LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING:
PEER EXCHANGE FORUM

At a Zoom Interactive Event on 7th May, CRF hosted members in a peer discussion and exchange. We shared approaches to development during the crisis and discussed plans to support our workforces as we return to work and a 'new normal'. This summary shares some of the key insights from the discussion.

Approaches to Development During the Crisis

Supporting the Workforce as We Return to a 'New Normal'

Approaches to Development During the Crisis

- Conversations about development stopped in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. But now the conversation is starting to change – what are the solutions going forward? How do we deliver against constrained budgets? How do we develop people remotely?

- Organisations are starting to look at how to more effectively help people when they are derailed in challenging situations such as the coronavirus crisis.

- A great deal of attention is being given to developing leaders – 'lunch and learns' and virtual sessions have been two successful strategies that some companies have used for development.

- After an initial focus on providing information/ guides/packs on remote working, support and development for managers has become more sophisticated. Virtual sessions that allow managers to discuss current challenges and learn from each other in a peer exchange are proving popular and effective.

- Organisations are giving more attention to helping managers learn how to spot emotional and behavioural changes among staff, which is more challenging to do in a remote setting.

- Some managers are still struggling with how to manage without the control of face-to-face interaction, so organisations are supporting them in this challenge as well.

- There was general agreement that the crisis is providing opportunities for learning professionals to accelerate the things they were wanting to do anyway. It is also accelerating the cultural shift to accept radical changes. Many are taking advantage of these new opportunities.

- At one organisation, the CEO is doing 'coffee corners', inviting up to 15 people from across the business, with no agenda – just to talk. The

CEO is being very transparent about not knowing what's going to happen, and this authenticity is resonating positively across the company.

- It was agreed that learning professionals need the confidence to coach and to challenge their CEO's way of thinking as and when needed.

- There was general agreement that slowing down and talking to people, taking time to check in, asking people how they are and saying how you are – in short, vulnerable leadership – is critical at this time. Thus, right now is a great time to develop more vulnerability in leadership, which is counterintuitive for most.

- The crisis has pushed senior leaders in new ways, and thus has opened up opportunities to have difficult conversations during and after the crisis. It's a good time to surface issues and push back.

- Some senior leaders are getting more informal in their communications, which some organisations are finding helps with authenticity and connection at all levels.

- Some organisations are anticipating a challenge in persuading senior leaders of the benefits of ongoing remote working. One way to influence senior leaders of its value is to curate the research, chunking it to leaders two or three topics at a time and in an appealing format. Presenting the research and its ideas as 'points for reflection' and linking research findings to other company priorities, such as gender equality, is proving helpful at some organisations. Looking for great stories of how others are doing things, and presenting near-future scenarios for the world of work are other helpful strategies.

- Some organisations are planning to turn leadership development on its head now. They are radically rethinking how and what to deliver. More convening of small groups of leaders to discuss the context is one important development strategy going forward.

- There was some discussion of what remote learning delivery platforms people are finding useful in their organisations. Answers include: Big Blue Button, Saba, Adobe Classroom Connect, M/S Teams, Newrow, Moodle, and Learnworlds. e may soon be overwhelmed with requests.

Supporting the Workforce as We Return to a 'New Normal'

- Organisations are expecting varied reactions (fear, excitement) from their people about returning to an office-based environment. There is concern about how to coach managers/leaders in helping people make the return. One company has created an internal agile project team that is tasked with talking to people internally to see what they are doing now and what do they want to keep doing going forward.

- There is concern about how to open offices safely and empathetically. It was agreed that leaders are being forced by the crisis to learn and use empathy.

- Many organisations are focusing on how to bring people back together (for example, where some have been very busy during the crisis while others have been furloughed).

- One company is equipping all its regional leaders with tools to make decisions about when they are ready to re-open offices. This includes considerations above and beyond government regulations.

- Many companies are conducting pulse surveys of their people to see what's on their minds (one frequent finding is that people are very nervous about returning to the office).

- Some companies are developing e-learning that everyone must complete before returning to the office, in order to address nervousness about the return. This learning emphasises topics such as safety and mental health.

- Many companies are taking a phased approach to return, with critical roles back into the office first. But what if someone in a critical role doesn't want to return? And what if someone in a non-critical role is eager to do so? Organisations must prepare managers now for how to deal with these ambiguous situations. Strategies for doing so include scenario-based and peer-to-peer learning.

- There was broad agreement that we all need to be using this time to prepare, so that issues around the return to offices do not take us by surprise.

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- It was agreed that organisations need to be thinking about how to make people comfortable in a very uncomfortable situation, and how to equip managers to cope with their people's discomfort. Providing masks, hand sanitiser, enforcing new social distancing rules in the office (including elevators) – there are lots of practical considerations around this. It was agreed that, at least initially, it's important not to make people feel obligated to return.

- Organisations need to survive in the short-term but also reset to thrive in the long-term. Learning professionals need to help their organisation generate new learning about how the future strategy needs to change, what capabilities are needed, and how learning can help develop those capabilities in such a different environment. How will Learning/HR challenge a business that is likely to be even more short-term and operationally focused?

Further Reading

Bradley, Chris, Hirt, Martin, and Sven Smit. 2018. **Strategy Beyond the Hockey Stick: People, Probabilities, and Big Moves to Beat the Odds.** London: Wiley.

Corporate Research Forum. 2019. **Building a Learning Organisation. Speed Read.** https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/speed-read-building-a-learning-organisation/

Corporate Research Forum. 2020. **Leadership & Learning: Peer Exchange Forum. Post Meeting Notes.** https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/post-meeting-notes-leadership-learning-peer-exchange-forum/

Corporate Research Forum. 2017. **Learning – The Foundation for Agility and Sustainable Performance. Research Report.** https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/learning-foundation-agility-sustainable-performance/

Corporate Research Forum. 2019. **Learning – The Foundation for Agility and Sustainable Performance. Speed Read.** https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/speed-read-learning-the-foundation-for-agility-and-sustainable-performance/