on staying up to date and having a flexible and agile mindset. It is up to us, as leaders, to manage our teams in such a way that employees are prepared and empowered for whatever challenges will cross their path.

ABOUT BRIAN EAGAR

Brian Eagar is the founder and group CEO of TowerStone. From being voted as the naughtiest kid most likely to fail at school, Eagar found success in the information and technology sector as a young sales and marketing executive, culminating in an executive sales and strategy role for one of the Siemens businesses based in Germany. On his return to South Africa, his passion to inspire leadership led to the creation of TowerStone Leadership Centre in 2006.

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