

MCM.

MCM Insights.

Extreme Agile Survival Guide:
Spatial Distance not Social Distance

MARCH 20TH 2020





We are living through unprecedented times and many companies are adapting by adopting agile or flexible work practices. Even for those already on agile platforms, with the correct enabling technology and infrastructure, you are likely to be working the extreme limits of agile and wondering how to keep the show on the road with a geographically dispersed workforce against such a backdrop of uncertainty and change.

As the majority of businesses push through into the unknown, we want to continue serving our clients and future clients by sharing our experience and best practice in the form of this survival guide.

Our aim is to distil our science-backed recommendations into simple and pragmatic to-dos to help your organisation support your people on the ground who will keep the engine running – no matter where they are logging on.

Build Connection, Maintain the Tribe.

We are wired for social connection and our biology is still set to 'belong' to a tribe. Those working at home may already be sharing concerns about feeling isolated and alone or out of the loop. Many of us have already adapted to use technology to create 'belonging' and connection through social media and technology. Now is a great time to leverage that! Some suggestions:

Morning huddles: A 15-minute video-call with your team as a check-in every morning (at least for the first week) to kick-start the day with connection. A check-in on how everyone is and that they have what they need. Take detailed task related chat off-line or on a separate call – the goal here is to keep team connection. Banter, joking and shared experience is the aim so resist temptation to jump straight into work.

Virtual Tea-breaks: (or 5pm beer break!): Could be optional or orchestrated, everyone makes a cuppa and just spends 15min 'catching up' to replace the tea-point chat. You could add a 'menu of themes' for discussion. It might be useful for a senior leader to 'host' one or two to also handle any questions or queries. Or make it even more social - build in a daily Virtual Lunch.

Building in a connection buffer: it happens naturally so best to build it in and pro-actively manage it! The first ten minutes of your meeting gets spent on the latest update on Covid-19/ the news/ what a particular company is doing/ speculating what happens next. People are trying to make sense of what is happening and their experience of it. They may NEED to talk to process it. Don't try and short cut this, facilitate it and then firmly move it into work-task territory. (Less need for this is you have morning huddle)

Virtual office buddy: Missing your over-the-desk banter? One solution is to leave your Teams or Hangouts connection open and be present virtually. All the advantages of sitting with your team in the office, with all the benefits of being able to mute them when you really need to get into focused concentration mode.

As a leader – get your own back-up in place. Create an inner circle and ensure your basic needs are being met. It's the old oxygen mask analogy: make sure you have one and it's got a good supply.



Protect existing routines and rituals – if necessary, build new ones.

We are programmed to create habits, long term habits become traditions. They bring us comfort and routine. Our brains love these cognitive short-cuts as they reduce our processing load. Right now, a number of our personal and professional habits are being scrambled and we find ourselves having to do new things in new ways. Do not underestimate how mentally tiring and potentially disorientating this might be. There are specific things you can do to help:

Maintain or create rhythms: Uphold and maintain key meetings times and dates - just shift the channel to online. It will help everyone to keep familiar anchor points in the week around which they can flex.

Use familiar touchpoints where you can: Social Team, IT Support, Office Manager, Reception...make sure the familiar faces who play those comforting “go to” roles in your organisation stay present and visible virtually.





Create informal channels and stoke the flames: Remember the ice bucket challenge? We're not suggesting that you go there again, but there are lots of ways of building new and positive habits and getting the virtual office talking at the same time. Replace Monday lunchtime Run Club with a virtual step challenge. Competitions of most unusual agile workplace snaps. You get the idea.

As a leader – get your own personal routine in place to support your on-going resilience. Whether it's a 30 min walk outside, a shower at the end of the day to mark 'the end' of the working day, or indeed getting your work garb on to denote your day has started. Set yourself up for success. 'Habits maketh the (wo)man'.

Don't Confuse Certainty with Safety.

We're all wired for 'safety'. Our primary goal is to keep ourselves safe – at all costs. When we feel threatened, our rational brain shuts down and we revert to fight or flight mode. Many people lean on unhelpful and unhealthy habits to numb the discomfort such as being hyper-vigilant on news, eating, drinking, technology addiction.

Cue: stress rockets as productivity plummets. Except that 'safety' is different from 'certainty' and our brain easily confuses the two.

When uncertainty is everywhere and it feels like everyday life has been turned upside down, use the following techniques to rebuild a sense of control for your teams:

Give them things they can control and tell them how they are adding value: If client or project work is on hold, use the time to get your people tackling the “not urgent but important” activity which will move your business forwards in the medium to long term. The current situation won't last forever. Give ownership of some of these tasks out too – shared responsibility for team mental health and productivity gives people a purpose.

Keep communication regular, open and honest: People are programmed to think in stories and if there is an information gap,

we'll all create our own story around it. And you can guarantee that it won't end happily ever after. In such a fluid situation, don't be afraid to stand up and say you don't know the answer; DO be afraid to say and do nothing. Build in regular communication touch points throughout the working week.

Set a 'learning' frame: Let people off the psychological hook of needing to be seen as 'competent' and at ease in this new strange world. Openly encourage people to reflect on their experiences and share any learning, whether it's inviting people to a virtual meeting, espousing the value of a lunchtime walk on their productivity level – whatever it is, ask the question in some way 'what is this teaching you? What do you notice?

It helps turn the volume down on fear and anxiety. This could be a double win if you can learn from each other and create connection too. Taking advantage of quieter times for self-development all strengthens the organisation in the long run.

If there is no certainty on outcome, give certainty on process: You can't control what the government will or won't do, or predict what might happen next (although our brains will try!).

What we can do is provide certainty along the lines of:

- 'We will be sending an update every Monday and Wednesday at 9am' – and then stick to it;
- 'If you have a query, I promise to get back to you within 4 hours with a response';
- When Boris makes an announcement, the leadership team meet and debrief in order to impact assessment. We commit to you to communicate via X by Y;
- The principles at the heart of our decision making are...

You get the idea. Best to respond to any 'what will happen to me if...' queries as soon as possible for the same reason. We are wired to catastrophise for the worst and underestimate our resources to meet the challenge.

As a leader – remind yourself, (or if that's hard right now get a coach, mentor, trusted colleague or friend to remind you) of when you have been at your best in a crisis and of the personal resources you have to lean on in order to show up and keep leading into the unknown.



Compassion and Flexibility.

Feelings first, logic second: We know that under threat, the logical part of our brains gets switched off: it's all about our survival. If people don't have the space to talk about and process their feelings, even at a high level, the logical part won't be able to kick back in. People aren't being lazy, disobedient or stupid. They are being human. Implement some key components of this survival kit to calm nervous systems down. There are no shortcuts – deal with feeling first or find yourself at the mercy of them. Productivity will then go back up.

Be flexible to create a win-win: work is important, but we're part of a wider society and your people will have other things on their mind. Looking after children when schools close. Shopping for elderly parents or a neighbour who's self-isolating. The endless quest for fresh supplies of toilet roll, soap and hand sanitiser! Give them permission to take the time they need when they need it. Put focus on helping them get the job done – whenever and however it suits them to do it. People will remember how you treat them at times like this and in more stable times will make their choices accordingly.

Start new wellness habits now: Mental health and wellbeing are top of the People Agenda. One of the outcomes of forcing everyone off their daily autopilot, engrained bad habits and all, could be long-lasting and positive changes to the way we all behave. Use this as an opportunity to build a stronger and more resilient organisation for the longer-term: encourage your people to start new wellness habits and look for ways to create a better work life balance.

As a leader – remember your nervous system is responding too. Proactively manage your diet, sleep and exercise and relaxation. This will be a marathon and not a sprint.





What's Next?

Many businesses have activated crisis management plans. Guidance changes on what feels like an hourly basis. We are all rapidly adapting to a new normal. However, as JFK said, “The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word ‘crisis’. ‘One brush stroke stands for danger: the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger--but recognize the opportunity.”

Only time will tell if the world of work will ever quite look the same again. In the meantime, be curious about what this is showing you about your organisation. What has it learned to do through this that will be of benefit at the end of the tunnel? Who stepped in? Stepped up? What worked really well? What didn't?

We are dedicated to bringing our expertise to the table to help, so please do not hesitate to contact us if we can provide support in any way.

Wishing you clarity in chaos and support in the field.

MCM.
Helping Organisations Adapt to Change.

Authored by:
Sarah Bolas – Head of Behavioural Change
Rebecca Marks – Senior Change Behavioural Change Consultant

If you want to know more, please get in touch.



Sarah Bolas
Head of Behavioural Change

+44 (0)7717 725516
sarah.bolas@mcm-uk.com



Rebecca Marks
Senior Behavioural Change Consultant

+44 7739 525348
rebecca.marks@mcm-uk.com

Realising the power of design to
inspire and transform; releasing the
potential of people wherever they are.

MCM.

71 Hopton Street, London,
SE1 9LR, UK
T +44 (0)20 7902 0900
www.mcm-uk.com
hello@mcm-uk.com

@mcm_uk
@mcm-uk
@designedbymcm

This publication contains general information only. This publication is not a substitute for professional advice or services, nor should it be used as a basis for any decision or action that may affect your finances or your business. Before making any decision or taking any action that may affect your finances or your business, you should consult a qualified professional adviser. MCM shall not be responsible for any loss whatsoever sustained by any person who relies on this publication.

RIBA 

Chartered Practice