

Innovation in a Time of Crisis



by Larry Clark | March 26, 2020

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Many of us are familiar with stories about how American GI's kept trucks and jeeps rolling during World War II, even when spare parts weren't available. Used to tinkering with jalopies in their garages, the young soldiers were able to jury rig fixes with whatever materials were on hand.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, innovators are jumping in to help. Around the world, beermakers and distilleries have shifted production to hand sanitizers. In Italy, a start-up engineering company began quickly using 3D printers to create the valves used in ventilators. Those just-in-time valves are saving lives.

When we look back on the current health crisis, there's no doubt that we'll learn that it resulted in a number of innovations: new drugs and medical devices, improved healthcare processes, manufacturing and supply chain breakthroughs, novel collaboration techniques.

Problem solving at the heart

What these innovations will have in common is that they will solve problems, which is always at the heart of innovation. And they'll also be driven by the intensely human desire to help, to connect with other people, and be part of the solution when things get hard.

But there is much more to the generative nature of a crisis that leads to innovation than simply an opportunity to solve problems. Crises present us with unique conditions that allow innovators to think and move more freely to create rapid, impactful change. For learning leaders, these conditions provide us with the opportunity to do our best to help, and for our teams to do their most innovative work in the service of our organizations.

What is there about crises that breeds so much innovation? There are four key shifts that occur during a crisis that foster the conditions for new thinking and doing. Understanding these can help learning leaders seize the opportunity to drive useful change.

Uniting Around a Purpose

One of the key leadership challenges in day-to-day organizational life is inspiring engagement and generating energy toward the goals of the organization. During a crisis, there can be a massive spike in energy present in the workforce. Leaders who can appropriately focus the energy of its workforce toward a clear purpose in resolving the crisis will typically find more than just a deep wellspring of energy and discretionary effort – they will often experience a wave of new ideas, as individuals feel compelled to share insights they normally would keep to themselves. For example, the Apollo 13 mission to the moon that was upended by an explosion on board forced NASA engineers to improvise to save the crew. Under the famous leadership dictate, “Failure is not an option,” the engineering team successfully rallied to design a makeshift device to scrub the air of carbon dioxide so the astronauts could survive the trip home, using only items available to the crew on board the lunar module. Some say that courage is defined as when purpose overcomes fear. In this way, crisis can create the organizational courage to take actions in support of a purpose that would be unthinkable in times of calm.

Seeing the System Differently

Leaders often leverage consultants to get a fresh, outside perspective on their organizations to find opportunities to innovate. A crisis can have much the same effect, putting the spotlight on vulnerabilities, problem areas great and small, that we’ve been ignoring or are just plain unaware of. When a crisis hits, we are forced to confront the truth about how our systems work (or don’t). The places where things could be done better or more efficiently become glaringly obvious. All of a sudden, opportunities for innovation are staring us in the face.

Unfreezing the Organization

As organizations grow, they harden their structures to create predictability, efficiency, and stability. Crises change all that. For example, the COVID-19 crisis has upended the way that grocery chains manage inventory, a process that has been refined over many years to maximize profitability by carrying smaller inventories and turning that inventory more quickly. With the huge spike in demand for products, purchasing managers have bypassed these finely tuned processes in favor of shortcuts that source larger quantities of products much more quickly. The bureaucratic overhead of review and

approval for dramatic change was effectively gone, allowing for fresh thinking to be applied quickly to address the challenge.

Creating a Bias Toward Action

On that last point, crisis demands movement and change – the pace of ideation, decision making, and implementation all increase dramatically. An organization that normally gets trapped in “the intense study of the obvious” now must force itself to quickly create experiments, see what happens, and experiment some more. This process of experimentation allows the freedom to test different thinking, to fail fast, to learn, and to move forward – in short, to innovate.

What’s this got to do with L&D?

Times of crisis present incredible opportunities for learning, and our L&D teams are uniquely positioned to make sure that an organization’s leaders are aware of and able to take advantage of the resources available to them. Many learning leaders are seeing the unfreezing of systems and thinking in their organizations, and a real demand for fast action to equip our people and our leaders. Several learning leaders have shared with me the opportunity – and the mandate – to experiment with new technologies and approaches to people development.

For example, while your leaders are learning on the fly to respond to the crisis in real time, there are quick-hit lessons, guidelines, and tips that can help them make the most of the opportunities for innovation that the current crisis presents. And learning teams who have previously seen pushback on virtual learning, digitally enabled learning journeys, and other types of approaches to learning are seeing a window of opportunity to now experiment with these tools because of their power to address the constraints we are under today.

There is no certainty about when the coronavirus crisis will slow down or end, or how we’ll be impacted. But if we use it wisely as an opportunity for innovating, for learning and growing, we’ll know that, once it’s over, we’ve done our best and tried to make some good come of it.

How has your company begun to innovate and adapt during this time of crisis?

We’ve compiled [several resources](#) on how to maintain productivity, collaboration, and communication in a time of crisis.

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