



Learning Organisations: Creating resilience through psychological safety

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Context

Learning is the creation of new mental maps through the expansion of one's worldview resulting in a shift in perspective or a way of being. On the other hand, an organisation is a human system that delivers value through the collaboration of human beings. By virtue of these two definitions, we could argue that a learning organisation is a human system that chooses to live in a constant process of expanding its world view so it can always improve its collective perspective, in this case for improved value creation. After going through an extensive change process, a client of ours once described the process of learning as one that can be described as painful and therefore should be exercised in the presence of psychological safety to manage the discomfort experienced by individuals in the process of learning. COVID-19 however has deprived us of an opportunity to be deliberate about creating psychological safety, and yet we have all collectively catapulted into a space of rapid response and truthfully an under-duress recovery. Therefore, we have collectively had to learn to deliver work differently, collaborate differently, engage teams virtually and clients differently. We have all found ourselves literally learning in the flow of life. Four months into this global crisis we can all attest to the fact that we have learnt

something new and we are now experts to some degree in the **Future of Work**, something that, quite frankly we thought was yet to come.

This context begs two questions:

Firstly, how then, did we all create these new mental maps on how we can deliver value in a new way if organisations have not been deliberate about creating psychological safety?

Secondly, this continuous learning in the flow of life is not going to stop when the multiple lockdowns are lifted, so we will have to continue to navigate the new normal and find some sort of perceived normalcy. How are we going to build a new wave of energy to continue with this learning?

Below are some of the insights we have gained in partnering with our clients in their response to the crisis and recovery to chart a new normal:

1. Remote working has elevated the level of human connection

– remote working has elevated the degree of empathy for each other's circumstances based on the knowledge that we are all in this together. As a result, we have had to quickly learn to “maintain structure while allowing

for flexibility” because over and above people's jobs, they also have to play the role of home-school teacher if they have young children, share space to work in with their significant others and do whatever else is required of them to keep a household in order. It has made people's level of empathy increase and the perceived judgment that often threatens psychological safety in the curated, structured workplace has suddenly expedited the need to being human with each other, as a key first priority. People now feel safe to quickly ask, “how do I share my screen in teams?” “How are you keeping sane in this lockdown?”

2. Managing performance through output

– trust is a component that we found was tested the greatest when teams started working remotely. As a result, we had to collectively re-wire what we thought productivity was to look at work from the perspective of output delivered not hours invested. People found themselves being “always on” and finding the need to prove that they are working and we had to start advocating in our organisation and our clients the discipline of “Consciously disconnecting” to manage the blurred boundaries that were created by remote working and become focused on ensuring they are delivering on their work expectations.

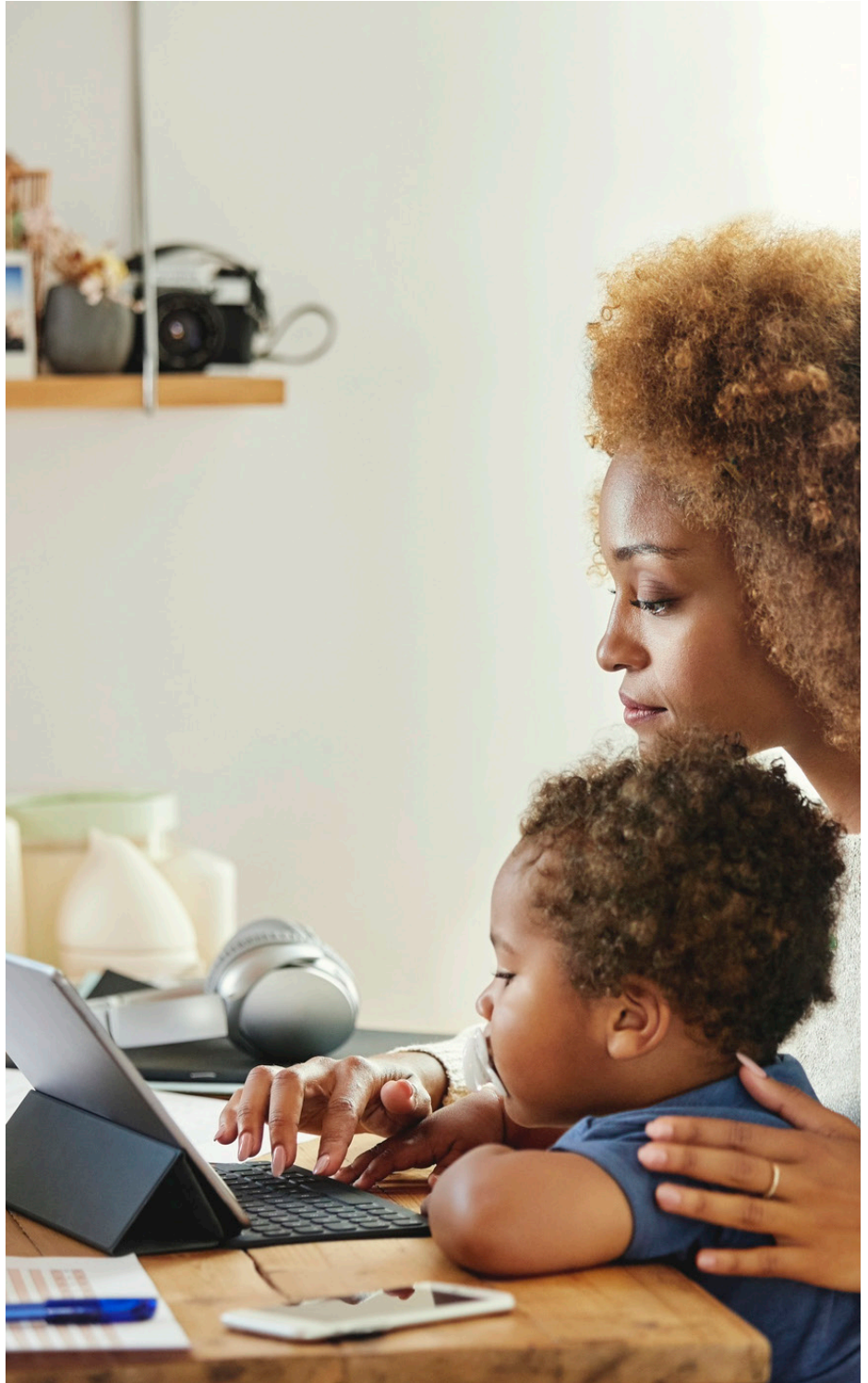
3. The deceptive “When we get back to normal” statement – what we are realising daily in our organisation and our clients’ organisations is that currently nothing can be further from the truth. The strong likelihood is that the statement “when we get back to normal”, is gone. There is post-COVID-19 reality which we are being prepared for by our current experiences. We have to collectively re-imagine the work, workplace and workforce. What this extraordinary period has given us, is an opportunity to respond and recover, and we now have to think about how we will thrive in the new emergent normal. We have learnt that the characteristic that has helped most organisations in this time is the ability to be resilient, the ability to see the possibilities when it all seemed like it wouldn’t work. Four months into the global crisis, the collective response now feels like the new normal.

In conclusion, the Future of Work is not yet to come, it is here. Learning can truly happen in the flow of life, as COVID-19 has shown us every day. Performance is not sitting at your desk for eight hours, because work is the output, our notion of a workplace has been challenged, and the workforce’s resilience has been put to the test. How do you imagine life after COVID-19?

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