

One team in the face of adversity? – brief series #3

Over the last weeks I had conversations with a few clients about how these “out of the ordinary” times generate extraordinary team solidarity. What is behind that solidarity, how to maintain it once the imperative of acting as “one team” may be fading?

Many professional stories are being shared about incredible teamwork, of course in hospitals and more widely, including companies that have put their industrial design and capacity to produce the much-needed ventilators. Dyson, the vacuum cleaner company, has within a period of 2 weeks developed a prototype which led the British government to order 10000 of them. This feat of teamwork can be explained by what Manfred Kets de Vries, a renowned professor of leadership, calls an “**unshakeable dedication of its people to a cause greater than themselves**”. When a crisis strikes, a number of characteristics of high performing teams can generally be observed. A sense of purpose becomes more tangible for the team and an alignment around the intention that guides all decisions and actions. In the face of adversity, the identity of the team can be reinforced by a powerful sense of belonging, acting as one. That is also when real cooperation within a team comes about.

Saving human lives or protecting jobs create a powerful call to action for a team. The urge and even **pressure to conform** to the prevailing opinion within the team can be higher than usual, with members setting aside personal differences. As we saw from my previous briefs, when there are no known and tested solutions out of a crisis, adaptive leadership is called for.

We all probably agree that when the house is on fire, we expect more action from the fire brigade than thinking and discussing, which is left for when everyone is back and safe at the fire station. The US army and increasingly other organisations use After Action Reviews (AAR) to learn from experience. The AAR consist in following a simple yet demanding structure:

- a more factual part: what was supposed to happen and what actually happened,
- a more subjective opinion: why was there a difference and what can we learn from this.

AAR are a good way to learn from what worked well and create a space to question the way things have been done. These reviews must be framed as dialogues, not lectures or debates, allowing participants, not the hierarchy, to speak as much as 75% of the time. The leader is there to benefit as much as other participants and should refrain from guiding the discussion toward a specific solution.

The most compelling lessons from running these reviews is that **flawed assumptions are the most common cause of flawed execution**. Food for thought!

To find out more:

- Innovative approaches to create ventilators (5 min read) <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/coronavirus-ventilators-covid19-healthcare/>
- Further analysis of After Action Reviews (8 min read) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffboss/2016/12/01/dont-skimp-on-the-after-action-review-6-reasons-why/>
- US Army Formal guidelines for After Action Review https://www.acq.osd.mil/dpap/ccap/cc/jcchb/Files/Topical/After_Action_Report/resources/tc25-20.pdf
- The hedgehog effect – the secrets of building high performance teams, Manfred Kets de Vries (2011)
- Previous briefs on Adaptive leadership and Resilience & Survival can be found at www.cbockmann.com