

When Trust is Broken: Reconnecting to Purpose in a Post-COVID World

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Back in 1994, Mauro Prosperi, then 39, [decided to compete in the Marathon des Sables](#), a six-day, 250 kilometer race across the Sahara. As a former Olympic pentathlete, he wasn't unprepared.

The race is perhaps the most risky in the world—so much so that participants have to sign a death waiver. To mitigate the risks, however, the event is carefully organized, with regular checkpoints and access to a medical team.

Yet, despite these precautions, it is impossible to predict every scenario. So on the fourth day of the race, when a violent sandstorm kicked up, Prosperi was forced to improvise. Although he tried to keep running, he kept getting buried in sand. Eventually, he crouched in a sheltered spot to wait out the storm, which lasted eight hours.

When he resumed the race the next morning, he used his compass and map to navigate his route, believing he would soon meet up with other participants. Recalling the moment, he said, "I didn't know I was lost."

What followed was a harrowing and terrifying ten day stumble through the desert as he gradually depleted all his supplies, before ultimately finding an oasis where he was spotted by a young shepherd girl. He later discovered that he had crossed the border from Morocco into Algeria, having gone 291 kilometers off course.

From the vantage of 2021, Prosperi's experience holds several critical lessons for today's organizations, many of which are running the toughest race of their existence.

The widening gap between walk and talk

Although the current race organizational leaders find themselves in is more metaphoric than literal, the harsh conditions they must contend with are very real.

Without question, COVID-19 has taken a severe toll. Over the past year, many people have been working at a pace that few consider sustainable. Many others have faced extended furloughs, layoffs and potentially unprecedented financial difficulties. Throughout, organizations were being judged on the adequacy of their responses—from the

safety measures they adopted and their flexible work policies to their stance on mental health and support for local communities. Adding fuel to the fire is the fact that the pandemic is just one crack in the corporate superstructure.

In truth, the foundations that underpin most organizations have been steadily eroding for some time. On the one hand, technological disruption has fundamentally altered the way in which organizations deliver value, calling into question the role that people will play in the workplace of the future. On the other hand, organizations are under mounting pressure to adhere to higher standards of behaviour around a wide range of social issues. Take, for instance, organizational performance around climate change, which is now being tracked by a growing number of investment funds focused on environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors. In 2020 alone, [Canadians poured \\$740 million into these funds](#), up from \$142 million in 2019.

Widespread protests around police brutality and systemic racism have also put matters of social justice onto the corporate agenda. [People around the world](#) are now demanding that organizations start walking their talk by eliminating engrained patterns of racism, sexism and discrimination. Consider: Calvert Research and Management, a global leader in responsible investing with over US\$26 billion in assets under management, is asking companies to assess and disclose their racial diversity, their pay-equity practices across race and gender and their stance against brutality.

Taken together, these forces have pushed many leaders into a purely reactive mode. Like Prosperi, they are being buffeted by a violent sandstorm that may be unwittingly throwing them off course. The upshot? Rather than holding true to longstanding corporate values, many have inadvertently lost their way.

This disruption of the organizational narrative is jarring not just for employees, but for external stakeholders as well. Countless individuals—from workers to customers to investors—have spent the past year recalibrating their personal priorities and are coming to recognize that they cannot stay true to their own values if the companies they work for, buy from and invest in don't share those values. Businesses that have veered from their core identity in recent months or years are consequently at risk of losing the loyalty of the very people responsible for their success.

To find the way back from this precipice, leaders will need to rebuild trust by reconnecting to their organization's core values, strengthening their corporate identity and reclaiming the organizational narrative. Let's explore how to get from here to there.

The long path home

As fuzzy as an organization's "identity" may sound, its power to motivate cannot be ignored. [Organizations that are truly purpose-driven](#) don't simply have more passionate employees; they also consistently deliver above-average growth and profits. Although there is no one-size-fits-all approach for clarifying your "why", there are some tried-and-true steps you can take.

Shine a light on your internal value system

Every day in business, people are presented with situations that have no easy answers. Should you walk away from projects where you can't add true value, even if a client really wants to work with you? Should you hire a vendor who charges less, even if their quality is a bit substandard? Should you pass on the costs of your sustainability initiatives to your customers? Should you protect your cash flow by extending your payables, even if it puts small suppliers at a disadvantage?

Without clear direction on how to resolve these thorny issues, people are generally left to their own devices. This does more than cause confusion among your staff. It also sometimes results in missteps that can escalate into corporate scandals.

A common struggle leaders face in this regard is maintaining a balance between short-term pressures and long-term purpose. Public companies, in particular, [often find themselves penalized by the market](#) for failing to meet quarterly targets—frequently inducing leaders to sacrifice economic value simply to hit short-term earnings expectations. This behaviour, in turn, sends a signal to staff about the organization's values, leading to the deleterious conclusion that it's okay to cut corners to meet momentary goals. This is arguably the first step on the slippery slide towards ethical misconduct—and it is by no means confined to public companies.

To avoid this corrosion of purpose, it is essential for organizations to clarify their guiding principles. Admittedly, this is easier said than done. To identify deeply-seated corporate values, executive teams must be prepared to engage in some tough dialogue. You'll need to pinpoint not only the ethical quandaries to which your business is subject, but also the trade-offs you are willing to make to do the right thing. Delving into these issues can be emotionally confrontational, but it's a critical exercise for leaders serious about aligning organizational values to those held by their key stakeholders.

This is particularly important for organizations that have adopted new operational approaches in response to the pandemic. Many businesses have made short-term compromises to accommodate a vastly altered working environment. While some of these changes may be beneficial, others are less so. Deciding now which practices to codify and which to shelve will likely save you considerable difficulty down the road.

Reframe the organizational narrative

To foster the level of trust and collaboration required to recover from the current crisis, authentic leadership will be key. Authentic leaders are those who possess [a strong internal leadership narrative](#)—one that allows them to align their actions to their core values and beliefs. Yet developing your personal narrative—what we call the narrative of Self—is only the first step. To mobilize others, leaders must also actuate a shared team narrative (the narrative of Us) and connect it to a compelling call to action ([the narrative of Now](#)).

In reconnecting to the organizational narrative—the narrative of Us—it can be helpful for leaders to revisit the core challenge and vision that drove the organization's founders. By identifying the shared experiences that have given

the organization strength, and the collective values that guide your actions, you can tap back into a shared narrative designed to propel everyone forward towards a desired future.

That “desired future” is the subject of the narrative of Now and can be elicited by asking questions such as:

- What are the most urgent challenges facing our organization?
- What are the threats to our values and core purpose?
- What can we achieve if we take immediate action?
- What may happen if we fail to act?
- What actions must we collectively take?

In reframing the organizational narrative, consider too what types of stories might motivate team members. Right now, many people are tired and angry. They have lost their internal compass and their trust has been shaken. Odds are they won't be galvanized by a narrative that mirrors the current sense of fear and insecurity featured in the daily news. Instead, it's up to leaders to craft a narrative of hope and resilience by emphasizing the collective power of the community to overcome adversity. Prosperi would have never found his way home if he had given up hope. What propels us forward is the promise of a better tomorrow.

The middle way

In many ways, we are navigating a chapter of history characterized by sustained trauma. Technological disruption, fear for the environment, pandemic-driven turmoil, political unrest and justified anger over social injustice have rocked both personal and organizational foundations. If we are to heal, both as individuals and as a society, we must work together to rebuild a culture of trust.

This will likely require leaders to maintain a delicate balance. On the one side, it is time to turn the page on the upheaval of recent years by committing to organizational and executive renewal. On the flip side, it remains important to acknowledge and celebrate the major changes organizations have embraced amid the chaos. In seeking closure, leaders should take care not to negate the heroic contributions that have underpinned their latest progress. Ultimately, leaders must find a way to blend long-held organizational values with a renewed sense of purpose.

It will take courage to walk this middle way. The courage to look past short-term pressures to embrace long-term values. The courage to cede a portion of our own gain to remain true to our beliefs. The courage to admit that, despite consulting our compass and map, we are lost. And the courage to ask for help in finding our way back to the centre.

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