

# We need adaptive leaders to navigate through this pandemic

By [Andrew Aitken](#)

20 Sep 2021

Like it or not, we're living in a very different world today. Covid-19 has flipped the world on its head, and while we may not ever have imagined living a world like this, we can, as leaders, still make the choice to thrive. In fact, we need to make the choice to thrive. Our people are depending on us to make that choice. And to thrive means we need to adapt. And quickly.



Source: [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

Business is no longer purely about strategy and execution (head and hands) anymore. We're seeing it first-hand as CEOs of mid-market organisations who are balancing head, hands, and heart are the ones who are building more resilient and capable organisations than those who are ignoring the heart space. Ultimately, what this pandemic is demanding is that we adapt as leaders and place the emotional wellbeing of our employees front and centre.

The impact of Covid-19 is not just physical, it's not just economical, it is a burgeoning mental health issue too. Of course, mental health has always been a concern – long before we ever heard phrases like “flatten the curve” and “second wave” or experienced national lockdowns and periods of isolation, depression was already a leading cause of disability worldwide, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

A South African Stress and Health Survey projected that the total annual cost to the country in lost earnings due to mental illness stood at R40.6bn – but that was way back in 2013. And today? Well, in today's world, health experts agree that we are in the midst of a mental health pandemic while WHO says the Covid-19 pandemic has caused more “mass trauma” than World War II. And the cracks are showing.



Mental wellness and the role human experience management plays in a thriving workplace

Michaela Voller 20 Sep 2021



For the first time ever, managers are actively asking for toolkits and skills to help them identify and support team members who could be struggling with mental illness. Every day I'm having conversations with CEOs and leaders from mid-market businesses who are mobilising to place the wellbeing of their people central to their agendas, and every day I stand witness to the enormous potential of these highly adaptive leaders and the teams under their guidance and care.

As part of our work, we recently hosted a series of coaching sessions with a focus on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. We explored what was happening within our clients' companies, how the pandemic has impacted their employees' productivity and mental wellbeing, how it's affected business processes, and most importantly, we explored how these mid-market adaptive leaders could effectively support their teams through these uncertain times by developing best practices.

It goes without saying, no matter what your business is, that clear and engaging leadership can make a huge difference to the way your employees are able to adapt to the ongoing disruption of Covid-19. However, I would like to share something else with you now: some key learnings and rather profound best practices our coaching leaders have articulated as a result of our on-the-ground conversations and recent sessions.

In the interest of helping your growth-stage business deal with the disruption of Covid-19 and support the mental health of your employees, here are some of the fundamentals we've found can make the biggest difference.

### **Put on your own oxygen mask first**

In other words, fill your own cup. You cannot lead unless you are fully equipped to do so. When you're stressed, you may be unconsciously contributing to your team's stress, and when your emotional and mental strength takes a dip, you have less support to give to the emotional and mental needs of your team.

One of the best ways to support yourself is to master emotional regulation. Recognising and understanding your emotional states can help you optimise resilience, wellbeing, and performance. An effective way to emotionally regulate and improve your mood is to create a morning ritual – start your day with purpose and control. I suggest starting your morning by engaging in 3 simple mood-boosters that are easily achievable and to build on it from there. For me personally, it's hydration, exercise, and a mindfulness practice, but you need to find what works for you.

### **Show vulnerability and understanding**

There is now a crucial need to move from a culture of silence to a culture of openness. When you're having open and honest conversations around mental health issues and coping strategies with your staff, it is important for you to be able to show an appropriate degree of vulnerability in a way that supports your team.

Leaders who show vulnerability by actively living out a compassionate leadership style and who take a genuine interest in their teams can create a culture that gives people the assurance that "it's okay not to be okay". And that is a vital space to hold in today's climate. I can tell you right now that when we see leaders showing vulnerability and support, we see leaders

who are building connections between their team members and the wider business.

## **Be proactive**

Being a leader is a far greater responsibility than simply steering the business outcome alone. Beyond all that, you have a purpose to influence the health and the lives of your team members and to help them thrive daily. And so, as a leader, your approach towards mental health in the workplace should be preventive, rather than reactive. While support in a crisis is admirable, it would be better to prevent that crisis from happening in the first place.

Understanding the mental wellbeing of those around us is no longer just talking about change, but about truly listening and acting on the feedback of employees. Your proactive support should be focused on promoting awareness, providing training, and integrating wellbeing within the organisation as a permanent fixture. As a leader, it is your calling to proactively equip your managers and your staff to prevent, identify, and respond to mental health issues. And to take advantage of the power of the one-on-one meeting.

## **Harness the power of the one-on-one meeting**

Most leaders will talk about the importance of the one-on-one meeting; the chance to spend time with each of their team members individually. But few will do it regularly, and fewer still will get the full benefit from these meetings for themselves or their team members.

Regular interaction with each of your team members is a powerful way to create a sense of connection and belonging. And when you prioritise and recognise what can be accomplished, you get more value from the one-on-one. I urge you to use this time to get a sense of how people are doing beyond their work and deliverables. Get to know how people are feeling, whether they are tired, bored, excited, or worried. Regular one-on-one interaction gives you the chance to make sure people are thriving at work – and if they aren't – to understand what is getting in their way.

Your one-on-one meetings are also a time to give relevant and timely feedback, both encouraging and corrective. It's the perfect opportunity to cultivate your working relationship. Because people like working for someone that they know and trust.

The reality is that many companies are still feeling their way through these uncertain and challenging situations. And while leadership styles may need to continually adapt as we face ongoing disruption from the pandemic, remember that the best performing businesses have highly engaged and motivated staff.

The need to listen carefully, to understand what is and isn't working, has never been so important.

Yes, "it's okay not to be okay", but don't stop fighting, trying, or pushing. I have seen businesses and leaders go through difficult phases of transformation, but they have embraced the opportunity to learn, change, and grow, and that has seen them thrive in the long-term.

We can all be changemakers.

I'm not saying that it won't be a challenge. I'm not saying that it won't take time, effort, or imagination. But we're South Africans. We're creative, innovative, vibrant people. We know how to emerge stronger and more resilient than ever before.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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