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# Leading Beyond the Pandemic

By Barbara Kay, LPC, RCC, TIPC

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MOBILE-FRIENDLY ARTICLE.



*Barbara Kay is a business psychology and productivity coach specializing in growth, productivity, teams, client relationships, behavioral finance, communication, change, and leadership. She serves financial services leaders, teams, and professionals nationwide.*

*Barbara is the author of numerous articles and two books, Top Performer's Guide to Change and The \$14 Trillion Woman. She holds dual degrees and credentials in clinical psychology and coaching. She can be reached at [barbara@barbarakaycoaching.com](mailto:barbara@barbarakaycoaching.com).*

**REMEMBER PUBLIC HEALTH** experts' mantra in the early days of the pandemic: "14 days to slow the spread"? The presentation of a focused threat flips our internal switch to high alert. This triggers a jolt of adrenaline, nature's caffeine. Like caffeine, a little jolt stimulates. Two years later, we're facing the aftereffects of nonstop threat stimulation.

What's the impact of high stress on your team? Imagine your entire team is suffering from mononucleosis. That's the impact of chronic stress—stress mono. Like mono, stress mono can cause a variety of aggravating symptoms. Some cases are severe, others milder. Yet, everyone experiences

persistent strain, and patience wears thin the longer it endures. That's the reality leaders and teams face today.

Fortunately, psychology has uncovered the keys to resilience under duress. I recommend leaders start with three steps to build team vitality: recognize, relate, and rebuild.

## Recognize

On the stress severity scale, the pandemic meets and exceeds the definition of trauma. It's been uncontrollable, unpredictable, inescapable, isolating, and unrelenting. This level of threat naturally triggers human survival reactions: flight, fight, freeze, and fold. Left unchecked, these affect work performance. Here's how they tend to show up:

**Flight:** Avoiding danger is the focus of the flight response. Those in flight mode may strongly resist returning to the office. They may be highly productive, just unwilling to leave home.

**Fight:** The fight approach is assertive. Those in fight mode may take back their pre-pandemic lives. They can feel frustrated with both safety measures and cautious peers.

**Freeze:** A deer in the headlights is the picture of the freeze response. High anxiety leads to difficulty performing. You may notice a lower ability to focus and execute. Formerly highly productive team members may be surprisingly less effective.

**Fold:** Folding is characterized by listless deflation. People who fold may seem apathetic or discouraged. Similar to those in freeze mode,

normal productivity may drop dramatically for those in fold mode.

All of these reactions are entirely normal. People may have a preferred response, or switch based on the circumstances. In addition, individuals will exhibit different responses based on their acquired resiliency. For some, the pandemic has been a tsunami of stress. They may have a severe case of stress mono. Those with acquired resiliency experience the trauma, but their symptoms are less severe.

Unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all way to lead people out of a crisis. The first step is to recognize that stress responses vary, and adapt accordingly. That's it. Moreover, it's essential to avoid labeling anyone as "stressed." This will do more harm than good. After quietly observing various individual stress responses, move on to the active resilience technique: relate.

## Relate

Active empathy reduces stress and builds connections. There is a tried-and-true method for expressing empathy: reflective listening. Happily, reflective listening is extremely effective and simple. There are two steps:

1. Quiet your internal mind-chatter and listen carefully to the person speaking. Notice both the facts and the feelings expressed.
2. In your own words, summarize what you heard, including the work and human elements.

A key to reflective listening is to hear with your heart. Stressed people are largely driven by emotion. Acknowledging emotional concerns is essential. Don't forget that acknowledging is not the same as agreeing. Never agree just to appear sympathetic. Instead, let the person know you heard their concerns. Imagine how they're feeling and relate to that. We don't have to agree with why they feel worried, frustrated, or discouraged to show genuine

concern over their distress. People value being heard and understood. It's powerful.

To lead people forward, practice the discipline of empathic acknowledging with reflective listening. It's good in every conversation, and essential when leading people toward resilience. Then continue with steps to rebuild.

## Rebuild

Over the course of the pandemic, I've been studying the impact of remote work on individuals and teams. In addition to social psychology research, I've heard first-hand accounts from financial services professionals across the country, in firms large and small. I've listened to leaders, advisers, and client-service, risk, and operations professionals share their experience of work during the pandemic. For many, remote work degrades teamwork and the overall work experience. Daily communication is fragmented into digital conversation bits, vastly decreasing efficiency while increasing volume and frustration. The loss of face-to-face dialogue exacerbates difficult conversations, creating more tension among peers. Video meetings require a level of attentive poise that is exhausting. Unrelenting screen time is abnormally sedentary and draining. At the same time, the positive shared experiences evaporate. Gone are the vital in-person connections that make working with peers more productive and enjoyable. Important bonds of empathic understanding and relational loyalty are severed by distance. Unless the people are highly skilled at virtual teaming, remote work decreases the fun and increases the aggravation of teamwork.

Making matters worse, the few gains of the pandemic are a result of not going to the office. As teamwork became more difficult, no commute and flexible work time became even more attractive. Given the loss of connection to the office team and

the pull of home interests, it's no wonder many feel disengaged from work.

It will take time to rebuild the positive elements of working together. Those back in the office will be much farther along than those still working remotely. Regardless, leaders can boost team bonding with three rebuilding techniques:

1. **Be optimistic and realistic.** Both negativity and positivity can be toxic to a team. Obviously, negativity depresses motivation. Excessive positivity ignores team challenges. It's the opposite of empathy. It undermines leader credibility and increases team cynicism. Instead, be both encouraging and honest about team challenges. Acknowledge and appreciate team efforts to unwind pandemic patterns.
2. **Make it fun and bonding.** There's a reason college freshmen experience a fun orientation. Orientation is designed to accelerate bonding to the campus and making new friends. It helps unhook from home and hook onto the college, so they don't quit. If freshmen went straight to classes, they'd just get the pain of hard work without the pleasure of friends; much like the pandemic experience of remote work.

Teams need to rebuild bonds lost during the last two years. If coming back to the office is nothing but a hassle, or worse, anxiety-producing, the negatives may easily overpower the positives. To rebuild attraction, create positive team experiences. Don't be surprised if it takes time for the team to reattach. That's normal. Being apart fractures human relationships. Bonding experiences can accelerate the renewal.

3. **Empower positive meaning and purpose.** There's a hierarchy to motivational incentives. External motivators such as gifts and cash are weak and lose power over time. The most

powerful are motivators tied to internal values. People will work long and hard for things that build a positive identity, meaning, and purpose. Conversely, they are demotivated by worthless busy work. Pandemic surveys show work satisfaction dropped dramatically as administrative tasks multiplied with remote work. The negative impact of burdensome busy work cannot be underestimated. It makes work much more painful.

Where possible, eliminate inefficient tasks as people return to the office. Reduce extra emails, unnecessary steps, burdensome bureaucracy, pointless meetings, and anything that gets in the way of significant accomplishments. In my professional opinion, many will resent taking time to travel to the office to face the same hassles they experienced at home. Do everything possible to make in-office work more meaningfully satisfying than remote work. Engage the team to maximize effectiveness and satisfaction. We all learned lessons during the pandemic. Use them to make in-office work more effective. In addition, engage the team to highlight the positive purposes of working together. The effort of coming to the office will be assuaged as people feel more effective and purposeful working in person.

Finally, I feel great empathy for leaders today. Leading a team out of the pandemic is tough. Chronic stress makes people much more reactive. They're likely to resist being cajoled, coerced, or compelled to follow orders. Look no further than the national conflicts over vaccines, masks, schools, and lockdowns for a prime example of how people erupt when pressured. Moreover, leaders have been under the same pandemic stress. While leading your team, engage support to build your resilience. You'll be happier and more successful as you lead your team in 2022. ■