

## The day after – from connection crisis to collaborative intelligence

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The Corona crisis revealed the fragility of our globalized system. The crisis brought deprivation to just about every vital social system and showed its infrastructure's flaws. What seemed to be obviously connected quickly unravelled. Highly interdependent value chains proved enormously vulnerable. The Corona crisis seemed at times to be one of connection. It forced many citizens to connect with others in a completely different way: virtually, so as to guarantee required distance.

At the same time, people were forced to be creative. On an individual level, close ties of friendship were strengthened. Sectors known for the lack of employee engagement -- such as collecting garbage, growing food, and cashiers' work in supermarkets -- suddenly discovered the meaningfulness of their otherwise invisible contribution to a larger whole. In the medical sector, care providers were widely honored as heroes. Taboos in many companies, such as the switch to home and teleworking, vanished at record pace. This not only caused work to be done differently, but employees spontaneously began to take on new and additional roles, such as that of digitally supporting colleagues and boosting ongoing automation projects.

The Corona disruption presents companies and organizations with pressing ethical dilemmas: choices between safety and social services (supermarkets), profit thinking and public health (such as the compulsory closure of catering and fashion companies), focusing on employees and customers. Until now, 'disruption', the ideological buzzword for disruption of business plans by digital technology, became a real-world and real-time event.

Rather than merely forcing companies to rethink their products, customer relationships, and marketing strategy to stay afloat among fast-growing digital platform players (such as Booking.com or Spotify), the disruption caused by the corona virus put in question companies' long taken-for-granted daily functioning and their certainty of being able to be in control of 'human resources'. The Corona virus pandemic heightened the awareness level of a broad field of stakeholders, forcing its members to develop an entirely different perspective on how the social world works, in particular how deeply the social world is embedded in the natural one that one had illusion to be in control of. **The Tayloristic reduction of 'human being' to 'human resources' showed itself to be many times more mistaken than one had feared.**

Let's consider, for example, a local construction group in Belgium. Even before the mandatory closure, the management team decided to shut down the sites in a controlled manner in the interest of employees' health. Almost 1500 workers were allowed to go home and were placed on unemployment. For the company, doing so was not a merely financial issue. At the time it let workers go, it received adverse reactions from customers, including local authorities, who were dissatisfied because their construction projects were delayed. Giving precedence to employee health was perceived by some customers as a choice contrary to their interests.

However, once it became clear that in addition to the healthcare sector, the agricultural industry was equally coming under pressure, the company started a program inviting employees to voluntarily assist in those sectors wherever possible. Volunteer work ranged from reconstructing care facilities for elderly free of the virus who stayed in their residential care centers' isolated wing, to preparing agricultural fields to make up for the seasonal workers remaining stuck in their native country. Such a turn of mind amounts to much more than just taking action based on moral conviction, or on a vision

of what living well entails. For this company, it was about doing the right thing. It was about striving for added value that transcends profit, based on moral principles the company felt it had to stand up for. In my view, such value-driven actions may represent a salient aspect of a deeper awareness shift that might facilitate future agility.

Workers became engaged with the larger social environment in which they were delivering work. Their change of mind was not triggered by last year's workshops geared to bringing about a shift in the company's cultural DNA. Rather, forced by the situation, conversations focused on the relationship between one's own contribution and the bigger social and political surround emerged. It was a conversation about what one is capable of doing and about what are one's options in a fundamentally changed society. Envisioned options were placed into an evolutionary framework, i.e., that of how does each of us expect things to evolve? This evolutionary thinking turned out to be a powerful connector of people that led to reformulating what was important to them. For example, excavators were used for work that farmers needed to accomplish, but for which they no longer had a budget due to price pressure from a globalized market. At the same time, new skills were developed now that machines were used in unusual ways for unusual purposes. **A revolution in human thinking occurred.**

Not only was static contextual thinking broadened into evolutionary thinking, workers themselves began to think in terms of structural relationships previously buried or neglected. The question was not only 'how can we transform a large sports hall into a hospital?', but also 'how can we use newly evolving insights for smoothly managing the unexpected influx of patients along with maintaining hygiene and making care as effective as possible?' This kind of thinking, traditionally reserved for managers, spontaneously emerged in people doing volunteer work.

The great corona disruption is not only a disruption at the level of social connection but also at the level of thinking and collaboration. It heralds a disruption of ways of working together in which interweaving thinking and acting becomes central, and the tayloristic distinction between thinking and doing becomes moot.

Thinking and acting together form the core of *Requisite Agility* in terms of which investments in employees are not only investments in competencies and skills, but also investments in increased maturity and the fostering of collaboration, -- a birthing of what we can call *collaborative intelligence*. The Corona crisis facilitated what the construction company mentioned above had been striving for over two years, namely, greater autonomy of employees leading to faster and qualitatively higher decision-making on their part.

The example of the construction company taught me that the challenge of becoming an autonomously acting contributor requires, as well as facilitates, moving from merely contextual to evolutionary and relationship thinking, a reformulation of one's own job mandate, as well as the emergence of high-quality decision making. However hurtful the corona virus crisis, it encouraged employees' commitment to the common good to the extent that they experienced their contribution as meaningful rather than merely assigned, and made manifest their ethical conviction to have to follow what was felt to be the important thing to do.

The decision to accept financial hurt due to one's income being temporarily sharply reduced, went hand in hand with making ethical choices that felt to be timely and right. The decision showed that a person will accept hardship when it is seen as an ingredient of promoting the common good. The rediscovery of work delivery grounded in ethical principles and moral convictions is perhaps the most important potential there is for bringing forth meaningful partnerships in the future. Such partnerships can be expected to make an important difference for all employees, their teams,

organizations, and social networks. They may lay the foundation from which collaboratively intelligent companies can emerge and thrive.