

Creating Team Oneness in Times of Crisis - Are your team 'Acting as One'?

In times of crisis, we need our teams to be at their best – 'Acting as One'

Yet how much time have you spent recently working on team – consciously making your team as cohesive, resilient and effective as possible?

When the adrenaline kicks in, there is all too strong a temptation to narrow our focus, become ever more task oriented – and neglect the human side.

Indeed, our bodies work this way. Adrenaline, stress and fear activate the amygdala, the most ancient part of the brain; some call it the 'reptilian brain', which triggers fight-flight-freeze behaviours.

Reptiles are very effective survivors but they are not known for higher-order thinking. It is not helpful for our team if, when stresses hit, we become aggressive, withdraw into task or walk away.

Many times, in response to this logic, people say: 'Staff should just be professional and get on with their job'. But this attitude rarely inspires, usually the opposite – and never builds the best teams.

Instead, we need teams that give meaning and belonging, that help people be at their best, that create strong relationships, that enable rapid learning and that build resilience for the long term.

We suggest

- 1. Above all, think about team.** Make this a priority. Every hour or so, take a couple of mental steps back from what you are doing and ask yourself: How is the team doing? How is each member of the team coping with the stresses? Are we 'acting as one'? What can I do to build team?
- 2. Acknowledge that your team has a culture.** Whether you like it or not, whether you have consciously constructed it or not, it is there and it is powerful. It will enable or constrain everything you do together. Accept that everyone is a 'culture shaper'¹ – you are all building a culture in each moment. If you are a positional leader, realise that you are a 'culture broadcaster'; how you behave is especially powerful in modelling the culture. If you are arrogant, aggressive or angry, others will respond accordingly. If you are humble, rigorous, open, hardworking and kind, others will be encouraged to bring these qualities too – and will want to give of their best.
- 3. Name the task of building a great team as an inspiring shared challenge:** 'OK team, we are going to need a really great team culture if we are to flourish, so let's make this a conscious effort. What we are living through is unprecedented. This will test our character. So...let's help each other be at our best, support and encourage each other, let's aim to improve all the time, let's try to have fun. Tough situations give us a chance to build character, learn and make our best contributions. Let's learn to be a great team'.
- 4. Take time at the start of each shift to frame the experience** positively for the team – we call this 'thinking beyond'. Any crisis is a learning experience with huge significance for you, for your patients/clients and for society more widely. How much can you learn so that you can improve each day and share this learning with others? Avoid framing it as an inconvenience, a distraction from your 'true' work or as an additional burden.
- 5. At the end of each shift or discrete action, make time to connect, reflect and learn.** Make time for each other as people. Ask questions that matter and listen without interrupting to the answers. Ensure that part of your culture is that you give everyone roughly the same amount of airtime, what we call the 1/n principle. Powerful questions include: What has inspired you today? What do you need? Is there anything you would like to offer anyone here? What's going well in how we are working together? What could be better? Finish with appreciations of the work you did together and for each other.

Distinguish between two situations² : those with lots of routine, and those requiring creativity:

If you are doing **routine** tasks

1. Prioritise how you treat each other. Above all, respect each other – you are all here for a reason, each person brings valuable skills and qualities, each person is facing their own challenges. We have found it powerful to create an ERA culture³ – where there is lots of Encouragement, Recognition and Appreciation, named often and following the three S's: be **Sincere, Specific and Succinct**.

ERA builds the strong foundation where people feel encouraged and know that their contributions are seen and appreciated. A great piece of ERA can take just two seconds – 'Thank you'. 'Great work'. 'That's thoughtful of you'. See how it lifts people, even those who say they don't need it.

2. Create shared language, rules of thumb and small, meaningful team rituals. Short, funny, even corny are all good as long as they share meaning for everyone and help pull you together. Routines call for a system; all of the team can shape and improve this continuously. Simple rules of thumb (if x then y), checklists and fail-safes that prevent mistakes all help when you are tired or under pressure.

Research in leading teams in sport, business and the military supports these ideas. If you are doing all of this already, huge respect – you don't need us. Most teams won't be; we can help you create powerful new habits through our ecosystem of resources for catalysts and their teams who are making big change happen.

- Do not treat these ideas as obvious, to be done once or, worse, a distraction from the task in hand.
- Poor teams hash up the most simple of tasks; teams that 'act as one' consistently achieve incredible outcomes.
- Which one would you prefer? Make the choice, find your courage and start now.

If you are dealing with **new situations** that require creativity

1. Again, **frame the experience** deliberately: emphasise that this as a learning opportunity not a burden or an extra. Mindset is crucial. At some level, most teams feel sorry for themselves; this will not produce the best results. Acknowledge the challenges but lift the hearts to your clear, inspiring, shared purpose beyond self. Give permission for people to offer creative solutions to problems. Help them to 'think beyond'.
2. Keep repeating that **success will come from working as a team**; be explicit with each individual why their skills are of value to the team; be clear with the team how all your skills fit together. These leadership practices give meaning, direction and purpose above and beyond task. It can feel magical when people 'act as one'.
3. **Prepare and rehearse**, if you can. If you can't, treat each new situation like a rehearsal and make sure you learn from it. Repeat, observe, reflect, learn, innovate.
4. **Actively encourage people to say when they spot a problem**. Many will feel inhibited by differences in experience, rank and personality; create a safe system so that anyone can raise a problem as it happens. The novelty of the situation and the need for creativity require this.
5. **Accept that you – all of you – are going to make mistakes**. When something goes wrong, it is rarely someone wanting to mess things up; instead, learn from it to improve the system. Encourage openness about mistakes so that you can all learn; anger and punishment just drive mistakes underground. Leaders especially must model this humility, openness and willingness to learn.