

# Life and management in the time of Covid-19

(with thanks to Gabriel Garcia Marquez)

## Christina Schwabenland



*These last few weeks have been extraordinary in so many ways. Things that seemed impossible (clean air in London) are now commonplace while things we took for granted, like meeting friends in a restaurant, now seem vanishingly unlikely. When lockdown began in mid-March I, probably along with everyone else, fixed my mind on when it would be over and life would go back to 'normal'. Now we are all asking whether that will ever happen – and of course, whether we even want that 'normal' to return.*

### **Dreading a return to a previous 'normal'**

Because, while the horrific death toll represents unimaginable grief and loss, there have also been so many, unexpected delights which I don't want to lose. I'm now beginning to dread the return to normal, there are some aspects of 'normal' I hope we can see off for good.

My preoccupation for many years has been in how to make organisations more humane. And for many of us this has suddenly happened! I think I'm not the only one who has experienced a sea change in work relationships. Overnight, it seemed, hitherto adversarial relationships became transformed by gratitude, generosity, a taken for granted recognition that we are all doing our best and sometimes making mistakes. The so called 'blame culture' has, at least temporarily, been replaced with trust.

### **The fragility of possibilities**

I know these changes might be very ephemeral if we don't try to capture them. Already those early moments of insight are beginning to fade, the rhetoric is changing; cleaners, people stocking shelves in grocery stores, cleaning streets, collecting rubbish are gently disappearing from view again; for a brief while they became visible as the people that keep society civilised, keep us well-fed, clean, and cared for. We 'saw' them in stark relief when everyone else (even homeless people, temporarily lodged in hotels) disappeared into virtual zoom-land. For a brief few weeks there seemed to be an emerging national, and mostly international consensus about what really matters; we'd been re-balanced.

So I think it is even more important that we resist this loss of insight. Those moments of solidarity mattered and matter.

## **Glimpses of generosity**

### **At work**

The first thing I noticed when my work as an academic went on-line and my trip to the office required walking up one staircase, was that suddenly generosity seemed to permeate nearly all of my work conversations. People were kind to each other, always asking first about each other's health before any other topic; acknowledging that when people are dying and their family and friends are isolated and at risk, it is not 'business as usual'. We are not dispensable; on the contrary we are interconnected; we may be working in isolation but the awareness of our mutuality and inter-dependency was, at least for a while, acute. If you think someone might be dead before you talk to them again it sharpens the mind.

### **Locally**

Generosity has also permeated the day-to-day life in my local community; the generosity of all the self-organising cells of volunteers (so much more effective than the government's top-down '*Volunteer for the NHS*' initiative). There are the local businesses offering services for free or with huge discounts to NHS workers, the mobs of mask makers, restaurants turning their kitchens over to produce meals for local people who need them.

We have also become very skilled at recognising each other in much greater complexity; as parents home-schooling children while preparing graduate courses for on-line delivery; cat lovers whose pets occasionally sit down on the keyboard or demand dinner loudly; sadly also as people grieving and anxious; managing real or threatened losses of unimaginable pain. We are creative people singing on-line, taking up drawing classes, finding ever new ways of keeping children engaged and happy, mental health workers looking after ours and others well-being. And employers have to see us, if not in our entirety, then at least as much more multi-faceted people. And interestingly, I don't think many of us have felt diminished as professionals because other aspects of our identities have moved into our work space.

## **A chance to re-write our business?**

The experiences of the last few weeks should (but perhaps may not...) lead to a major rewriting of business school curricula and teaching and learning methods (?). While critical scholars, postcolonial researchers and environmental activists may all have been cautioning us against too enthusiastic support of 'globalisation', the need for more locally organised production, especially of food, must be pretty obvious. The valorisation of the corporate sector, especially in relations to the 'inefficient' public and non-profit sectors requires a rethink as well. And as for reward management – who can really argue now that senior managers 'deserve' huge pay increases while support workers, cleaners, NHS staff barely 'deserve' the living wage? What does 'presenteeism' look like when we are all on-line?

Yesterday I was out for a walk and found this sheet of flip chart paper attached to a bus shelter with a pen hanging beside it. I googled [@justpythia](#) and it seems these have appeared all over London, but I couldn't find out anything more about who justpythia is. What's really interesting are the comments; 'better work life balance', 'universal basic income', 'more part time and flexible working'. There were a few comments about climate change too, but the majority were about changing the way we organise work, and making it more humane.

## Shifts

### Ups and downs

But my moods are very febrile. At times I feel very hopeful that this strange experience has brought communities together and caused a major re-evaluation of what is important in our lives. At other times I feel very discouraged and also depressed; too many weeks without holidays to look forward to.

One of the strangest experiences of these past weeks is that moods, reflections, sensemaking shift and change from moment to moment. This really is an unprecedented event; for all that I like the idea of 'emergence' experiencing it in the moment is something else again!

### Parking and noticing

Every morning I go for a walk. There is a park nearby with two ponds and over the weeks the ponds have seen an explosion of new life; ducklings, goslings cootlings. There is a swan nesting on an island, so signets soon too, I hope. These funny, fuzzy little creatures are having a wonderful time learning how to dive down into the water for food, setting off on their own for an adventure and then suddenly swimming back fast to join the group. There is death there as well as life; some of the babies do not survive. Other park walkers and joggers also stop at the ponds and we comment to each other about this or that little family as if we'd known each other for years. Lockdown is making friends out of strangers; perhaps the best experience of all.



Flipping on the side of a bus shelter: photo: Christina Schwabenland



Making friends out of strangers: photo: Christina Schwabenland

### About the author

**Christina** convenes the Humanistic Management Network's UK Chapter, ably supported by the steering group: Paul Harrison, Bob MacKenzie, Ruth Slater and Ilaria Boncori. She teaches at the University of Bedfordshire, and has an on-going passion for making organisations more humane.

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