Leading through the stress - the Covid-19 Lego challenge.

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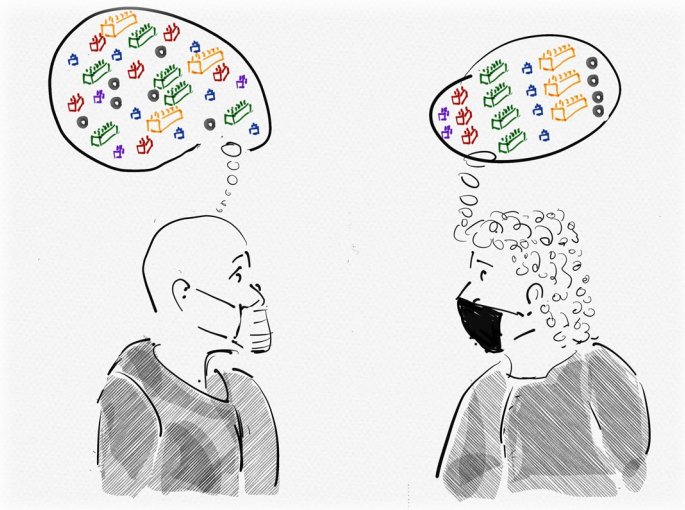


Have you ever had to sort out LEGO? When my kids were younger, we seemed to have so much of the stuff, and it was always lying around. Believe me, there is nothing worse than stepping on a Lego block in the middle of the night. We had a spot in the lounge where we would keep the LEGO box. Every evening we would just scoop up the giant castle, the misshapen vehicle or spaceship and drop it in the Lego box. All the colours and shapes mixed up, an explosion of plastic.

For the past month, my mind has been a bit like the Lego box. Full of the issues of today.
Keep my family safe, earn something, how are my friends, how many Covid-19 deaths, am I putting on weight, racist Facebook posts, how I hate shopping, why some people won't wear masks, cashflow, dreams which have vanished, Zoom meetings, new technical problems, invoices, need more exercise, kids at school, on and on.

Is this your experience?
We are having to cope with so much at this time. Our minds are full of challenges, and sometimes it feels overwhelming.

The reality is that our bodies are reacting to all this. Brain science tells us that our bodies respond, our blood pressure increases, our brains release adrenaline. The amygdala, (your primitive survival brain) activates, taking energy away from the parts of your brain that help to store memories and perform higher-order tasks with less energy. Right now, we are all reacting to stress.

When this happens, it becomes difficult to see the bigger picture. * When this happens, our decision making slows down and the stress cycle speeds up. More Lego blocks, a bigger mess in the Lego box of my mind.

No one can afford this to happen. We need to keep our minds clear and focused. And our leaders even more so. Our leaders at every level are under great pressure. Simple day to day leadership decisions have now become decisions of great consequence. A poor decision at the lowest level in this environment can easily be a life or death decision. We need to keep mind control.

So, what to do? The world health organisation recommends a range of stress reduction considerations**. Doing things like

- exercise,
- maintaining routines,
- limiting the news and social media,
- limit alcohol and smoking and
- keep connected.

As they say, "remember this is a marathon not a sprint".

So back to the psychological Lego box in my mind. At this moment, scooping up Lego into a plastic soup is not ok. There comes a time when we need to put the mixed-up Lego box on the floor and sort it all out. Put the different types of Legos in piles. Decided which piece goes where. When we do this, we start to gain control. For leaders having a sorted-out mind and thinking clearly is really important at the moment.

I am privileged to coach leaders as part of my practice. At the moment, helping them to sort out the Lego is one of the most satisfying things we do together. How?

- I start with the question "so what is keeping you awake at night?"
- Then I listen, I really listen, jotting down everything I hear.
- When the client and I have finally got the" Lego box" into the room, we start sorting the issues or psychological LEGO into piles and looking for first steps.

Having someone help you work through your stress is a powerful, and for most leaders an important thing to do. I believe that sorting out psychological LEGO can also become a personal discipline. If you are in a leadership position, it could be important to find time to do this.

Without question, everyone is very busy at the moment. But you could also expect that your LEGO box is a bit messy right now. You may need to plan a moment to reflect. Either book some time with your coach or book some personal reflective time in your diary.

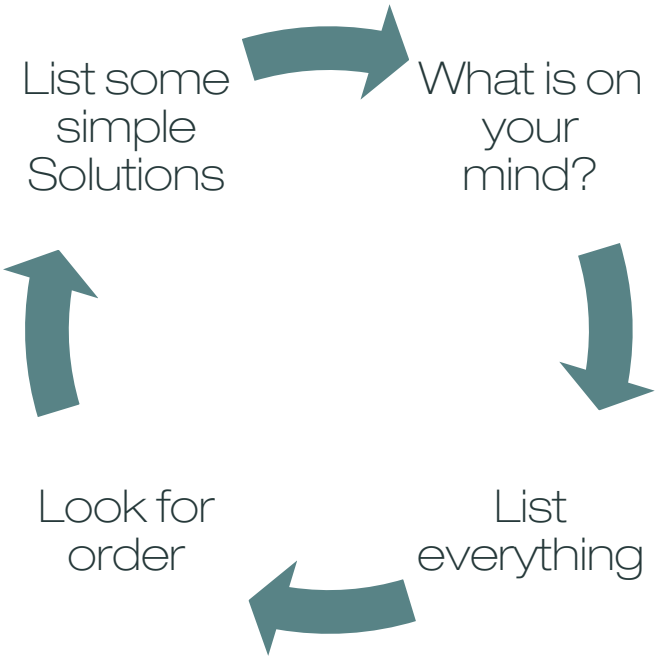
There is a second reason why, as leaders this skill set becomes important.

The ability to coach your staff is a very powerful leadership tool. Particularly if you are the leader of leaders, coaching has been become a recognized key skill set. In the middle of this COVID-19 crisis, the leader coach becomes a real organizational asset. Our people are all under pressure. This will impact on their effectiveness. If their success is our success in his moment, then it stands to reason that their stress is equally your responsibility.

Great leaders are great coaches.

So how do we do this?

While there are a range of coaching or self-reflection techniques, and all have merit, I would like to suggest a simple process for now.



We all know that stress is one of the top societal killers. In the crazy world we find ourselves now, as a leader, we need to be thinking clearly, and we need our people at their best.

The ability to manage our stress and the stress of our people could well turn out to be a key organizational competitiveness.

As compassionate leaders accepting that stress is real in these times is the first step in gaining control.

*https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/protect-your-brain-from-stress
**https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf

For more information or to schedule a one-on-one coaching session please feel free to contact me.