



Adaptive Capacity

Key EAP Strategies for the New Year

| By Jeff Gorter, MSW, LCSW

It goes without saying that 2020 was a year like no other. An unprecedented series of challenges included the COVID-19 pandemic, civil unrest, widespread economic distress, catastrophic wildfires, a record-setting hurricane season, and the most divisive election cycle in memory. If it feels like you have been running a marathon, it's because you have!

But employee assistance professionals are no strangers to chaos. Dealing with the unexpected, responding to crisis, and managing the human side of business challenges are core competencies of any top-tier EAP, and EA professionals have

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answered the call in amazing and creative ways, as always.

As we move into 2021, it is the right time to consider what course corrections and “lessons learned” we want to apply to the New Year. If 2020 was about *reaction*, 2021 will center on *pro-action* as business leaders seek to forge ahead and reclaim the momentum they were experiencing prior to the turbulence of 2020. EAPs can support this effort by facilitating adaptive capacity.

Adaptive Capacity

Adaptive capacity (AC) refers to a leader’s ability to respond with a purposefully positive regard to an unexpected shock or challenge, such as the pandemic. It’s grounded in an *attitude* rather than an action plan in which “if I don’t think about the problem correctly, I’m not likely to arrive at the correct solution.”

It needs to be stressed that a “purposefully positive regard” does NOT mean minimizing the challenge or slapping a happy face on a painful situation. Rather, AC is about *self-efficacy* – the recognition that says, “While I may not have created this problem, where it goes from here is up to me!”

There are three aspects to adaptive capacity:

- **Resilience:** Absorbing/withstanding the initial impact in a positive fashion (primarily demonstrated in the early stage of the pandemic, Q1 & Q2 of 2020).
- **Response:** Adjusting to the pandemic by mitigating damage and restoring stability (as seen during Q3 & Q4 of 2020)
- **Resolve:** Identifying and seizing opportunities presented by the new dynamic (in planning and strategizing for 2021).

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Learning Culture

Adaptive capacity embraces a *learning culture* where creativity, experimentation, and innovation are encouraged. Stressful situations, particularly prolonged ones such as the pandemic, tend to make us rely on the things we are familiar with, the “tried and true” ways we have handled challenges in the past.

While previous experience informs our strategies, doing what we've always done will *only get us what we've always got*. Or to put it another way, I don't want to be well-equipped to survive in a world that no longer exists! A novel virus requires a novel solution.

By cultivating a climate of curiosity, EAPs can guide leaders to affirm with their teams that it's safe:

- To ask questions;
- To “not know;”
- To brainstorm; and
- To be comfortable with uncertainty as we pursue unique solutions.

Now this doesn't mean lowering of performance standards or accepting something less than excellence, but simply recognizing that you can't solve a *new problem* without generating *new solutions*... and no one hits a home run every time at bat. If your team believes that failure will be punished and risk is too “risky”, the EAP has squandered a key resource.

Risk Factors

To be sure, creativity and adaptation requires energy, and the extended physical and emotional drain we've all experienced can impair a business leader's adaptive capacity. As a result, EA professionals can support and educate leaders on the four types of fatigue that have commonly been reported in the current environment:

Decision Fatigue: The unexpected and unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has required leaders to make a host of decisions, personally and professionally, in response to the ongoing crisis. Being decisive is certainly not new territory for a business executive, and many leaders often describe a kind of “rush” when faced with a challenge and then subsequently rising to that challenge.

But while solving problems and generating solutions is one of the most affirming aspects of leadership, it can also leave one incredibly weary when each and every day brings a new set of problems and yesterday's solutions no longer apply.

“Doom scrolling” is another related but subtle source of exhaustion – that is, constantly checking and rechecking news and social media reports in a futile attempt to gain “that one morsel of information” that

will help me feel in control again and guide my next decision. But spending too much time on social and other media drains energy and feeds discouragement if left unchecked.

Zoom Fatigue: While it may seem minor to some, 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.

Even simple “glitches” like unmuted participants, barking dogs, or “cute invaders” (i.e. children) can bring a laugh and inspire gentle camaraderie (“I get it...we've all been there!”) But they can be subtly exhausting. Face it...when was the last time a toddler wandered through the Board Room during a critical business meeting?

Many effective leaders are “people persons” and were energized by the human contact and



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creative energy generated by being in the physical presence of their talented teams. For many, work is being done in isolation and we simply miss our “work family.”

Compassion Fatigue: The stress, strain, anger, and grief experienced by so many people during recent months often falls squarely on the shoulders of an Emotionally Intelligent business 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 had friends, neighbors and loved ones who have contracted the virus, and many have not recovered. Balancing their personal *and* professional needs is no easy task. Despite all best efforts, COVID-19 remains a real and unavoidable source of distress for the foreseeable future, both for executives and employees alike.

(Editor’s note: If you haven’t already, check out and complete the “Are YOU Suffering from Compassion Fatigue or Burnout?” self-test questionnaire in the third quarter 2020 *JEA*.)

Cumulative Fatigue: Simply put, this is the previously mentioned types of fatigue (and others), stacked on top of each other. It’s easy to miss – or *dismiss* – in ourselves. The unprecedented size, scope, and duration of this pandemic is draining everyone, regardless of your specific job or role, and it can be difficult to maintain one’s own morale, much less 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 I may have fewer emotional reserves to address them. Unaddressed cumulative fatigue leads to a “settling” or entrenchment into a survival mode (reactive stance) and thus cuts off creativity, necessary for a more proactive stance.

Strategies to Maintain Adaptive Capacity

EAPs are uniquely positioned to provide the expert guidance and behavioral health resources needed to move ahead. The following strategies have proven helpful with business leaders and line workers alike:

➤ **Be patient with yourself, and others:** We have not faced something exactly like this as a nation in over 100 years. We are all doing the best we can in an utterly unfamiliar situation – 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 success...is encouraged.

➤ **Lean into the narrative:** While we did not choose this global crisis, we do have to respond to it – this is our moment! Like so many major crises in history the past, how we *manage* this challenge will define us, both individually and collectively. Effective leaders seek to inspire their teams by affirming the value of their efforts/contributions in the larger context of COVID-19 response/recovery.

For example, many healthcare workers have found their efforts to be personally affirming, recognizing that they are providing frontline care in a national crisis – a worthy and heroic endeavor. This doesn’t negate the very real sacrifices many of them have made, but many report that recognition sustains them during times of discouragement. Finding and attributing meaning – a larger purpose – in a challenge or struggle adds perspective and reframes suffering, leading in many cases to post-traumatic growth.

➤ **Seek outside input:** Successful business leaders have identified trusted colleagues, mentors, and advisors they can turn to when the creative well runs dry or when energies are running low, and savvy leaders include their EAP in this list EAPs offer a ready resource to leaders for consultation, coaching, and targeted trainings to reduce isolation and enhance a strengths-based solution focused approach to the challenges ahead. Establishing regular periodic “check-ins” with support networks can offer a fresh perspective and helps hold leaders accountable to self-determined goals.

➤ **Engage your team in the process:** In the midst of a crisis, many business leaders tend to isolate, believing the responsibility rests solely with them. EA professionals routinely coach leaders to give up an “I alone must solve this” approach, and

instead embrace an “I have a deep bench” mentality, empowering their teams to participate in the problem-solving process.

As mentioned earlier, by actively encouraging a learning culture, leaders tap into the creativity and energy of their teams, who are often equally motivated to see stability and productivity return to their workplace. Even simple strategies like hosting a creative listening session with employees or even having an old fashioned “suggestion box” can generate surprising innovations to meet the current need. Besides giving them ownership and investment in solutions, research shows that employees support initiatives that they had a role in *creating* (“my voice can be heard and matters”).

➤ **Commit to “aggressive” caretaking:** For many leaders, taking care of themselves is an afterthought, and only when they have time after the “work is done” (which is to say...never). 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 business initiative. Both EA professionals and business leaders need to put THEMSELVES on the calendar, and hold that time as “sacred”, just like any critical business meeting.

Summary

Although 2020 brought unexpected challenges and disruption on an unprecedented scale, EA professionals have played a key role in helping organizations weather the storms. As we all look ahead to a new year, EAPs will continue to guide this next phase of recovery. By encouraging and facilitating adaptive capacity, we can all emerge stronger and better positioned for a successful future. ❖

Jeff Gorter, MSW, LCSW, is VP of Crisis Response Services at R3 Continuum. Mr. Gorter brings more than 30 years of clinical experience including consultation and extensive on-site critical incident response to businesses and communities. He has responded directly to the Sept. 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. He may be reached at jeff.gorter@r3c.com.

Tips for Increasing Use of EAPs

Most organizations are not reaping the full financial benefits of having an EAP. *Business Management Daily* offers the following suggestions for boosting use of the EAP:

➤ **Make it convenient.** Employees are more likely to use the EAP if counselors are a short drive from work, or they can access them 24/7 by phone or online.

➤ **Emphasize confidentiality.** Employees are more likely to use EAP services if they are not concerned about co-workers knowing about it.

➤ **Host wellness seminars.** For instance, free lunchtime “brown bag” sessions on topics like stress management or time management.

➤ **Inform families.** Let employees’ families know they can contact you. Offer information about your services, hours, and phone numbers.

➤ **Publicize, publicize, publicize.** Promote your EAP regularly through emails, website updates, and free posters and refrigerator magnets that list hours and phone numbers.

➤ **Remind employees there’s more to EAP than they might think.** Stress that the EAP is available for personal reasons such as financial concerns, relationship counseling, and others.

➤ **Encourage staff to bookmark the EAP.** Add a link on a company intranet to the EAP site.

➤ **Train supervisors.** Teach them how to recognize work problems and to recommend using the EAP as an option for improving work performance. ❖