Navigating to a 'new normal'

The coronavirus epidemic has created a seismic shift in working practices for almost every organisation on the planet. So far, survival has been dependent on good crisis management and a massive commitment from people at every level, something which is unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term.
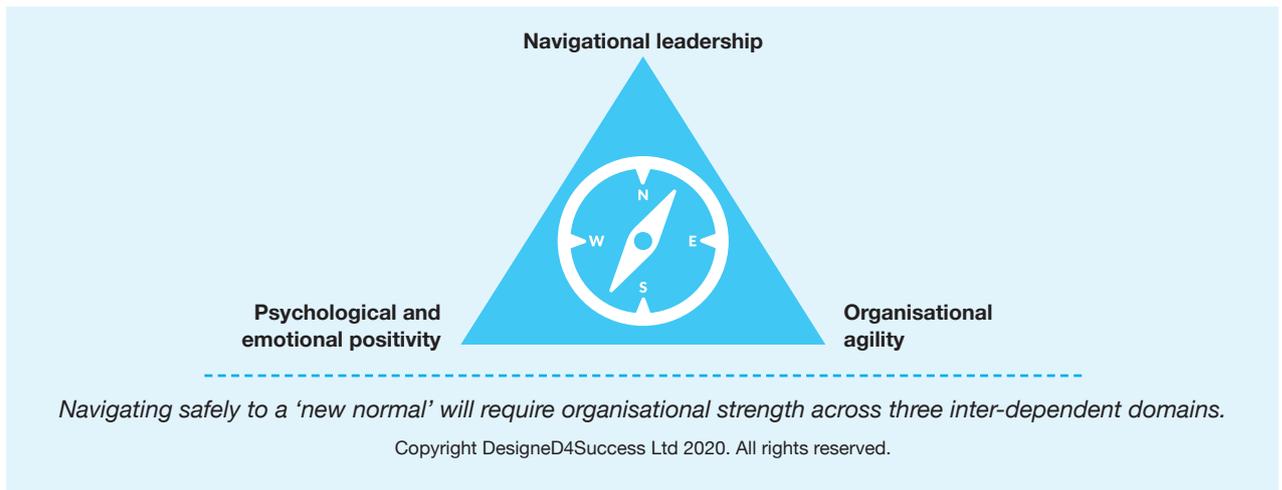
Many organisations have come through this crisis state and arrived at a period of temporary stability, having come to terms with new technology, remote working and the many challenges of lock-down. But this state won't exist for ever; there will come a time when we need to adapt again to a *'new normal'*. It is hard to predict what this new normal might look like, but it will certainly be different from traditional ways of working. For some, this level of uncertainty and change provokes feelings of anxiety, loss and even anger. For others, it offers a once in a lifetime opportunity to harness the benefits of *new learning* and *new ways of working*, building on the best of what went before to create something even better.

The transition from temporary stability to new normal presents a new set of challenges that most organisations will never have encountered before. It will be a leap into the unknown; all the old rules, forecasts, and data that formed the basis of strategic planning might as well be torn up and discarded. Individually, people may feel their very survival is at threat; many will be reluctant to move away from the seemingly safe territory that temporary stability offers, whilst others will yearn to move backwards to the security of the past.

Navigating safely to a 'new normal' will require organisations to have strengths across three inter-dependent domains, as shown in the diagram below:

Navigational leadership

Psychological and emotional positivity

Organisational agility

Navigating safely to a 'new normal' will require organisational strength across three inter-dependent domains.

Leader as Navigator

The *new normal* is not a destination to be arrived at: it's likely to be a state of constant flux where clarity of purpose, unwavering courage, adaptability and emotional connection become critical instruments of effective leadership. It won't be enough to rely on traditional leadership competencies; the answers will not be found in books or traditional training. The 'experts' no longer have all the answers.

This then, is a defining moment for leaders at all levels; the landscape has changed, the destination (if there is one) is uncertain, the well-trodden paths no longer exist, and the maps are redundant.

This is the moment when leaders must become navigators, for it's the navigators who will see us safely through the uncharted territory that lies ahead. Becoming 'navigators' will require leaders to learn new skills, and think differently about what it means to "lead". Much as the original navigators set out across uncharted oceans in the hope of finding riches and distant lands that existed only in myths, legends and fairy tales, leaders will need that *clarity of purpose*, *unwavering courage*, *adaptability* and *emotional connection* in order to provide people with the confidence and commitment to follow.

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Psychological and emotional positivity

It is almost impossible to overstate the likely *psychological* and *emotional* impact of the current situation. The level of change, uncertainty and personal risk combined with a lengthy period of social isolation will affect people in different ways and the consequences may not be fully realised for some time.

At its mildest, people may experience intermittent *anxiety* which may present as *panic attacks* or mild bouts of *depression*. Some people may have been infected with the virus and have lasting *physical damage*; they may be anxious about returning to work for fear of re-infection or stigma. Others may be grieving a *bereavement*. For many people, physical and mental well-being will be compromised for an indeterminate period, with a consequential impact on individual and organisational performance which may last many years into the future.

Building psychological and emotional positivity will therefore be an urgent priority in navigating to a new normal. As well as strong navigational leadership, people will need *time*, *space* and *support* to reconcile their individual and collective experiences, make sense of how the world has changed, re-connect with each other and redefine their own direction and expectations. Some existing interventions will help; *psychotherapy, counselling* and *coaching* offer a range of therapeutic and individual support that will help recovery. But the scale of the problem is likely to require new approaches to reach a wider population.

In a world where it's no longer possible to observe people as they work, identify the early warning signs and bring people together physically, organisations and their leaders will need to give *mental* and *physical well-being* a much higher level of priority.

Organisational agility

At the beginning of 2020, most competent organisations will have had a clear sense of direction; they knew where they were headed and had a well-considered strategy for getting there. If they're lucky, some of that strategy will remain relevant, but much of it will have been overtaken by events. Any *vision* they may have had for the next five years is almost certainly redundant – for the foreseeable future, *organisational agility* rather than stability and historical performance will underpin success.

Organisations themselves aren't agile – they're like super-tankers which are hard to manoeuvre and slow to change direction. So agility must come from within; navigational leadership supported by teams with high levels of *accountability*, *collaborative behaviours* and *common purpose*. The navigational leader will recognise and value collective intelligence and distributed authority, in order that decisions can be made quickly to avoid risk and exploit opportunity.

Processes, systems and plans will need to provide responsiveness and flexibility. Working patterns and team structures will no longer be static; organisations will want to benefit from recent learning and investment in remote working, employees will expect to exercise their right to flexible working and the way that people and teams connect will become fluid.

More than anything, this level of agility will require the highest levels of *trust* in every direction.

Building strength across these three inter-dependent domains will present challenges that few organisations have encountered in the past; letting go of everything that provided confidence and ensured success in the past will feel like a massive risk, yet the danger of resisting the need to change is even greater.

Leaders at every level should be asking what they can do now to prepare themselves, their teams and their organisation for whatever the future might hold.

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