

# The pandemic has left us in a state of flux at work. How can we manage the unknown?

*With COVID-19, uncertainty and a state of transition are creating and increasing individual, team, and organisational risk. Feelings of impending change affect recruitment, team development and career ambitions. Catherine Baxendale discusses how leaders can deal with these different levels of risk.*

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As an executive coach working with brilliant people in different sectors – ranging from government, global media, tech and financial companies and professional services across the US, UK and India – I have had the privilege to listen to and explore first-hand how risk and resilience shows up in high-powered, diverse environments. Here are my summary thoughts to share.

## Organisational risk

In many companies, there is a huge state of flux for all the reasons that have by now been widely described and you will be familiar with. Key people that I work with have also discussed the feelings of impending change that they have to wrestle with and the practical impact those feelings have on recruitment, team development and their own career ambitions in their organisations. We know the organisation of yesterday is not the same as that of today, but what will the organisation of tomorrow look like? This feeling of the unknown can cause and accelerate silo mentality, a focus on self vs others, and short-term investment decisions because people don't know what to plan for.

## Team risk

There seems to be a real thirst for new ways to improve team engagement, morale and culture. As we know, many leaders have not met their teams in real life; teams are working across boundaries that seemed unrealistic pre-pandemic and the demands on teams in an always on culture, even regardless of time zones, is taking its toll. Those of us lucky enough to remember luxury business travel know how it really was a special time to unwind, regroup and do some uninterrupted thinking, but that clearly is not much of an option now. Furthermore, business travel allowed people to meet for events and dinners, which enabled team relationships to develop and mature and helped to create a supportive, collaborative, even enjoyable, work environment. Now leaders have come to rely on well-crafted team emails, some Zoom-type team events (which can easily miss the mark), and possibly some meet-ups for coffees or walks on an ad hoc basis. This is clearly leading to some frayed edges.

## Individual risk

It has been described many times how the past 15 months have influenced our physical and mental health. I am seeing first-hand how the 'always on' culture is leading to a high risk of burn out, as people have taken on too many projects and responsibilities simply because they can, as they are stuck in one place with their computer making it difficult to say "no". I am seeing leading global companies expecting too much of their employees, such as having to join a global team meeting at 2am. I am seeing how employees are expected to be in Zoom meetings over a long day and not having any time to respond to emails or follow up on projects except at weekends and evenings. There is little or no space for down time, family time or exercise time and, in some cases, sleep is not optimal either. This is not a sustainable situation.

## Suggestions for development

Most people are not making decisions about risk that will affect their entire organisation, but will be influenced by the uncertainty and the challenging environment this creates. Helping leaders to work out what is, and is not, in their area of control is critical. Focussing on what they can do to create a better organisational culture in their area, and behave in a way that positively contributes to this, is key to effectiveness.

Taking time to invest in teams in a way that builds people up, rather than knocks them down, is critical. Working out how to increase the confidence, resilience and engagement in the team is time and resource well spent. Giving people permission to have Zoom-free periods and no evening or weekend work is really important. Bringing some joy and fun to what people do will help lighten the burden.

The need for an executive coach who can act as a thinking partner and ally seems incredibly valuable at this time. People do not have their usual support network and release valves that have, up to now, helped to keep us on an even keel despite work, home and health pressures. A coach can be there as a supportive and appropriately challenging partner to help you navigate the obstacles and pitfalls. Interestingly, coachees say that Zoom is a perfectly good format for coaching as a safe, confidential space is already created. For those that are not able to access a coach, then a trusted friend could act as a mentor to help you see things more clearly and give you an additional perspective to help you create more balance and harmony.

Overall, we are living in a huge time of uncertainty and transition which is creating and increasing individual, team and organisational risk on many levels. We need to use our internal and external resources as best we can to build our resilience, develop a growth mindset to see these changes as an opportunity, rather than a threat, and to stay mentally and physically healthy and positive.

**Catherine Baxendale will be a guest speaker on the upcoming LSE executive course on [Leading Risk in Organisations](#).**



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