



Finding Normalcy after **DISRUPTION**

BY BRIAN E. PORTER

Odds are that most readers automatically assume the “disruption” has something to do with the restrictions of 2020, right?

That makes sense, but we really cannot leave our lessons learned from 2020 with only those caused by health-related disruptions. Instead, we need to consider all possible scenarios that might cause a change in the way daily business operates:

- Physical damage to facilities due to severe weather events and/or fire
- Turnover of employees due to some emotional situation
- Succession failure from unexpected loss of leader
- Lawsuit through product, physical, or IP-related litigation
- Supply chain disruption due to supplier bankruptcy or new competition
- IT failure from outage and loss of business for more than a few minutes
- Data breach causing significant customer blowback, requiring the rebuilding of trust



“Considering that we are looking to determine the new normal, we must listen to understand which changes worked during a disruption and which did not. Listen first and speak second.”

AMA Quarterly's Winter 2021 edition focused on how to operate under chaos. But then, how do we accelerate normalcy after a disruption? For the past few years, I've been involved in a number of AMA's project management and AMA Certified Professional in Management™ courses. A number of the terms and concepts from the AMA courses are included here to align you as a manager with best practices.

THREE FAILED “EXIT” ASSUMPTIONS

Here are three scenarios that managers may encounter when things appear to be returning to normal:

Assuming normal will return automatically. Don't let yourself get lulled into the false sense that things will right themselves just because the original disruption is gone. After a hurricane, perhaps the building is replaced but new technology is installed. Following a pandemic, some health protocols may linger. The old “normal” may never be normal again.

Assuming employees want the old ways back at all.

Many employees may prefer to keep some of the changes that came about due to disruption. Flexible time, working from home, a new organizational structure, or additional technology may be attractive to workers and something to include in the new normal.

Assuming everyone is the same. You may have an organization with split-personality behavior. Some want the old ways back. Others prefer the new normal. As an example, in my college classrooms, surveys have found that roughly 40% preferred in-person learning, 40% preferred live online learning, and 20% would accept either way. What is the school to do?

USING PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOLS IN THE TRANSITION TO “NORMAL”

There are four project management areas that should be considered. They are communication, stakeholder engagement, process revisions, and templates.

Communication. In the AMA Total Professional model, the first section presented is communication. Why is it first? It's due to the immense importance that a manager must place on this skill. Whether you will communicate up, down, or across the organization, you should make sure to adapt your style moving forward.

Historically (let's say the year 1500 and before), the only way to communicate was via letter or in person. Today we have a plethora of tools, including push-and-pull communication styles such as phone calls, fax machines, email, instant messaging, chat boards, dashboards, virtual conferencing, and many others that continue to evolve.

One of the major outcomes from 2020, and the new normal of 2021 and beyond, will be the growing use of virtual conferences. Why am I so confident of this?

- **Experience.** People have a lot more experience with virtual conferencing than they did in February 2020.
- **Tools.** Just about every laptop and cell phone now has one, two, or even more virtual calling (VC) tools.
- **Travel costs.** Organizations will challenge the need for travel and consider savings more important.
- **Immediate gratification.** Individuals do not want to wait for a meeting in a day or a week if they can set up a VC for later that day. The speed of information demands such.
- **Reduction of office locations.** Necessity will be a significant driver, as many organizations are not going to renew leases because it will save them time and money. VCs will be necessary, or renting temporary meeting spaces will become a new reality for business.

Sure, there will still be plenty of in-person meetings due to the need for human interaction, but they may be more localized.

Considering that we are looking to determine the new normal, we *must* listen to understand which changes worked during a disruption and which did not. Listen first and speak second.

Stakeholder engagement. One of the primary benefits from improved communication is having a better handle on stakeholder communications. Once we master the tools and flex our communication modality and style for the people involved, it will automatically transfer some benefit to stakeholder engagement. If managers actively request input from project, process, and operational teams up-front, with the modality that best suits that stakeholder group, the manager will see engagement.

Remember that a portion of stakeholder management is listening. This means we have to stop thinking about our next

position or statement and actively focus on what the other party is saying. By paraphrasing, taking notes, and giving feedback through facial expressions and head nods, we acknowledge that what they are saying is critical to our mission.

When the stakeholders feel they are heard, they will be even more open to new ideas and may respond more positively to contradictory opinions as well. When combined, communication and stakeholder engagement legitimize the entire process.

Process revisions. As the shift from disruption and survival tactics changes to the new normal, you will have to implement the communication from stakeholders. Why else would we have asked for their input?

Review the processes your organization uses in meetings, expense reports, inventory, shipping and receiving, invoicing, customer service, design, development, training, legal, quality control, or any other departmental function. Perhaps you will find that even the most basic things, such as parking and security entry to buildings, have improvement possibilities that affect more than one process.

Consider the process-revision effort an opportunity to brainstorm even further among your team. "During a disruption, we _____, but now that we have learned from this disruption, we should _____." You may find efficiencies, cost savings, customer-focused improvements, and other benefits. Don't just copy what was completed during the main disruption effort. Get creative!

Templates. Based on the prior three sections, you're now ready to complement the processes to gain maximum usability. Create a standardized tool that can be efficiently and effectively implemented as quickly as possible.

Use this analogy: *Process* is the sequence of finding an online product, comparing, selecting, and then paying for the item. *Templates* are the actual design layouts of the website tools that allow easy entry to complete the process. Take, for instance, manufacturing. The quality inspection or QC process may have many steps, but the template is the checklist to ensure that you completed all the steps. For applying to a job, the process may include uploading the latest CV/resume, obtaining references, providing work examples, or creating other documents. The templates are the web pages and the checklist of items that company needs from candidates to apply for the job before they can click "send." Consider what updates to both process and templates will be needed.

OUTLINE THE RETURN TO NORMALCY FOR THE TEAM

If you wish to make the return to normalcy simple, use these basic steps and reword as you see fit:

- Determine appropriate new **communication** standards you will implement.

- Relay communication standards to the team for optimal effectiveness.
- Reach out to all **stakeholders**, even the grouchy ones, to legitimize changes.
- Take the feedback and organize the data to observe trends and decision points.
- Review existing processes and consider what works and what might benefit from change.
- Take the time to **revise processes** that should have a permanent impact on the organization.
- With a multigenerational, multifunctional team, update older templates to meet the new process and generate **new templates** required.

Make reviewing and improving the processes that your team uses an ongoing part of your responsibility as a manager. These reviews can be done quarterly or annually. For many years, I've considered my role as a manager to put the employees' roadblocks as a first priority. My issues come second. You may have something that is important and urgent to address, but most days, my goal is to make sure my team, whether it was one employee, 20 employees, or more than 100, knew their role and how to move forward. Bolstering their efficiency improved the department's efficiency.

My general rules included two prongs: addressing the immediate improvement opportunities right away by using lessons learned (predictive) or sprint retrospective (agile) ideas to help the team grow, and having quarterly meetings with employees to identify how each could improve. Questions to ask during these meetings could include what tools to consider using to accelerate delivery or accuracy; how you can better support the employee; how they view their own performance; what steps they might take for future improvement; and what suggestions you have for them.

Don't wait for the next disruption. Be predictive in finding ways to adapt, adjust, and keep things running smoothly through the everyday waves of change.

Together, the new process and new templates, based on communication with all stakeholders, will introduce a new normal that optimizes your value delivery—no matter your department, business, industry, or market. [AQ](#)

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