



COVID19 – To get from fear to hope you need to build trust – take up your responsibility

PESSIMISM SEEMS TO HAVE TAKEN OVER

Whenever you open a newspaper these days you mostly find voices of pessimism. The economic downturn is the end of our economy, the end of democracy and maybe even of civilization per se. Also lobby-groups of all kind of professions talk about the support their clientele need to survive (don't get me wrong, I am not against economic support, it is definitely needed) – the total collapse of the world we know is getting closer and closer and no light at the end of the tunnel is in sight. (see my first essay on leadership and containment) The only light for most of the people comes with the actual reducing of the lock down. And even this light is darkened by the (realistic) worry that the opening up comes too soon and too fast.

By pessimism I rather mean a state of then a character or personality trait in contrast to optimism. This kind of **pessimism seems to serve all of us well** in the current crisis.

First is a good protection - against further disappointment and despair. Since you are prepared for the worse you feel safer whilst reducing your expectations to lowest possible level. You are preparing for the loss of income, your job, your money, luck – maybe now you are preparing for the loss of individual and societal freedom and even democracy. Only then you get the feeling of being in control – because you are preparing yourself. In this way pessimism also protects you against the underlying fear and the connected helplessness and powerlessness.

However, pessimism does not really help us deal with the fear behind it, it is just covering up this emotion. Also, it detaches you from necessary action – which of course in light of the pessimistic outcome would not make sense anyway.

There are a number of risks inherent in that attitude:

1. **pessimism is contagious** as well as fear – it can be and will be spread easily. Social as well as traditional media will contribute since it is their self-chosen task as sensation seekers preferring to distribute messages with an utmost disturbing content or headline.



In addition, people tend to **jump on the pessimism bandwagon** and are often afraid to share an opinion different from the others.

2. **Pessimism impedes action** – the fear behind as well as pessimism itself rather paralyzes than activate. It also makes you **resignate** – no effort can help you out of your situation, it is not worth doing something.
3. Pessimism is **difficult to leave behind**, it opens up a downward-spiral of focusing on the negative, neither seeing nor realizing any positive developments – the confirmation bias kicks in.

In summary, when we start falling into pessimism, we are trapped in the feeling of helplessness, powerlessness and in the illusion of “non-agency”. This could even lead us to capitulate to the virus. This sounds like a very risky situation in these times of crisis. If we focus on its opposite, we will become more thinking and action oriented.

THERE IS AN ALTERNATIVE – HOPE IS KEY

First, we need to understand that pessimism is a defence against fear and the accompanying pain. Fear is at the core of COVID 19 and any other crisis. Before this downward spiral might take over and before we are eaten up by fear and pessimism, we have to rescue ourselves. Let us look at **the flipside of fear – it is hope**, as the American Philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes it. Fear and hope have some aspects in common: both involve evaluation of an outcome as very important, great uncertainty about this outcome and some lack of control or passivity. The major difference is the focus: fear focuses on the bad outcome and **hope focuses on the good outcome** that may occur.

If we do not want to be condemned to inaction, more fear, more pessimism, we need to find a way to develop **practical hope** which motivates us to take action toward a goal or an outcome we find important and valuable and which seems to or gets within reach. Of course hope as an emotion and state of mind - when you can see the famous half glass water of being more full than empty – cannot be prescribed. Instead it needs a base from which it can develop and grow.



Pessimism as well as hope in times of a large and complex crisis like covid19 are a social phenomenon. This means that all of us on every level are easily seduced to be pessimistic by our psychic defense system – hence, as good as we can and as it makes sense we have to fight against pessimism and work for hope. Many people, organizations, institutions will be involved. (Think of this wonderful song which has received new attention: You will never walk alone). **Hope grows when people are together** who already feel a little bit or a moment of hope – it needs communion and exchange. Maybe you could observe this within yourself when watching all these beautifully designed videos by people from different countries e.g. playing a concert together, this created hope for solidarity, communion and empathy. And **you as a leader you have a special role in working for hope** – since you as a leader are always a role model, people look at you and observe what you say and how you act.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO CREATE AN AMBIENCE OF HOPE?

1. First you need to find some hope within yourself

Practical hope is not just there as such and is not a dry exercise, it needs to focus on an important goal and outcome. Some actions shall be connected to it and also the (maybe also far-fetched) possibility to reach this goal.

The first inner step to open up yourself for hope is self-containment. You need to be able to detect, read and manage your emotions of fear and anxiety and you need to understand at which point pessimism starts kicking in.

You could first try to look around you, often you find on a daily encounter **somebody who is willing to share his hope** and how they cope. They can act as role model for you – this is what you want to be yourself as a leader. In that or independently you should try to find good reasons for hope. You could start to think about future outcomes of the actual crisis – from individual to global level. The actual uncertainty is so high that many different developments are possible. Choose a negative and a positive plausible path for a long-term development in your industry or sector. Then **deduct and integrate possible and differing strategies, goals and actions** – for your organization or for the part you are responsible.

When you are too pessimistic yourself you might need other people to do that together with you – differences in gender, background, age might help to go beyond your own perception of the actual situation. At the end of this first step you might realize that different



perspectives offer already some hope. You might want to choose one, but also remember the others to later “adjust your hope” - if the external world changes.

2. Trust is the most important ingredient for hope

Without trust no hope. Hope needs both, somebody or something to make or take the action into the direction of the desired outcome and trust, that they will be the right driver. It could be you, a leadership team, the company or even some favorable circumstances or from a religious perspective God who have to be trusted. You as a leader you certainly want to inspire others with the hope you have developed for yourself. What you now need is the trust of these other that you as a leader can make it.

Trust is very important in our globalized world of personal and ... exchanges, it is needed for all kind of social constructs, be it families, organizations, institutions - wherever task or labor are distributed. However, it is a delicate and fragile emotion - it takes a long time to develop but it is quickly and easily destroyed.

Not knowing each other, trust develops over time by repeated actions which entail for example keeping promises, do what you say/walking the talk – trust needs to be earned, as one says. But sometimes you need to get or give a credit of trust - when there is no time to build it but social rules and regulations as well as similar experiences in the past might indicate that there is a good reason for trust (a brand name, a guarantee or promise, role or personal authority, biographical evidence etc). If you look at your organization, you might want to think about how people judge you(r organization) now and in the future after the crisis. For example, it is more trust-building to help others in need in times of COVID19 then to make funny or cynical commentaries on twitter.

If successful, trust leads to feeling secure, safe and well contained. But trust is easily undermined by insecurity and can then switch back into fear. Trust also means vulnerability and exposure for the ‘truster’ with the fear to be taken advantage of by the trustee. As a leader wanting to build trust you need to take that into account – people need time and some kind of “proof” for your personal or organizational trustworthiness – the best is to start and act with authenticity, integrity and empathy. People want to deal with the real you



(authenticity), they want to make sure that you have a moral compass which you do not lose out of sight when they are not there (integrity) and they want to feel that you care about them (empathy). It is not a question for me here that you have the right technical and cognitive capabilities which you need.

3. Building trust by assuming your very responsibility

Authenticity, integrity and empathy are important ingredients to build trust and can be best described with one word – taking the **responsibility for what you say and what you do**. This notion refers back to a philosophical meaning of responsibility. Literally it means to be able and to be willing to giving a response about what you said or did. To whom to give a response? It can reach from an inner reply to your own conscience (or God) to an outer response for example to your co-workers, your clients, stakeholders, partner as well as ultimately to a judge.

When **you give a proper response about your thoughts**, aims, goals and motifs behind your action this can create trust. In replying openly, honestly and from a personal stance you will receive trust. When asking your inner censor or your conscience it can help you to find out whether you should take or not take an action. When assuming responsibility in this sense it also means that you imagine ahead possible questions and outcomes – it therefore will shape your actions to the better.

An essential element in trust building is **to reflect on purpose**. Purpose is important on the individual level as well as on the organizational. Although I am not a fan of the widespread “purposology”, as a psychologist and analyst I know how frightening a life appears when there is a general fear of void and emptiness lurking around by the worry of losing (or having already lost) the job. For many of us life without work is a life without purpose. For identity, self-stabilization and self-confidence most people need work or a meaningful other task to survive psychologically healthy. When considering and integrating purpose in your endeavor for hope you work against this fear.

This important role of work and task fulfillment has a number of implications for you as a leader:



- a) **meaning and purpose need to be discussed on top level** for the whole of the organization as well as for its parts, talk and share your ideas of purpose, strategy and goals in a transparent and holistic fashion (silo- thinking is old fashioned)
- b) you need to think **about how to bring as many people as you can to a meaningful** work within or beyond your organization
- c) the people who have lost their job are about to lose an important aspect of their humanness and feel hurt in their dignity – maybe there **are ways of supporting the employment of the now unemployed** from and for your organization?

Another way of supporting the development of trust is to **use creative spaces and work with art**. In times of crisis our thinking and feeling tends to narrow down to reduce the pain of anxiety and to support us coping. However, we would need all our creativity to find new ways of thinking about what it is our organization shall offer as product or service. Some can shift their production to different products (e.g. Triumph which had produced underwear now shifts partly to masks), others start additional and completely new services (e.g. some companies build plastic shields for protection) or even re-invent themselves (e.g. transforming a cocktail bar into a soup kitchen for the poor). These creative innovation-oriented processes are not that easy to establish. But what could help is a fresh look from outside of the organization **for example from artists**. Either you let yourself be inspired or you invite them for a session with your management team. This could also mean to start as a management team with some art creation to open up your mind and thinking.

The main message of this essay is that **you have to win the fight for hope against pessimism**. Pessimism is a destructive force which will narrow down your thinking and inhibit your actions. The underlying fear stems from high uncertainty in this crisis. When needs are not met for some time and no hope exists to have them fulfilled at least one day in the future, destructive emotions like anger and envy can develop. This can lead to negative actions against minorities to punish them for their unmet needs. Populism will be nourished by this development. Instead of falling into this trap, hope needs to be developed by first looking for hope within yourself and then work on it together with others by looking for allies and being a role model. They need to trust you and a good base for that will be taking up your responsibility in the philosophical sense of being empathic, authentic and integer. Looking for a wider purpose and integrating art are essential parts of this process.