

Reemergence Planning – A Sound Strategy After a Crisis

In September 2001, *Wired* magazine reviewed science writer Steven Johnson's then-new book, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software*. Johnson's premise: Brilliant adaptations arise out of interconnections and cooperation among individual components of complex systems. He optimistically predicted that we would develop technology tools that have humans "collaborating on a scale only rivaled by the cities we first started building 6,000 years ago." Two decades later, as we address COVID-19-driven fears, uncertainties and doubts, Johnson's forecast seems revelatory and underscores a possible sea change in the strategic and operational plans for organizations worldwide.

In response to social distancing, shelter-in-place orders and mandated lockdowns necessitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic, people are collaborating virtually on a scale never seen before. And despite the major difficulties and losses resulting from this crisis that we'll undoubtedly confront in the months and even years to come, leading organizations already are beginning to figure out the organizational changes and strategic adaptations to implement once the crisis abates. In other words, they already are considering their reemergence plans.

Leaders who address reemergence considerations in current strategic planning activities equip their companies to manage that transition more effectively when it arrives. And the best reemergence plans will be those that apply insights gleaned by

executives during their crisis-management leadership, communications and collaborations.

Reemergence – A New Type of Strategic Planning

A few weeks into a crisis, such as one involving rapid and sweeping shifts to a remote working model, may not seem like an opportune time to begin thinking long-term. Most companies have only begun to address a wide range of challenges associated with operating in a pandemic environment, the duration of which remains uncertain. We believe that reemergence planning can help organizations address those same pandemic-driven challenges – which makes a compelling case for assessing the post-crisis transition now.

One large organization took just this approach, creating a reemergence plan while also reviewing its overall strategic plan developed prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. The company's CEO and executive team wanted to craft a clear and concise message that frames the organization's post-crisis approach and objectives. This message will be used as a guide as the company's numerous units and offices develop related, localized plans to address their unique challenges and needs when the time comes. The company's leaders also believe the plan will help employees recognize, and appreciate, how their current activities will contribute to the company's future success.

Considering and formulating a reemergence plan can deliver key advantages, but it's important to note that the drivers of future success within most companies remain uncertain for now. The strategic objectives and priorities companies are currently pursuing may need to change dramatically when shifting from defense to offense. A restaurant chain working to increase revenue after social distancing restrictions are removed and its locations reopen may need to invest in marketing activities before hiring additional personnel. A brick-and-clicks retailer may have a sudden need to quickly shift staff resources currently dedicated to ecommerce over to physical locations if consumers demonstrate an unbridled passion for in-person shopping following their extended isolation.

As leaders identify possible reemergence objectives and needs, they can begin assessing the challenges their companies will encounter when pivoting toward those goals. Many aspects of their organizations will be different. Workforces will be altered. Some will shrink, at least temporarily (e.g., oil and gas companies, airlines), while others (online retailers, grocers) will grow, and it's very

possible that a greater number of companies will adjust to operate in a far more virtual manner. The use and support of IT systems and applications will be different and may need to be reallocated, just as staff will need to be reallocated to address new priorities.

As experienced leaders know from guiding their organizations and people through significant events or crises such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, communicating and managing change effectively is a complex, challenging endeavor. The shift to a post-crisis environment will involve substantial changes for companies and their employees.

Having a strong reemergence vision and direction in place helps employees understand the need for change. A reemergence plan gives them a clear picture of where the company is and where it seeks to go. That clarity is important because many employees will expect "things to return to normal" when the crisis subsides. That will not be the case for many organizations. Instead, there will be a new status quo that leaders will need to establish and communicate very well to their people.

Seeing Future Opportunities and Benefits Through Current Approaches

The longer-term clarity that a reemergence plan creates also offers near-term benefits to be derived from current crisis management efforts.

Knowing there is a post-crisis plan can help employees worry less about the future and focus more on how they can help stabilize the organization, while simultaneously doing their part to position the company to capitalize on post-crisis opportunities. That big-picture perspective can engage and inspire people to generate innovative ideas

about how they can reshape their own roles to benefit the organization.

The existence of a reemergence vision and plan should also motivate leaders to keep their eyes open for new approaches, tools and talent that may arise in the laboratory of crisis-management operations and experiments. These breakthroughs may serve the organization well after the crisis subsides, so leaders should consider gleaning insights regarding:

- **New collaborative tools and other technologies:** During the massive shift to a remote working model, workforces have put a range of video- and text-based collaborative tools through their paces. The use of cloud-based workflow tools has also soared. These types of technologies already have taken on newfound value, and their use may expand in the future to assist with other change management efforts as well as ongoing transformation and innovation initiatives.
- **New approaches to collaboration and innovation:** Organizations have deployed new design-thinking exercises and approaches – often in a virtual setting for the first time – that help generate new ideas for solving problems, driving culture changes and breaking down barriers to innovation. Many of these approaches will be worth incorporating long-term into the organization and expanding in a post-crisis environment.

- **New leadership styles and communications:** Given the severe and historic threats posed by the pandemic, leaders have spent more time empathizing with employees and communicating in a clear and frank manner. They have spent less time deploying traditional motivational approaches and tactics often shared when performance is down. These new approaches toward communications and employee engagement will likely reshape future leadership and people engagement strategies.
- **New candidates for leadership:** Extraordinary times provide fertile opportunities for strong future leaders to flourish. We've seen employees demonstrate an uncanny calmness under pressure and wisdom far beyond their years since the pandemic was declared. For example, during one of the twice-weekly meetings our firm's Chicago office holds, a young consultant realized the team was struggling with the health and medical terminology related to virology and pandemics. She came to the next meeting with a brief and compelling presentation, based on meticulous research she conducted on her own time, that equipped the entire office with the foundational level of understanding we needed to communicate effectively and efficiently about COVID-19. That type of initiative and skill is a strong indicator of leadership excellence. Current leaders should take note of individuals who thrive in adverse, unforeseen conditions.¹

¹ For more information, read "The People Side of COVID-19: The Ultimate Test of Operational Resilience?", Protiviti Flash Report, March 16, 2020, www.protiviti.com/US-en/insights/flashreport-people-side-covid-19.

In Closing

The COVID-19 crisis presents a test of leadership and resiliency. We frequently hear references to the word *triage*, in the context of healthcare institutions and first responders continuing their heroic efforts during the global pandemic, as well as organizations reshaping their short-term strategies to generate revenue and support customers. Triage in terms of prioritizing and reprioritizing tasks and activities is going to be a necessary art for most organizations for the foreseeable future.

In addition, organizations would be well-served to leverage their current efforts and innovative approaches to build their reemergence plans. We know these are historic times presenting unprecedented challenges for organizations. But we also know the sun will rise. When it does and the economy reignites, organizations will want a strong plan for reemergence that fosters an effective approach to change management and connecting with their people.

For further insights, visit www.protiviti.com/COVID-19.

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