

Covid-19 has publicly tested national organisations and national leaders, - and sometimes found them wanting.

Equally, we have seen some heart-warming and creative responses.

But what questions should we ask about our own organisations and leaders?

Decisions affecting every person and walk of life in the UK have been taken, under the pressure of hourly news updates and trial by journalism. Managers from the shadowy heights of bodies like the NHS and PHE have been pushed, blinking, into an unaccustomed spotlight. Ministers responsible for say, education or housing have suddenly faced a public grilling on protective equipment in care homes.

Some have wilted under this new exposure, and others have blossomed. In Germany, virologist Dr Christian Drosten, of high reputation in his field but no public image at all, became his country's most popular podcaster and has cult status as an object of admiration and respect.

"Nations cohere and flourish on the belief that their institutions can foresee calamity, arrest its impact and restore stability"
Henry Kissinger, April 2020

Taking Kissinger's first point, about foreseeing calamity, - just how unpredictable was this virus? *Fifteen years* ago, the risk of a pandemic featured as one of the Top Ten Risks on lists made by the World Economic Forum, Western Intelligence Community and Goldman Sachs. Much more recently, in 2015 Bill Gates warned us of a potential pandemic, and told us we were not ready. The risk was high, we didn't know when it would arrive, and the potential effects were global. So what would 'ready' have looked like?

More particularly, what would ready look like in our own organisations, not only for a deadlier pandemic, but for other traumatic scenarios? And the first place we look is at our leadership and its capability (see diagram, right).

"Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm" Publilius Syrus (50 BC)

Our leaders may have credible experience and agreeable personal qualities, but how effective is their judgement when they do not - and cannot - *know* the answer? Recent evidence in the UK is of some leaders trying to retreat behind 'following the science', as a substitute for judgement, seeing the phrase as indicating absolute clarity, a buoy to grasp in a swirling torrent of uncertainty. Whereas in fact:

"Following the science means embracing uncertainty,... inviting challenge, admitting error, changing direction when needed..." Dr Philip Hammond, Medical Correspondent *Private Eye* July 2020.

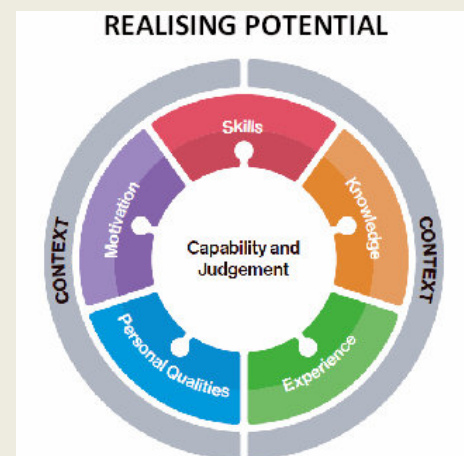
No manager can know the unknowable, but managers of high capability will be able to tolerate new uncertainties and continue to make sound judgements by incisive processing of what they do know and a rapid appreciation of the new threats and opportunities. Perhaps above all, they can hold the uncertainty, whilst still maintaining a sense of direction.

"If you cannot accurately predict the future then you must flexibly be prepared to deal with various possible futures"

Edward de Bono



"Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise" Albert Camus, *The Plague* 1947



But even good leaders can struggle if the organisation is sub-optimal, if the decision-making process is multi-layered and slow, and if lines of accountability are unclear. Some might say - albeit quietly - that the NHS, the largest employer in Europe and the most sacred cow of all, is an organisational nightmare. Talented and committed people throughout the NHS do wonderful work in spite of - rather than enabled by - their organisation.

It was clear to the point of embarrassment that when decisions needed to be quick, the normal management protocols were ignored and outside agencies such as the army were called in, *not just to help, but to take over the whole task*. Public Health England, just six years old as a body, has been abruptly subsumed into a new organisation, the National Institute for Health Protection. The 'primary focus' of the new entity is *'to ensure we have the best capability to control infectious disease and deal with pandemics or health protection crises'*. Whereas PHE according to its website was responsible for *'protecting the nation from public health hazards'* and *'preparing for and responding to public health emergencies'*. The difference between these purposes is elusive, to put it kindly. But the main concern here is that there is no clarity whatsoever about the *working relationship or final accountability*, as between either the old PHE or the 'new' NIHP - and the long-suffering NHS.

Central to this is the age-old confusion between responsibility (which can be shared) and accountability (which cannot). But before we feel too smug, how effective are our own decision-making lines, - are they/will they still be effective in a real emergency? And is final accountability clear and understood? Really? Or are we all guilty of blurring the issue by over-using the more comfortable term 'responsibility'?

"A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody ought not to be trusted by anybody" Thomas Paine 1794

So, apart from spotlighting our leadership capability and our organisational health, what practical, operational lessons has the Covid-19 experience provided for us?

Communications? We have seen that 'Stay at Home' and 'Wear a Mask' are helpful and meaningful exhortations, whereas 'Stay Alert' and 'Control the Virus' are not. But have we looked at our own communications lately? How meaningful are statements like 'We believe in excellence' or 'Total commitment to our customers', which adorn the walls or websites of so many institutions?

Maybe our employees and our customers look at these with the same jaundiced eye with which we view some government Covid communications? Possibly?

It is a given that we have found that more work, and more diverse work, is possible remotely and via shared-screen media such as Zoom than we had realised. But the crisis has challenged many other assumptions. So we should be careful to listen closely to our people about their experiences. For example, we might have assumed that our leaders can lead in any circumstances, but managing a virtual/remote team presents new challenges to our leaders, some of them very significant, - they need help.

Again, we might assume that younger people will always welcome new technology-based methods of working; but some companies are finding, as they start gently re-staffing their premises, that it is the younger team members who are the most delighted and relieved to be physically present again with their colleagues.

Or take the example of a speech and language therapist, used to face-to-face coaching of her school-children clients, dreading the forced use of remote media, finding instead that the new process in fact increases the interest and involvement of the parents, to the benefit of all.

"The most misleading assumptions are the ones you don't even know you're making" Douglas Adams

Our purpose here is not to criticise the failings of governments during the Covid-19 crisis - although it is alarmingly easy to do so. Rather, it is to use the current situation as a catalyst, a prompt to ask ourselves some tough questions about our own organisation.

- How truly capable is our leadership when 'the sea is not calm' and uncertainty increases?

- How effective is our organisation when quick decisions are needed and when accountabilities need to be crystal clear?

- What lessons have we learnt about new ways of working and communicating, in terms of both efficiency and team and individual motivation?

The pandemic is a highly negative phenomenon for thousands of organisations. But if we fail to grasp the opportunity it offers for honest reflection and learning, that really would be tragic.

About Bioss UK

Our core expertise is in understanding the relationship between the context in which organisations function, the work needed to achieve its purpose, and the capability of people to contribute to that work.

We work in partnership with our clients to align and integrate these three elements to enhance current and future performance, and to match each individual's capability to the challenges of their work. To achieve this we have a coherent set of models, frameworks and tools to understand organisational complexity, underpinned by over forty years of research.

We use our models as a lens through which to understand an organisation's context, including its strategic plans and objectives, and then to explore the work and people implications.

A recent development is Virtual Teams Appreciation (VTA), a tool designed to help team leaders and members work more effectively in virtual environments.



Bioss UK
Devonshire House, Level 1
One Mayfair Place
London W1J 8AJ
United Kingdom

enquiries@bioss.com

Tel: +44 (0)20 7268 4811