What's Next In The Post-Coronavirus World? Five Principles in Progress
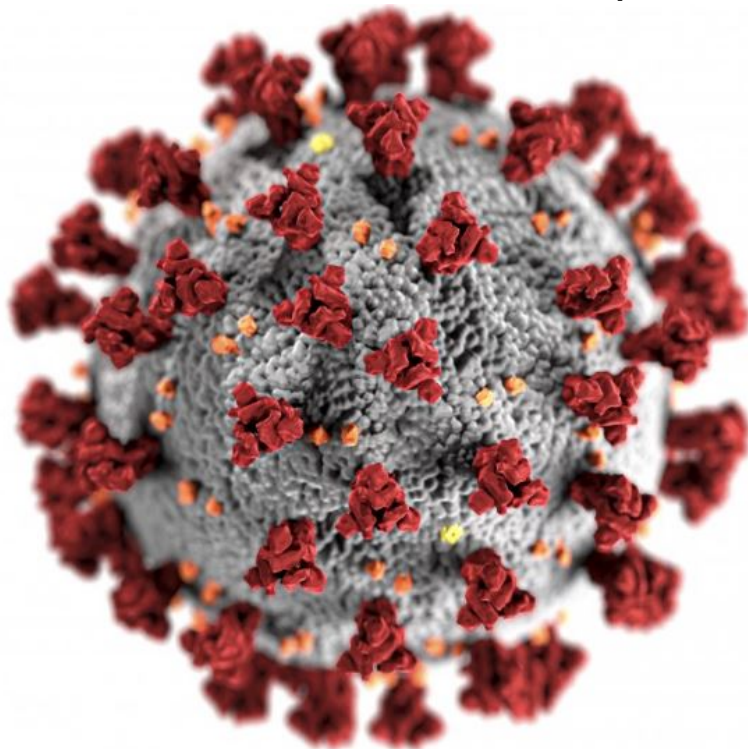
Many are asking, "What's next?" following this unprecedented global pandemic?

Some suggest that society is now in a "new normal" which seems ludicrous given that people are practicing social distancing and home sheltering, which is far from normal.

Others speculate that organizations will move from "A" to "B" (e.g., from office work to nearly all work done virtually through digital-enablement) These speculations feel naïve and simplistic like a college freshman predicting with certainty what their job will be like after college.

Still others predict new specific practices (e.g., healthier lifestyle, less pollution, more caring relationships) as a result of the global crisis. These idealized practices generally fail to account for inevitable recidivism as noble aspirations often revert to traditional actions (e.g., weight loss followed by weight gain).

I hesitate to propose a definitive new normal or to speculate with precision what new practices will emerge from this virus. Rather, I would like to suggest five general *principles in progress* that may follow this coronavirus pandemic by labeling them with an "-ing" adjective. Just like 9-11 created a world wide security agenda and the great recession of 2008 established more financial controls, these principles may shape what's next after the current crisis.

1. Increasing customization or personalization.

Even with worldwide stipulations (social distancing, lockdowns, health care), the global pandemic affects individuals and organizations very differently. Being homebound with children to home-school or in a small apartment is vastly different from being homebound without children or in a larger house. Many

entire industries (e.g., entertainment, transportation, consulting, retail) have been devastated; other industries (e.g., virtual or digital connections, delivery services, personal health providers like masks, grocery stores) are thriving.

Mass customization or personalization is not new but may get increased attention as organizations may customize services to unique customer requirements and personalize work to fit the needs of individual employees. There may be fewer "one size fits all" approaches to work.

2. Redefining boundaries of work from place to values

Traditionally, people go "to work", are "at work", and return "from work." With this mindset, work has a physical space and place boundary.

The social distancing required by this pandemic may evolve this definition of work. While many have focused on the administrative requirements of working at home (e.g., find a dedicated space, use technology, dress for work, etc.), the lingering insight is not where work is done, but what work is done. Instead of asking "where are you working?" leaders may ask, "how does your work create value for our customers?"

The emerging boundaries for work may focus less on space and place and more on creating value for key stakeholders. Creating value for customers, investors, and communities outside the organization can be done anywhere, in an office, at home, on an airplane, in a hotel, etc.

The value of creating value for customers may become the focus of work. For example, it is not enough to have a culture based on values; the "right" culture means that the values inside a company create value for customers and investors outside. With a value boundary defining work, employee actions are not tied to a place, but to value created for customers.

3. Navigating paradox

The simple calls for shifting practices from A to B miss the complexity of organizations. In this crisis, leaders have recognized and been forced to navigate paradoxes, including:

Care for the individual AND create a competitive organization
React to the short term with bold decisive actions AND envision the long term future with sustainable values
Take care of yourself AND offer care to others
Be divergent to seek new ideas AND be convergent to make things happen
Practice social distancing AND avoid social isolation

Leaders and organizations navigate these paradoxes by recognizing and avoiding predispositions and unconscious biases, encouraging disagreements without being disagreeable, and constantly adapting to current circumstances. A great leader once said, "Run with patience."

4. Tolerating uncertainty

The crisis reminds us of how much we want certainty even when it is not possible. For example, people want to know they will be out of lockdown when the government loans will come through, what will happen to their company, and when they can return to work. The reality is that no one really knows.

Uncertainty activates the limbic system in the brain that signals threat and increases anxiety. Tolerating

uncertainty comes when the brain's threat response is replaced with rewards and opportunities by:

Recognizing, naming, and accepting the causes of uncertainty;

Spending less time focusing on ambiguity triggers (e.g., watching endless reports on the virus updates) and more time being mindful about the present and celebrating what is right (e.g., discovering new activities during sheltering);

Reflecting on choices made in times of uncertainty and learning what could be adapted to future choices;

Anticipating the worst possible outcome of the uncertainty and recognizing that this outcome could be withstood.

Ultimately, the primary source of peace (either individual well being or organizational relevance) comes from within as people and organizations come to tolerate uncertainty by living their deepest values.

5.   Seeking guidance

In any crisis, decisions and choices get magnified requiring even more attention to making the right decisions. Post-coronavirus crisis, decisions should increasingly be made with rigorous analytics using digital technology. Making the right decisions comes from offering guidance that prescribes what should be more than describing what is. In the last year, my colleagues and I have worked to create an Organizational Guidance System that identifies which choices in talent, organization, leadership, and HR have the most employee, business, customer and investor impact. It moves beyond scorecards that report what has happened, dashboards that offer current information, and predictive analytics that show what might happen. Post virus, this rigorous guidance should further inform decisions and choices.

Conclusion: Opportunities in Crisis

The most important thing that leaders can give employees is an organization that succeeds in the marketplace. Without success in the marketplace, there is no workplace. To succeed in the marketplace requires insights and innovations in HR outcomes of talent, leadership, and organization that deliver value to employees, customers, investors, and communities.

In a crisis, these HR agendas get amplified. Many have expressed a version of "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste" which comes from learning more than lamenting when facing a crisis. Through making progress on principles of customization, value-based boundaries, paradox, tolerating uncertainty, and guidance, business leaders, HR professionals, and employees create a better future.

The best is yet to come.

By Dave Ulrich