

Personality styles under stress: leading through the crisis

by Monica Olsen, BScN BA, MHRD

Given the uncertain timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders will increasingly need to tune into what they need to remain calm and focused, so that they are in a better position to influence and calm others. As mentioned in an earlier bulletin by Dr. Paul Mohapel on self-compassion and resilience, this is not the time for leaders to give free rein to unhealthy behavioural manifestations: workaholic, superhero, perfectionist, and Lone Ranger. Rather, learning to notice one's thoughts, emotions, and sensations without judgement can help overcome unhelpful habitual reactions to stress and, thoughtfully, choose different responses.

In their book, "Dealing with People You Can't Stand - How to Bring out the Best in People at Their Worst", Dr. Rick Brinkman and Dr. Rick Kirschner discuss how every behaviour is trying to fulfill a purpose or intent. People engage in behaviours based on their intent and do what they do based on what seems to be most important at the moment. As a broad frame of reference, we will discuss four general intents that determine how people will behave and their key stressor.

Behaviour changes as priorities or intents change. It is helpful for leaders to identify these intents in themselves and recognize the connection to their own behaviour in various situations. Mindfully mastering this practice makes it easier for leaders to observe and understand how these intents manifest in others and, thus, help defuse unhelpful behaviours by providing the most appropriate remedies.

The Insights Discovery personality assessment associates four colour energies with corresponding intents, stressors, stress signals, and remedies.

An emergency physician recently said, "We are used to dealing with unknowns, but COVID is an exercise in vulnerability and loss of control that is beyond anything we've ever experienced." To help alleviate that anxiety, this ED physician maintains a calm home life and before coming into work, establishes a regular practice.

"I have the same routine each time. I eat a huge meal in case I have to skip lunch or dinner. Then, I give my husband and children a kiss before I leave. I always turn back and watch them wave to me from the window. My son makes a little heart sign with his thumbs and index fingers to remind me to be brave. After that, I can handle anything."

In a recent interview, Dr. Brené Brown, a research professor who has spent the past two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy, offered three pieces of advice.

- Recognize how new and unusual the situation is: this is hard, this is new, this is why it feels awkward and terrible and vulnerable.
- Remind yourself that the pandemic won't last forever and try to keep that perspective.
- Reality-check your expectations: we're not going to do this well.

To ensure that you can deal with the many uncertainties and lead others through this pandemic wilderness, you must take care of yourself first. That cannot be delegated! Here are a few powerful questions to help you identify what you need, regardless of personality, to renew your internal battery and deal more effectively with stress.

- What is essential for your emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual well-being? What practices should you engage into best take care of yourself to be in a better position to care for others during these trying times?
- Write yourself a letter from the point of view of a kind, understanding, and encouraging friend or loved one. What would that friend say to you right now as you are going through this unprecedented time?
- How can you use this time to develop more authentic and caring connections with the people in your personal and professional worlds?

- How do you demonstrate courage and vulnerability with yourself and others?
- What can you learn and reinvent for yourself during this time that will continue to serve you, your team and potentially our system?
- What new possibilities are now presenting themselves that you may never have noticed before?
- Despite the circumstances, who do you consciously choose to be, for yourself and others, in each moment?
- How can you keep your sense of humour intact in the midst of it all?



Source: Adapted from Insights Group Ltd, 2010-2016.

Intentionally notice “where you are at” throughout your day, when you are feeling challenged, and work to reduce your stress. By doing so, you will be in a better position to notice where others are at and help them stay more in control. We will get through this together!

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