

## MBC and Covid-19 – Some thoughts

We are now seven weeks into the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions in the UK. Other parts of the world are at different stages. It feels like infection rates may, for now at least, have reached, a plateau. The dust is settling on the huge and noisy volumes of rushed out guidance on adjusting to working remotely. Public and political debate has moved on to questions about what a loosening of those restrictions will look like. At the same time, it seems clear from government indications that we are not about to return to the normals we knew a few weeks ago. When it comes, it looks like relaxation of lockdown restrictions will be gradual and any further outbreaks of the virus are likely to result in some re-imposition of restrictions. Unless and until a reliable, effective and affordable vaccine is produced, and produced in sufficient quantities to vaccinate huge swathes of the world's population, which is not expected to happen this calendar year at least, significant restrictions are likely to remain in place.

Now, therefore, feels like a timely moment to take stock, reflect on what we have experienced and (hopefully) learned, and to distil some of that to guide us through the weeks and months to come. The Mindful Business Charter's raison d'être is the promotion of healthy and effective working practices. We have an important role to play and voice to express as we do so and the Charter affords us a sound basis on which to build.

### Some context

At the outset it is worth reflecting on just what has happened and what businesses have been able to achieve over the last weeks. While of course huge swathes of the economy have been mothballed, it would have seemed inconceivable even in January of this year that so many businesses would have been able to reengineer their operating models, almost overnight, so as to have all, or at least the vast majority, of their staff working from home. All those roles that we were told could never be performed remotely have been performed remotely. The adaptability and imagination required of businesses and those working within them has been extraordinary. This is both commendable in itself and a demonstration of how rapidly the status quo can be overturned if circumstances require it or people are brave enough to allow it. It is that spirit of bravery to challenge and change the status quo to which the MBC aspires.

### Maslow and Covid-19

It is also important to reflect on just how hard this is for each and every one of us on a personal and collective basis. There is true heroism being performed in our hospitals and care homes every moment. For most of us our challenges may seem more mundane, because they are more personal and closer to home, but they are our challenges and we do not have politicians lauding us and the population applauding us on a Thursday evening. We are left to muddle through, wondering in our anxious ways how to respond to this crisis, perhaps worrying too whether we are doing enough.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs presupposes that as humans our aspirations are to reach the higher levels of that hierarchy, the pursuit of love and belonging, of purpose and of self-actualisation. To get to those giddy heights we have to have secured the lower levels – shelter, health, food, air, water and so on. Many of us have got used to taking those things for granted. We are all now finding those foundations less secure, to which the bulk buying of pasta, toilet rolls, paracetamol, disinfectant and chopped tomatoes can attest.

At the same time, we, for ourselves and in our work, are still seeking to navigate those higher echelons. And many of the structures and supports we had in place to take care of other practical

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stuff while we focussed on the big issues, have been removed. We have to school and care for our children 24-7. We have to take more care of other dependents too. We cannot rely on nipping out for a sandwich or salad for lunch – we have to think about, pre-buy and then make everything we want to eat. Our cleaners cannot visit so we have to find time to do that. And all of this has to be done against a backdrop of increased background levels of anxiety about ourselves, our loved ones, the wider population, our jobs, the economy, the prospects for our graduating children, the loss of those rites of passage as they leave school or university and so on.

And all of it has to be navigated in a climate of disconnection. We cannot see our colleagues, our friends or our families (save those we were fortunate or unfortunate to have been locked down with). People walk away from us in the street, the supermarket or the park (or at least they should do). We have to disinfect ourselves following contact with the outside world. And many of the things we would do to relax, to unwind, to be us, are no longer allowed, at least in so far as they require us to be outside of our house or within touching distance of other people.

This is hard and it will continue to be hard. (For more articulate reflections on this have a look at the musings of Paul Gilbert on <https://www.lbcwisecounsel.com/resources/articles/#.XqVbgGhKg2x.>)

So, what might we be thinking about and what can we learn? What follows are some ideas that occur to me, both generally and in the context of the Charter. They are presented as a starting point. I hope they are useful at least to provoke further thought and reflection, and in the spirit of collaboration and shared learning that lies at the heart of the Charter I would encourage you to contribute your own so that we can, together, provide some guidance and wisdom for the challenging times to come.

### 1. Something has to give

Humans are generally very good at responding to a crisis. In the immediate aftermath of the lockdown people found ways of balancing all their old work responsibilities (and doing so in new ways) with everything else the new circumstances demanded of them. And it was wonderful to see how people adapted and took the initiative and permission to adjust their working hours, for example, to fit around new found child care duties, and felt able to announce the same on automated email responses – is it still relevant to think of these as Out of Office messages? Given the finite nature of time, however, the assumption must be that this came at a cost to our personal time and our sleep. This is not sustainable long term. We know this.

We need to move from a phase of disaster recovery into a mindset of developing a new and sustainable balance of activity and responsibility.

One of the businesses with which we work went out early on and spoke to every one of their employees to ascertain what their personal circumstances were and to discuss with them, as a result, what changes needed to happen with their work. If they are home schooling three children under ten, for example, then they cannot do their old full-time role. So, they agreed who would go on furlough, who would reduce the volume of their working hours, who would change the times they worked etc. Because, as the HR manager said to me, “our employees are best placed to judge what they can and cannot do, how to cope and what works for them”.

These are the open and honest conversations we all need to be having with ourselves and each other. Rather than a purely top down approach from the business to say that client demand is down and therefore we are reducing hours for everyone or whatever, take a more bottom up approach to understand what is realistically and sustainably possible for each individual in this new order and

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reconstruct the business model on that basis, or at the very least taking that into account. This is part of the openness and respect which forms the first of the Charter's pillars.

## 2. We are all in this together but our experiences are all very different

Building on the theme from 1 above, is the crucial realisation we all need to embrace and keep firmly in mind, that we are all experiencing this situation very differently. This is on many different levels.

Some of us are naturally more prone to anxiety than others. This can be from a whole range of factors, short and longer term. How we feel, therefore, right now will be very different. And how we respond, how we behave, will be very different.

If I am, for example, prone to obsessive compulsive behaviour to manage the anxieties we all always have around hygiene and health, then it would be absolutely understandable for that behaviour to be triggered right now and for me to be washing my hands to the tune of the full set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (or at least Wikipedia) rather than simply Happy Birthday.

Besides how we think and feel about the situation, our personal circumstances are all very different. Some of us may be locked down alone. Some may have children or others to care for. Some may be locked down with abusive partners, or at least flat mates we can tolerate for a few evenings a week when we happen to overlap on the sofa but with whom 24-hour incarceration was never intended or discussed. Some of us have comfortable and demarcated places to work at home with effective Wi-Fi and some do not. Some of us have the luxury of outside space to enjoy, and the courage to do so, while others do not. Others still will have underlying health conditions which mean they should not venture out.

We need to keep firmly in mind that my normal is not yours. And we need the curiosity and concern to enquire about and take on board each other's.

## 3. Be mindful about how you are

The inevitable consequence of the current situation is that we are all carrying around with us much more background anxiety than normal – some more than others but all of us more than normal. That has consequences. When we are anxious, we are primed for fight or flight. This means that vital energy and oxygen rich blood is being diverted away from our brain to the muscles in our arms and legs. As a result, our brains do not work so well. This physiological inevitability is why the Charter's focus on removing unnecessary stress is both good for our health but also for our effectiveness, our productivity. When our brains are deprived of that energy and oxygen it tends to be the prefrontal cortex that slows down first, meaning our cognitive functioning is reduced. This will be happening for all of us a lot of the time right now.

As a result, we need to be kind to ourselves and others and allow ourselves and them a bit more time to do things, and a bit more leeway perhaps to not always get them perfectly right. We also need to be mindful of the dangers of negative thinking traps – the catastrophising and more that we are all susceptible to, but which happens that much more when we are stressed. Learn if we can learn to stop, to take a breath and to challenge our thinking – not everything we think, not every thought we have, is true. And we also need to be aware that when we are stressed, when we are anxious, our body responds by ramping up our danger detectors – we are looking for, and likely to find, threats all over the place when perhaps there are none. We are much more likely to interpret other people as being aggressive to us and to respond in kind. Stop, breathe and think.

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#### 4. Be mindful in how you work with others

Central to everything the Charter stands for is the need to be mindful, to be thoughtful. The second pillar speaks to this in terms of meetings and emails and the third in terms of respecting rest periods. Now more than ever we need to reflect on this.

It may be great, for example, that a law firm partner, or client, has been able to adjust his or her working pattern to take the morning to look after the children while their wife or husband works, to then work the afternoon and early evening on client work. That must not mean that everyone around them, the lawyers they instruct, the team that work with or for them, has to do the same and to be available for them all evening. Those others have their own lives and their own requirements and responsibilities, and may well be working with other clients or other partners whose pattern involves working in the morning.

So, now more than ever, think about when and who you email or call. Think about whether proposed meetings are necessary and convenient for others. Have the conversation – talk to each other. The Charter provides a framework and a permission to have those conversations within and between our organisations and those conversations are more important now than they ever have been. And be clear on emails when they need to be read and actioned. Just as you are taking the opportunity to choose when is best for you to work, allow others that choice too. And maybe go one step further. Talk to your team about when they want to be working and instruct them, or at least give them very clear permission, to stick to that and to allow things to wait in their inbox.

#### 5. Be more thoughtful with your emails

When we communicate face to face with someone, a small part of our communication consists of the words we use. The remainder is our body language and our tone of voice. When we receive written communications all we have are the words, and we have to work out the rest. How we do that, what we infer, will be influenced very strongly by the mood we are in. If we are in a positive mood, then we are likely to interpret messages more positively. “In the old days” written communications in the workplace might go through several iterations before both author and typist were happy for them to go out. We took time and care to make sure the tone and message was as right as we could make it. We take less time and less care with emails (or texts or WhatsApp messages).

This is a problem at the best of times but is exacerbated at the moment because we are likely to be sending more emails and because of all that extra background anxiety we are carrying around because of the virus and all it involves. The person sending an email is more anxious, more stressed and therefore more likely to come across that way in their correspondence. At the same time the recipient is also more anxious, more stressed and more likely to interpret the communication negatively.

The result is a toxic mix which risks communications being very easily misunderstood leading to conflict and tension.

What we all need to do, therefore, is spend that much more time reflecting on what we are writing, taking care over it, and also that much more time and care reading and interpreting communications, perhaps always seeking to start with an assumption that the sender had positive intent when writing. It is that thoughtfulness that sits at the heart of the Charter.

#### 6. Sustainable work space and routines

Central to much of what the Charter aspires to is allowing us all to create boundaries around our downtime, to prevent our work becoming all pervasive. This is reflected in the second pillar around

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mindful communication but also in the third pillar around respecting rest periods. One very obvious consequence of the lockdown is that our work has completely invaded our home. Once again, we are all experiencing this differently. Some people may have a dedicated office space at home while others may find themselves working from their bed(room) or kitchen or lounge. And every time we Zoom or Skype or Facetime someone, we are letting them into that same space.

Our needs in this regard will be different, and what we are able to do about them will differ too. But we should all take time, and encourage those who work for us to take time, to reflect on how best to work safely and effectively in this new environment. Here are some thoughts:

- **Physical set up** – If large numbers of us are working from our bed, or the floor, or from a laptop perched on a pile of books, we run the risk of long-term musculoskeletal problems. Take the time and effort to create whatever safe working space you are able to. We are not all returning to our offices spaces any time soon. This is the new normal so make it as safe as possible. And be aware that, for example, working from our bed(room) risks training our brains no longer to associate the bed with sleep, thereby creating problems with our sleep which we all know is vital to our broader wellbeing as well as our mental health and our effectiveness when working.
- **Variation** – when we are in the office most of us will move around. We will go and talk to someone else, go to a meeting room, get up and get a drink, walk out of the office at lunchtime, walk to meetings etc. Too many of us now will find ourselves sitting for hour after VC filled hour hunched over our laptop. Get up, vary it, enjoy the opportunity to change things around.
- **Routine and rituals** – Many of us, whether we are aware of it or not, will have some routine and ritual about getting to our normal place of work and home again. And we take comfort in those routines and they help us switch between our work and our home selves. Try to ensure that we retain some routine and ritual - which may take more effort than usual now because we are the only ones holding ourselves to account for it.
- **Demarcation** – Inevitably with our new workspace either in or very close to our bedroom or lounge, for example, it becomes much more difficult, and therefore much more important, to demarcate between our work time and our downtime. How can I respect my rest periods when there is little if anything to mark when it starts or ends? If we are able to set aside a physical space for our work then this can obviously be a huge help and we can close the door on it when we are done. If we are having to work from our lounge or bedroom, however, it may be very helpful to decide when we are done for the day and to pack work away, out of sight, so we can relax without being reminded of it all of the time. Some people even find it helpful to go out of the house and walk round the block and arrive back at the front door at the start and end of their work day just to create that demarcation.

And finally in this regard, some of us, perhaps because we have fewer dependents to care for, and more time on our hands than we would like or know what to do with given the restrictions in place, may find weekends the most challenging times and may find that doing a bit of work at the weekend helps ease the uncertainty and possible lack of purpose. That may be a fine response in the short term but beware of allowing that to become a new normal which continues beyond the time when it serves a useful purpose.

## 7. The permission and responsibility to call things out

The Charter works because it is bilateral. If I as a client have signed up to the Charter to confirm my commitment, it gives permission to those providing services to me, whether third parties or my colleagues, to push back, to challenge me when I may be behaving in ways that are not consistent

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with the Charter's aspirations. It only works, however, if those others use that permission. The Charter thereby, perhaps, creates both a permission and responsibility to hold each other to account. We need to remind ourselves to both do this ourselves and to be receptive and approachable when it is being done to us. Our heightened collective anxiety means we are likely to be more defensive, more aggressive at the present time. The crisis should not, however, be used as an excuse for poor behaviour. The Charter is about removing unnecessary sources of stress in our working lives. For sure the crisis may have given rise to greater levels of unavoidable stress, which we will need to accept and respond to, but it will also have given rise to perceptions that everything is critical and that all resulting stress is unavoidable. This is not true and we need to be brave enough to challenge this perception when we encounter it (in ourselves and others) and wise and humble enough to accept the challenge when it is made to us.

## 8. Collective trauma and what comes next

I am not interested in trying to predict the future – one of the great challenges for our leaders right now is the uncertainty we all feel about the future, we just do not know what is going to happen and when. What I think we can be sure of, however, is that this ongoing experience represents one of the greatest collective traumas the world has experienced in decades. In terms of impact and longevity it surpasses the terrorist attacks around our cities that punctuated the early decades of this millennium. I suspect we might have to go back to the World Wars to find anything which impacted everyone in society, across the globe, so significantly.

As said earlier, humans are very good at dealing with the immediate crisis. Some of us, some of the time, are also able to learn and grow stronger as a result of traumatic experiences. Many people, however, and they are not weak or foolish, will experience different levels of ongoing psychiatric injury as a result of trauma – post traumatic stress disorder is the name commonly given to this condition. We all need to be aware, for ourselves and for those we work with and care for, that, for a great many of us, there will inevitably be a secondary pandemic of psychiatric pain and suffering as a result of this collective experience. It will not happen all at once. For some it may come early and for others they may seem to have emerged unscathed only for symptoms to appear months or years down the line. We need to build into our organisations the support and kindness to care for ourselves and our people now, through the uncertainty, anxiety and isolation, and for many years to come as we come to terms with and process what we have experienced, each in our different ways.

### In conclusion – be kind

All of this, I hope, makes sense, but it is not easy at the best of times. It is much more difficult, and much less likely to come naturally to us, to think about others and their needs and their normals when we are ourselves feeling anxious, under pressure and stressed. The Charter came into being partly, at least, as a reaction to a general drift towards being always on, always available. It encourages us to define and respect our own and others' boundaries and parameters. Covid-19 has been a step change in that drift as people have changed their working patterns to deal with the crisis and to accommodate our other responsibilities. It is vital that we do not allow the crisis to create a new and worse normal with all our boundaries removed. If we can uphold and stay firm to the Charter's pillars and aspirations, we should be better able to do so. It feels like, with so much, it comes down at the end to kindness and connection. And both of those begin with remaining kind to, and connected with, ourselves.

I said at the outset of these thoughts that they are a starting point. Please reflect and share those reflections so that we may, in the Charter's spirit of shared learning and collaboration, help each

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other find our collective way through, dealing with the challenges that the crisis creates as well as taking advantage of the opportunities it presents.

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