

Leadership Discussion Series

Loss, grief and leadership

April 2020

Could we all be grieving our loss of connections, normalcy, our future plans, and control? As leaders now is when we will be remembered for our best work. Time to walk alongside our colleagues, listen and support them. This article covers why we maybe grieving, the 5 stages of grief, how we can help others and ourselves get through this. You will need a cuppa, your phone, lots of compassion and patient listening.



Psychology Today, Annie Spratt

"Stay safe and stay connected" is a catch phrase I've adopted in earnest in the last few weeks. I'm making an extra effort to make calls vs. emails or im/sms to check in with colleagues, friends, and family. Sure we have plenty of business VCs and calls but to get an 'out of the blue' call, to simply check- in, is now more important than ever.

The refrains I hear include: crazy times; unprecedented; it keeps changing so fast; it's a ghost town; feeling isolated at home alone; I miss the office and my colleagues; juggling work and kids home schooling is crazy; glad to be busy with a job; and, when will this end? We are at a loss to describe what we are all experiencing. We are all fearful to some degree for our own health along with family, friends, and colleagues and their jobs and, importantly, our own livelihood and future. We fear the immediate loss of connections and normalcy, of the future we had planned for ourselves and with those we love, and the broader economic and societal toll. Perhaps our biggest overall fear is not knowing how long this will go on for.

Could we be feeling grief?

A recent Harvard Business Review article captures this sense of loss as being akin to feeling grief. David Kessler, a global expert and author on grief outlines why it's important to acknowledge our grief, how to manage it, and how he believes we can find meaning from it.

Kessler says we could be feeling a range of different forms of grief. A key component is anticipatory grief where our mind goes to the future and imagines the worst. The world has changed maybe only for 6 months but that is not how it feels and we know that some things will never be the same again. This week we hear of a potential second wave of virus outbreaks and



subsequent lockdowns if we go to the office too quickly. The government's stimulus is huge so the economy must be in trouble and future generations will be paying it off. A vaccine may be 12 plus months away, which all increases our concern for the future.

Kessler points out we are not used to this kind of "collective loss or grief." This crisis caused by an invisible enemy gnaws at our sense of safety. We're feeling that loss of safety and loss of control collectively.

The article takes us through the **five stages of grief** providing a framework to work through:

Denial: I'm healthy and strong and the virus won't affect me.

Anger: I'm being made to self-isolate by a nanny police state that gives me conflicting messages.

Bargaining: Ok, I can trade off a few weeks of physical distancing for a result.

Depression: When this will end?

Acceptance: OK, now I have to figure out how to get through this.

Kessler states that moving to acceptance is a non-linear path for each of us. Acceptance allows us to feel more in control. In this case, we can remind ourselves that we can kill this enemy ourselves via washing our hands and we can help our community by physical (not social) distancing. He talks of gaining a sense of meaning that will be different for each of us via going through this process in our own time.

Leadership in a time of loss

As leaders we need to at least try to read the signs of this loss or grief and be ready to provide support and compassion to our colleagues. It is certainly a good time to get more comfortable with open conversations with lots of active listening. We need to be ready to be vulnerable and honest that we don't have all the answers and have similar feelings. We certainly don't want to be dismissive.

We will have friends and family who have lost jobs or closed their businesses. We can empathise and reassure our colleagues that we are here to support them and, in turn, they can help and coach their team members.

Leaders can take on the role of the club-coaching director to support their various teams' coaches and ensuring each team and player gets the support they need. I'm not sure too many town hall meetings can be held during this crisis to ensure we are connecting with all our teams consistently. To paraphrase the crisis communications adage – *if a information vacuum exists make sure you fill it with your messages or someone else will.*

We also know that by helping and serving others with greater needs via volunteering we can help put into perspective our own fears and concerns. This approach may assist some colleagues move along the grief process and find new perspectives.

Emotions needs motion

Back to HBR and Kessler who states, 'emotions need motion' meaning that it is important we acknowledge what we are going through and allow ourselves to go through the five stages of grief. This is where leaders will need to stock up on patience and compassion as we will have plenty of highly stressed team members during this uncertain time.

The really nagging aspect of this crisis is the open-ended nature of it. This goes to our human fear of a lack of control and certainty. This brings us to the concept of 'letting go' of things we cannot control. We might be able to take something from the experiences of Viktor Frankl, the psychotherapy pioneer and holocaust survivor, and James Stockdale, the senior Vietnam War POW and former US vice presidential candidate.



In Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning* he recalls that many prisoners died just after Christmas 1944 as they had set their hopes they would be free by then. They died of hopelessness when Christmas came and went without freedom. Stockdale's experience is identical. He states in an interview with Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, that the overly optimistic POWs died while the realists often survived believing they would get home but were able to accept an uncertain time frame. We too are suffering the effects of forced isolation albeit in our own home.

Cuppa and a good long chat

So, just as we all seem to be saying hello and chatting more these days to neighbours as we do our daily exercise or walk the dog, we can grab a cuppa from our struggling local café and make that unexpected check-in call. I know it certainly helps me being couped up with my self-talk so it can only help our team members, friends, and family. Off to make a few more calls.

Sources

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RUOK mental health help <https://www.ruok.org.au/findhelp>

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