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Leading Sustainability Change Vlog

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WORDS (1913)

Hello, I'm Pauline Conaghan, a Sustainability professional at NYU Abu Dhabi, and this is my VLOG on Leading Sustainability Change: The Challenge of Adapting to a New Norm.

The Coronavirus pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on our lives affecting global health, global businesses, governments and the global economy with the impact being dramatic, rapid and pervasive. It is hard to imagine that the Pandemic began with

a small cluster of less than 30 cases and in less than five months has grown to over 2.7 million cases according to today's figures.

Currently almost all countries have reported cases of COVID-19 and the expectation is the whole world will be affected by this disease. Social Scientists refer to moments when natural changes affect communities differently as “natural experiments” that can lead to insights and discoveries that are otherwise confined to laboratory or theoretical methodologies.

As Blake Thompson from Oxford University puts it:

“The COVID-19 pandemic may be the first truly global natural experiment of the modern, ‘big data’ era.”

Such natural experiments could enable diverse studies to be conducted.

From a leadership perspective, we can already observe that this health crisis has led to diverse reactions from different organizations sparking further innovation. As we observe the current crisis unfolding, we can see effects on organizations that are built on a culture of innovation and risk taking versus one built more on safeguarding or risk aversion.

Retrospectively there will be opportunities to study and test how these modes of leadership will have proven more or less effective, but I will focus on some initial observations that are already surfacing.

This unprecedented “natural experiment” will have a deep impact on the landscape of organizations: some will unfortunately be affected so deeply that they may not survive and others will survive and perhaps even thrive at the end of this period. Those enterprises that do thrive will more likely be those that have embedded innovative and adaptive thinking into their culture already.

This is especially true in areas where competition has been high and where a sustainable agenda has pushed them to adapt to changing environments. Whilst this period will be difficult, in the long run, these evolutionary changes will have a positive impact on a sustainable agenda in the future.

COVID-19 is accelerating the progression towards a new norm. Lockdowns and social distancing are having a deep impact on the way we work and live. Some of these experiences will be temporary but others may be welcome and more permanent. We cannot escape this new reality of adjusting to a world that looks very different from what we were experiencing only a few months ago - we are now working from home (WFH), homeschooling our children and not able to see many of the people we love.

And those who have the means to work or homeschool are extremely lucky as we are finding now that these new norms don't exist for everyone. We may be in the same storm but not in the same boat. Therefore leaders of organizations and governments will need to focus on giving every employee and member of society access to the tools that will accelerate this transformation for society.

Businesses that have been able to switch to remote working have been able to maintain activities and so far have avoided having to pay off their staff altogether. NYUAD is such an organization and while the vision and mission of the University is built on the premise of small classrooms with individualized attention and advanced research capacity, all activities of instruction moved fully online within 4 days. This has enabled maintaining operations and the educational mission and also at the same time, keeping the community safe on our residential campus. This possibility was due partly to an already developed infrastructure that enabled hundreds of courses to move online very quickly. NYUAD's experience is shared by all educational institutions in the UAE. Like other businesses that are built on in person service, the ability to move online was critical for the continuity of the academic mission.

In the US, remote working enabled business continuity to a level that is estimated that without it, according to Global Workplace Analytics, productivity would have decreased by a staggering \$30 Billion/day. In addition, Global Workplace Analytics predicts that 25-30% of the workforce will be working from home multiple days a week by the end of 2021.

The trend of remote working is accelerating and is likely to become a new norm much more rapidly. In their "State of Remote Work" report of 2019, Buffer reported that 99% of surveyed respondents who worked already for companies that enabled some remote work answered "yes" to the question "would you like to work remotely, at least some of

the time, for the rest of your career?” In some respect, therefore, the COVID-19 crisis has been a huge awareness campaign and advocate for remote working that is likely to lead to a true transformation in the way work will be done in the future. Further supporting the economic arguments is the result of several studies that showed most parameters of efficiency and work-life balance were better when at least “some” work was enabled remotely.

The impact of this trend on greenhouse gas emission due to less traffic is staggering. As the report from Global Workplace Analytics also states:

“The annual environmental impact of half-time remote work (for those who both want to work remotely and have a compatible job) would be the greenhouse gas equivalent of taking the entire New York State workforce off the road.”

This data lead Kate Lister, President of Global Workplace Analytics to conclude:

“There is no easier, quicker, and cheaper way to reduce your carbon footprint than by reducing commuter travel.”

NYUAD, like all organizations and companies around the world, is dealing with this new reality, with reduced budgets to continue its mission. Some resources however will be directed towards something new to respond to the COVID-19 crisis in terms of research, tools for rapid testing and detection. We are hopeful that universities through research and science will be part of the solution. However, the University announced this week that students will no longer have summer study opportunities as this is not part of their

academic progress. This was a tough decision made as a collective by all university leadership groups and the communication was sent accordingly, in a warm personal way signed off by each individual leader. This will ultimately be difficult for many of our international students who are funded by the University as they may not be able to or had even planned to go back to their home countries. Some had been relying on this type of transition until new roles were secured. Internships and job offers around the world are now fewer for all graduates like them, and international opportunities are not what they were.

The UAE and NYUAD, are known for their wonderful leaders and many partnerships and collectives are formed in working on a range of issues especially in education and research, community engagement, sustainability and environmental issues. COVID-19 is the top priority and through science, engineering and innovative entrepreneurship, they are working around the clock on leading initiatives in developing testing, devices and providing the best care possible. Examples include:

The 2020 NYUAD International Hackathon for Social Good in the Arab World's winning submission by a team who developed website that helps hospitals employ medical workers during staffing shortages

And also Drone Technology to Make Grocery Shopping Safer designed to help those self-isolating receive their full list of groceries.

In tackling such an enormous crisis never seen before in our life times, our leaders demonstrate traits such as: calm, authority, resilience, relentlessness, trust and honesty, and the ability to show empathy. At the same time, there is no shying away from doing things better.

During this global health crisis and pandemic, the time for unlocking the lockdowns that we have now become accustomed to is being pushed to later and later in the year denying us of much needed hope but these tough decisions are made to ensure our safety.

Some countries and states are planning to open up sooner than they should thereby providing even more **uncertainty** to a very complex issue despite medical and scientific advice and recommendations. It is these health professionals we are eternally grateful to for their tireless work as well as risking their own lives to look after our sick suffering from COVID-19. In addition, many are working with scientists on developing a vaccine or a cure with human trials having just begun in the UK yesterday - again people leading and being part of the solution. However, according to the latest UK Government News Conference, Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty, says there is the likelihood that a vaccine won't be available until at least the end of the year. As a leading medical expert, a Sky News survey says Britons trust Dr Whitty most to lead on this issue.

Seven weeks ago, I was finalizing a Sustainability Report on Embedding Sustainability at NYUAD and outlining our achievements. At the time I was also noting conversations

focused on unprecedented closures of schools and universities followed by businesses, travel and malls as the UAE leadership took the initiative and every precaution to contain the spread of the Coronavirus.

The UAE and world leaders are constantly engaging in what is real in this crisis; identifying **adaptive** challenges; facilitating ongoing adjustments as discoveries are made; and orchestrating adaptive work for people to shift their values, ways, practices, and priorities to deal with these real issues.

We are now in an unprecedented recession and fall in economic activity around the world with government bailouts. An effective vaccine is one way out and the search for a vaccine is eagerly awaited. But the world needs global leaders, old and new, to come together to support NGOs such as the World Health Organization. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown is calling for global cooperation with the EU, Japan, Canada, Korea, Norway and the UK in the search for a vaccine, building up capacity, and to always keep trying, with or without the US. It is a double crisis of health as well as economic, and both are enormous in their own right. The stakes are very high and we cannot give up, said Gordon Brown on CNN with Christiane Amanpour. It is vital that leaders identify ways collectively.

Humanity has a way to find positives in the harshest of realities - there are leaders in all of us. We only have to look at Captain Tom Moore's fundraising efforts for the NHS,

raising £28.5 million so far and so many people want to be a part of what's needed in a time of crisis.

And in the UAE, we receive daily messages on our phones reminding us to isolate and today, in recognition of Ramadan, for the first time, we received a message of encouragement from Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince:

... I remain grateful for your patience, resilience and kindness in these unprecedented times. Together we can ensure the safety of our cherished families, friends and communities by continuing to practice the necessary precautionary measures. As one, we will overcome this pandemic ...

A beautiful demonstration of leadership and support during these turbulent times. Let's hope that light at the end of the tunnel will appear soon ...

Thank you!