Thoughts on Mental Health During Covid and Beyond

During the first lockdown most of our support and care were focused around providing resources and forums to help people understand, share and set themselves up to adapt. The second lock-down is different. How do we help our people and guide them through the second lock-down and in the long term? It is my firm conviction that closeness, empathy and human touch are the way forward. Time will show and life circumstances will teach us, but for now, if we want to help people solve their own mental health issues and, even better, give them the tools to prevent future mental health issues, we need to develop a more personal touch.

Mental health was the rising "hot topic" in the legal industry before the pandemic, in particular in the US but also increasingly in Europe. Despite the obvious benefits of supporting the mental health of people in the industry, dealing with, and talking about, mental health topics was a sensitive topic. As is still the case with diversity and inclusion, the expectation was that improved support required business metrics and numbers which ideally resulted in a positive ROI.

Perspectives have changed rapidly with the sudden rise of the pandemic and the first lockdown in March. Caught in the midst of a completely new and unknown situation, every single person was affected. What was predictable was that mental health would become an urgent human problem affecting individuals and businesses alike. Concern for the health of our people and preparation for the longer-term negative impacts on the economy became key topics for management. The uncertainty around the duration and potential long-term effects on the economy, gave rise to widespread anxiety. For many, exhaustion stemming from children being home from school or day care and high-risk family members at home then added another layer of stress.

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Many law firms reacted very swiftly by offering worldwide training and an enormous number of resources, live meetings and workshops on dealing with mental health, parenting and remote working routines. Online kids play and story time hours were available, but some of us went further to offer racial injustice workshops and knowledge sessions plus LGBTQ forums. I mention these latter topics because, although we put them in the Diversity and Inclusion bucket, our social environment and trauma caused by racial, gender, religious, social, generational or any other kind of discrimination, all affect our personalities and are at the very core of our mental healthiness.

Existing wellbeing programs blossomed in the virtual environment. Our people attended sessions on hot topics like, how does anxiety play out in the pandemic, how do I set boundaries (given that the physical ones of the office have disappeared), how do I build up resilience? Kids and clients became an integral part of the virtual programs. Regularly checking in with people via worldwide and local emails was an important tool to give each of us a sense of belonging, validating our challenges despite the physical distance.

We all had a hands-on live training on work-life-integration.

Over the summer, despite difficult moments, we had to learn to adapt to the new parameters and even recognize some positives: appreciating the simple pleasures and being grateful for what we have. How many of us realised how few things we actually really need? Working from home eliminated our commute and gave us more time to enjoy the great outdoors, nature and the weather.

LOCK DOWN

However, some people still keep wishing for "normal" to come back. This is not unusual. It is what our brains do with what we know as familiar. In fact, we were experiencing collective grief for our usual way of life and were not yet ready to let go. Some of us struggled, not least because of the inability to travel and move around freely. We felt trapped. The inability to go to events or see friends and family was (and still is) more difficult to bear for those who rely on a bigger social network as a core pillar of their wellbeing. Nevertheless, the old way of life we were grieving had many negatives that were clearly not sustainable in the long term. We need to move forward. We need to learn to act and live in a sustainable way, focus on our core needs and live our lives in balance with nature.

The second lock-down is different. How do we help our people and guide them through the second lock-down and in the long term?

We are now in the midst of a second lockdown. Infection rates are much higher and tracking is becoming increasingly difficult. The Black Lives Matter movement and the turmoil around US election has affected people around the world, not just the US. Although, for now, most schools and day-care centres are still running, research shows that burnout is skyrocketing with a great increase in prescription medication and women carrying a disproportionate burden of family responsibility. Loneliness is increasing as are mental health issues stemming from the pandemic. In our workplaces, the longer the crisis continues, the higher rises the anxiety around layoffs, economic fallout and schooling responsibilities. At the same time, our lack of physical closeness in a remote work environment, a general misunderstanding of emotional stress and a failure to provide sufficient support to our people exacerbates their general reluctance to raise issues relating to a need for leave or reduced hours.

We need to raise to the next level of assistance we give to our people. Some of the tools we have offered in the past, and thought to be useful, have turned out to be not so effective. For example, the employee assistance programs most firms offer are seldom used. Few people actually use anonymous helplines and the counselling offered, in the same way they do not use the tremendous database of online exercising, listening to recorded talks or workshops etc. Why is that the case? The easiest answer is that these offerings do not have a personal touch and the number of resources we have is so overwhelming that people lose the ability to choose. To this end, as institution, we **need to map out the real needs and maybe adjust our toolkits and benefits** around that to ease orientation through the thicket of topics.

It is my firm conviction that **closeness, empathy and human touch are the way forward**. Time will show and life circumstances will teach us, but for now, if we want to help people solve their mental health issues and, even better, give them the tools to prevent future mental health issues, we need to develop a more personal empathetic touch and help them do the same. This means, having a closer look at ourselves, at the pain we carry (individually or collectively) in order to empathize and help others understand their pain and move through it. It would be much too easy if we could solve our difficult issues "just" by providing resources and benefits and assistance. As we saw in the US elections, just reminding people that they have the right to vote is not enough. It takes calls, plans and even taking people by the hand to get them to eventually vote. As humans, we react and interact best if we are touched emotionally. If we feel the warmth and protection of others. If we feel heard and seen. If we have a sense of belonging. We need to **touch the pain** inside ourselves to help each other understand and act with empathy. How do we do this?

» We need to **train and empower people to understand** their own **distress** and that of others.

What are the signs that someone is not feeling well? How do we go beyond the general "how are you doing question" and the "great, I am so busy" answer and encourage people to open up? How do we get into conversations of substance in a virtual environment? Open and sincere questions are the way. Call people just to talk to them. Reach out without a specific need or request. Ask whether there is anything they are struggling with today, are they sleeping well. Offer a safe space to release frustration or complain. Obviously, the more we know people, the easier it is to break down barriers. Remember sometimes the people we know the least are the easiest to open up to.

» We need to **encourage people on an ongoing basis to seek help** and have (personal) help available for them. Being personal and truly listening to others to understand their needs is a skill. As with every skill, we get better at it with practice. Start at home, start with your closest relationships. Listen without preparing on your answer and your own perspective while the other is talking. Offering help and encouraging people to

seek and accept help without the fear of stigma is based on trust. However trust is not a status quo, it is something we earn with each single conversation and exchange. It takes a long time to earn it and just one remark to lose it. Leading by example is key in the process of removing stigma.

» We also need to **build our sense of a community** that works and belongs together. We can do this by organising challenges, virtual or other events (outside in nature), by making virtual events fun, by calling people just to talk, by developing kindness to each other and understanding.

» It all boils down to **empowering everyone, ourselves included, to learn and practice self-care**. Teach others what self-care means, why it is important, what the main components are and how they tie together. The times of "the more the better" will wear out – including in terms of work. Purposeful and efficient work will give our

focus on self-care another positive twist in time. The pandemic teaches us that there is silence that we need to learn to bear since office chatter or busyness will not always be available to hide behind. Building mental strength, setting self-care priorities and boundaries, learning to cope and adapt to circumstances is, again, a matter of awareness and practice. Whether you are in a leadership role or not, being a role model for self-care is key to encouraging others to do the same.

Some may argue we are just reacting in the midst of a huge crises and that it is impossible to learn to swim while drowning. That is true and we need to provide immediate special assistance to those who are drowning. For the others, the time to start swimming lessons is always now.

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