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RSOG INSIGHT

MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER EDITION

IN THIS ISSUE

With the COVID-19 impacting countries at various stages, everyone is trying to understand what is required to protect themselves and their communities.

We spoke to some of our friends around the world, on how it has affected them and their views of the situation.

ABOUT OUR GUEST

Kishore Sengupta's current research, teaching and consulting activities are focused on managing complex projects, managing complexity in organizations, and managing innovation in networks. Before joining Judge Business School, he held faculty positions at INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France (2000-2014), the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, USA (-1989-2000), and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (1996-1998). He has also worked at the AT&T Network Software Center (now Alcatel-Lucent) and Ernst and Young. His responsibilities have included serving as advisor on complex projects with large organizations, NASA, and the U.S. Government Department of Defense. Dr. Sengupta's consulting activities involve organizations in USA, Asia and Europe.

Dr. Sengupta's published work in the academic and business literatures includes a widely acclaimed article in the Harvard Business Review (February 2008) on how managers fail to learn from experience. The accompanying [podcast](#) is one of the most-downloaded in INSEAD's history. His research has been highlighted in the [Wall Street Journal](#). Dr Sengupta has extensive experience in the design and delivery of executive education programs, and teaches in the flagship programs of Judge Business School.

MANAGING IN TIMES OF THE PANDEMIC

BY DR KISHORE SENGUPTA

In this edition, Dr Kishore Sengupta of Judge Business School, Reader in Operations Management at the University of Cambridge, shares his thoughts about the current situation with an article entitled "Managing in Times of the Pandemic". Since 2013, Razak School of Government (RSOG) has collaborated with Judge Business School on various programmes including its Senior Leadership Programmes (SLP), Leadership at the Peak, and RSOG - Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam Sabah's New Age Leadership Programme, with special emphasis on leading high-performing teams, managing stakeholders, and inculcating innovation.

Sometimes, the smallest of creatures can make the biggest impact. The tiny virus behind the global pandemic has upended our carefully cultivated ways of life. We are resorting to measures such as lockdowns and essential movement, that are generally unheard of in peacetimes. All our attention is focused on coping with the crisis.

At some point, we will need to start thinking about the next stage and what that means for us. I doubt anyone thinks we will go back to the *status quo* once the pandemic has subsided. The question, then, is: *what does the crisis mean for the longer term?* I believe that there are some important learnings from the pandemic that leaders of organisations need to consider.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in the article are of their own and do not reflect the opinion of Razak School of Government.



My focus here is on a practice that has been adopted across the world because of the pandemic – working from home, or, working remotely. Remote work is by no means a novelty – entire swathes of technology and service industries have adopted it. However, it has never been done at such scale and across so many sectors or functional areas. Much of the current discussion has focused on the *here-and-now* aspects of such work, such as technologies used, connectivity, and working practices. I would like to consider the second-order consequence of what happens when we work remotely in large numbers.

In this age of always-on connectivity, we often forget why collocation matters. Employees can turn to their superiors and peers more or less spontaneously for guidance and problem-solving. Co-presence makes coordination easier. Plus, there is a visible community for support when things are difficult. In other words, the workplace contains a multitude of practical, social and emotional cues that are deeply embedded in our work practices. These cues disappear or become much more subdued when employees work remotely. Without collocation, many of the activities mentioned above require explicit actions. A colleague who can usually be found at the other end of the floor can now be reached only through a video call scheduled for a specific time. Instant messages clog our screens. Coordination becomes more onerous. Roles become fuzzier. Traditional guidance / control mechanisms become less useful and more of a bottleneck. With much less guidance, coordination, and mutual support, employees are more or less on their own in terms of making decisions and solving problems. To put it in stark terms, employees are now working *autonomously* to the extent they have not in such large numbers. What does this mean? I believe that there are significant implications for both employees and organisations.

The Employee

Let us start with the employee. Now that the novelty of prolonged periods of working from home has faded, initial feedback received from our participants suggests two diverging patterns. Some employees are revelling in their newfound autonomy, flexibility, and ability to be more creative. They are comfortable in leveraging greater fluidity in roles and are utilising this opportunity to redefine themselves, professionally and in the context of their workplaces. Others are faring less well. In the absence of the familiar structures of the workplace, they are more tentative on what to do, whom to ask for guidance, etc. They struggle with ambiguity in roles and responsibilities, a lack of implicit feedback/affirmation regarding their actions; and have trouble with lower clarity on the immediate next steps.

Leaders need to learn and implement some lessons here quickly. Beyond enabling the pragmatics of remote collaboration, they need to think carefully about how to enhance the sense of autonomy of those who are comfortable with it; and more importantly, create cognitive and emotional scaffolds of support for those who are not. From a day-to-day perspective, this has three important implications. The first is about more *communication*, done more frequently. Broad townhall-style forums are useful, but they are good for broadcasting messages rather than facilitating discussions. They need to be complemented by more intimate interactions in smaller groups, with the significant time given for open-ended discussions. While this additional requirement for communication imposes burdens on leaders, there is little alternative given the cold formality and impersonality of digital channels. The second implication is that managers need to provide employees with more *help and guidance* regularly, at finer levels of granularity. This is not about micro-management; but rather, encompasses a need to acknowledge that employees can stumble over details when getting something done. In the absence of a collocated community, they often do not know whom to turn to (or sometimes feel inhibited about asking for help). Leaders need to step in and play an enabling role. The third is about *celebrating* small markers of accomplishment, and not just the bigger milestones. This is a way for leaders to communicate support and appreciation; and is critical for sustaining morale in a difficult situation where employees feel isolated and left to their own devices.



The Organisation

For several years, organisations have been buffeted by the headwinds of digitisation, changing consumer behaviours, shifting expectations of their employees, as well as regulatory challenges. These forces have combined to shape an arc of unpredictability and volatility that has now been given significant momentum by this crisis. To survive, organisations no longer have any option other than to transform how they work; and adapt quickly to the changing circumstances.

This is easier said than done because organisations are designed for stability not change. The mechanisms that ensure stability are constituted by two characteristics that are common to most organisations: *formalised* hierarchies and *well-defined* roles. Hierarchies enable scale, make it easier to manage complexity, and provide predictability in day-to-day operations. The clarity in roles helps in productivity and efficiency, managing performance, and recruitment. There have been many experiments in alternative governance mechanisms such as project-based firms, flatter structures, and flexible roles. However, organisations have invariably gravitated toward an alignment of well-settled hierarchies and roles, which have become deeply embedded in their cultures.

The pandemic has created an inflexion point where this is not sustainable any longer. Leaders must consider urgently how to transform their organisations. This sounds, and is, daunting. Large scale transformations have a poor record of success and can destroy more value than they create. However, based on research that I have conducted with my colleague Philip Stiles on how organisations handle discontinuity, I believe that there are specific steps that leaders can take; and these are nicely connected with the move toward autonomous ways of working discussed above that we have adopted in this pandemic.

I suggest three guiding principles as the starting point for thinking about transformation. The first is to recognise that while execution-driven work is important; when environments require making changes on the fly, it needs to be *complemented by innovation*. The employee becomes a problem-solver, rather than someone who simply carries out tasks that have been defined well in advance. Following on from this focus on problem-solving, the second principle is that of the *fluidity of roles*. Problems seldom arrive in bundles that map neatly into well-defined roles. Rather, they require working flexibly in multiple roles and collaborating with colleagues across functions on the basis of the problem at hand. The third principle is that when the focus is on the problem, *control mechanisms* that are based on hierarchies become a limiting factor. The emphasis needs to shift from control toward some form of self-organisation that adapts over time.

The three principles can be illustrated through an example from a telecommunication company that is in the throes of a big transformation: it is moving from existing digital telephone systems to the next generation technology. Employees who maintain the current systems/ technologies are tasked with migrating to the new technology in addition to their current roles and responsibilities. Very quickly, it became apparent that existing routines for work, which prioritised the executional stability, were not useful for performing the migration, which required innovation through problem-solving. Second, the problems to be solved in technology migration did not map well into the existing roles that were designed for maintaining an existing system. Finally, the hierarchical control mechanisms that were designed for delivering high-reliability performance in existing networks were not suitable for innovation and problem solving on the fly.



So, for this transformation, the organisation experimented with *self-organising teams*. Members were empowered to innovate and solve problems to implement the migration. They did this by developing routines for improvisation and innovation. They solved problems by collaborating with colleagues from other functions depending on the challenge at hand. Team leaders consciously altered their management mechanisms from supervising employees on a day-to-day basis toward giving them more autonomy instead; and acted as ambassadors on their behalf to the larger organisation (for example, to argue for more resources or more leeway in deadlines). After initial difficulties (such as acquiring resources and getting the larger organisation to acknowledge their success in solving a myriad of problems), the teams accomplished goals that would not be possible through traditional governance structures.

The characteristics of self-organising teams described here have much in common with how employees are working in the days of the pandemic, e.g., autonomy, fluid roles, and problem-solving at a micro-level. Thus, while the pandemic has undoubtedly created significant difficulties in how we work, it has also *created* an opportunity: organisations are conducting natural experiments on autonomous work at a scale that they would not have attempted otherwise. The imperative here for leaders is to not just to make the best of the situation and ride it out. It is also an invitation for them to imbibe an ethos of structured experimentation and learning. They need to cast a dispassionate data-driven eye on how things are evolving; arrive at clear conclusions on what worked and what did not; decide on what aspects of autonomy and self-organisation can be institutionalised in their organisations; and utilise these as the first step in the larger journey of transformation. Such a “bottom-up” approach to transformation has many attractive features. The risks are lower than top-down large-scale transformation; progressive improvements can occur through learning; and gradual scaling up reduces the possibility of destabilising the organisation.

To be sure, there are multiple challenges. Even empowered employees can feel a sense of dislocation from the loss of regularity and predictability. Second, the work of such teams, which is often about trials, errors and addressing problems, becomes difficult to assess through conventional organisational yardsticks that prioritise efficiency. Managing and mentoring individuals and assessing their performance, become considerably more difficult. Finally, many leaders feel that a perceived loss of control inhibits their ability to manage their employees for the best results. These are all important concerns. Organisations need to take the time and trouble to think through them carefully.

The consequences of the pandemic are only beginning to be felt and will reverberate for many years to come. It has tested the limits of our ability to adapt and innovate. This is no doubt a difficult time for employees, leaders and organisations. It is also an opportunity to rethink and make positive changes in how we work, lead and organise. Some of the dots are already visible. I believe that connecting them provides with a set of patterns for making effective changes and sustaining ourselves.

