

Why HR Leaders Need to Cultivate Their Adaptive Capacity

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It goes without saying that HR professionals are no strangers to change. Dealing with the unexpected, responding to crises, and managing the human side of business fluctuations are central to any HR leader's role in a company. But 2020 has brought an unprecedented series of challenges, from the COVID-19 pandemic to civil unrest to widespread economic distress.



Addressing the HR needs of your organization in the midst of a fluid and rapidly evolving dynamic requires rapid reassessment and frequent course corrections on almost a daily basis. It requires adaptive capacity.

What Is Adaptive Capacity?

Adaptive capacity refers to a leader's ability to respond with purposeful, positive regard to an unexpected shock or challenge, such as the pandemic. It's grounded in an *attitude* rather than an action plan.

To be clear, "purposeful positive regard" doesn't mean minimizing the challenge or slapping a happy face on a painful situation. Rather, it is about *self-efficacy*—recognition that says, "While

I may not have created this problem, where it goes from here is up to me!” This belief in one’s ability involves three aspects:

- **Resilience:** absorbing/withstanding the initial impact in a positive fashion
- **Response:** adjusting to the change by mitigating damage and restoring stability
- **Resolve:** identifying and seizing opportunities presented by the new dynamic

By intentionally cultivating their adaptive capacity, HR leaders tap into the creativity and innovation of their teams, positioning their entire workforce, their organizations, and themselves to not just survive but also *thrive* in the next normal.

Risk Factors that Drain Our Adaptive Capacity

Creativity and adaptation require energy, and the physical and emotional drain can impair an HR leader’s adaptive capacity. There are four types of fatigue to watch out for in the current environment:

Compassion fatigue: The stress, strain, anger, and grief experienced by so many people during recent months often fall squarely on the shoulders of an emotionally intelligent HR executive. Engaged leaders know when their teams are hurting, and many tend to take it personally when the pain has no easy or immediate answer.

Add to that the fact that they are people, too—many have friends, neighbors, and loved ones who contracted the virus, and many have not recovered. Balancing their personal *and* professional needs is no easy task.

Decision fatigue: The unexpected and unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has required HR professionals to make a host of decisions, personally and professionally, in response to the ongoing crisis. While solving problems and generating solutions can be fulfilling, it can become wearying when each day brings a new set of problems and yesterday’s solutions no longer apply.

Zoom fatigue: While it may seem minor, many leaders report that virtual meetings, while a valuable and necessary adaptation, are physically and emotionally draining in ways that traditional face-to-face meetings are not. It takes more energy and focus to truly engage and connect at a meaningful level.

Many effective leaders are often “people persons” and are energized by the human contact and creative energy generated by being in the physical presence of their talented teams. And now, for many, work is being done in isolation, and we miss our “work family.”

Cumulative fatigue: Simply put, it’s the above-mentioned types of fatigue (along with others) stacked on top of each other that lead us to cumulative fatigue. It’s easy to miss—or *dismiss*—in ourselves. The unprecedented size, scope, and duration of this pandemic are draining to us all, regardless of role, and it can be difficult to maintain one’s own morale, much less that of those who look to you for leadership.

And it's not like the other more "mundane" aspects of life have taken a break; stuff still happens. Challenges with parenting, relationships, elder care, finances, etc., continue just as they always have, only now, individuals may have fewer emotional reserves to address them. Unaddressed cumulative fatigue leads to a "settling" or an entrenchment into survival mode and cuts off creativity.

5 Strategies to Maintain Adaptive Capacity

Here are five strategies that will help you maintain adaptive capacity and avoid "settling":

1. **Be patient with yourself and others:** We have not faced something exactly like this as a nation in more than 100 years. We are all doing the best we can in an utterly unfamiliar situation, so strive for *progress, not perfection*, and give yourself a break. Support and embrace failure—learning and innovation only come in a safe environment where trying, and not necessarily succeeding, is encouraged.
2. **Lean into the narrative:** While we did not choose this global crisis, we do have to respond to it. Like so many times of major crisis in history before, how we manage this challenge will define us, individually and collectively. Effective leaders seek to inspire their teams by affirming the value of their efforts and contributions in the larger context of COVID-19 response and recovery. Making meaning out of new or powerful experiences (like challenge, trauma, and struggle) actually reduces and reframes suffering, bringing an expanded perspective.
3. **Seek outside input:** Identify the trusted colleagues, mentors, and advisors you can turn to when the creative well runs dry or your energies are ebbing low. Establishing regular periodic "check-ins" with these support networks can give you a fresh perspective and hold you accountable to your goals. This also provides you with an opportunity to help others—to *give back*—which is empowering for you and those you help.
4. **Engage your team in the process:** Cultivate an "I have a deep bench" mentality, and empower your team to participate in the problem-solving process. Besides giving them ownership and investment in solutions, research shows that employees support initiatives they had a hand in creating. ("My voice can be heard and matters.")
5. **Commit to "aggressive" caretaking:** For many, taking care of themselves is an afterthought and only when they have time after the "work is done." Running the marathon of pandemic response requires a disciplined, intentional commitment to regular and consistent self-care; pursue this objective with the same intensity you employ in any work initiative. Put *YOURSELF* on the calendar, and hold that time as "sacred," just as you would a meeting with the CEO of your company.

During this time of unprecedented challenge and transition, when we choose and maintain our adaptive capacity, we are better-positioned as HR professionals to guide our organizations through this turbulent time of change and emerge even stronger.



Jeff Gorter, MSW, LCSW, is Vice President of Crisis Response Services at [R3 Continuum](#). Gorter brings more than 30 years of clinical experience, including consultation and extensive on-site critical incident response, to businesses and communities.

Gorter has responded directly to the September 11 terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina, the Virginia Tech shootings, the Deepwater Horizon Oil spill, the earthquake/tsunami in Japan, the Newtown Tragedy, the Orlando Pulse Nightclub Shooting, and the Las Vegas shooting. To learn more about adaptive capacity, check out R3c's video series [here](#).