

# Start making a difference

Crystal clear thinking in turbulent times

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## Imagine the unimaginable

Claire Finney

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Imagine the unimaginable: the death or illness of someone in your family upon whose support the lives of everyone rest. Intense grief is inevitable – yet so too are concerns for your own wellbeing and those you love. “How will I survive?” is the question no one dare ask, but it is the thing everyone is thinking. Now take this emotionally-wrought atmosphere, and instead of your family imagine the same thing in a company with hundreds high-powered professionals.

“They are like headless chickens,” pronounces Sarah Mellor, the Start Making a Difference founder whose mission it is to help traumatized companies, and who in a long career of consultancy and coaching has seen her fair share. “I’m not being overdramatic. In the wake of a traumatic event, people in the company simply do not know what to do.”

In the example closest to that of the family scenario, the death or inexplicable departure of a key company figure, the reactions follow a remarkably similar vein: grief and panic, followed by a general breakdown in communication as employees eschew sharing their concerns. In the case of a departure, there may also be fears among those employees left behind that the departing person knew something they don’t. In the case of sudden death or illness they will scrutinize the way managers handle that person’s affairs. Yet, as we saw writ large on our television screens last year, shock as experienced by professional organizations can take a variety of different forms.

Arising as a result of alleged unauthorized trading by an employee, the multi-billion dollar loss sustained by the Swiss bank UBS was a case study in the shock caused by a major financial event. As Sarah wryly observes, “these are very ambitious people who don’t talk about their concerns; if you have yourself in a negative trading position where your risk is growing you’re not going to talk about it.” Other notable examples she cites include Sony’s loss of client data and the BP oil spill. “Accidents do happen and they do have their ramifications, and if you’re not prepared you won’t know how to respond.” Yet while such reactions may vary enormously according the organisation and the event responsible, the question at the top of everyone’s mind during a period of company shock is always the same: what does this mean for me?

Fortunately this is a question that Start Making a Difference is well qualified to answer. Sarah has a BACP\*-accredited post-graduate qualification in systemic therapy and performance improvement/psychological coaching, and is a member of the Association for Coaching.

Since setting up on her own six years ago after years at the Bank of England, management consultancy Peter Chadwick and Ernst and Young, she has worked across a host of companies as a strategic consultant and executive coach. What spare time she has she spends doing therapeutic work in the south London hospital where she trained - a “continuously fascinating lesson in real people, real problems and the power of positive thinking”. Her experience of consultancy and executive coaching has given her the tools necessary for dealing with professional organisations in shock.

“I start working with chief execs and invariably in the course of that I end up helping board members or other staff that are struggling,” she explains. “It’s because I go from chief exec to all members across an organisation that I learn a lot about how things do or don’t work.” While the decision to promote it is recent, Sarah’s work with shocked organisation has been going on for some time. Indeed when we meet she has just finished a four week stint at a professional services firm. Yet the times are, as they say, interesting at best – and with the potential for shock high and rising Sarah felt the time was ripe to highlight the business’s virtues and show how Start Making a Difference is already helping organizations support staff through emotional uncertainty and prepare for the impact of shock on performance.

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Let's return to the family scenario – an example which, while distressing, nevertheless provides an important starting point for explaining how organisational shock works. Hearing the term for the first time, one's natural reaction is to reach for the medical definition of shock – a comparison Sarah is actively keen to encourage. Shock is medically defined as a “critical condition brought on by a sudden drop in blood flow through the body”, a “failure of the circulatory system to maintain adequate blood flow which curtails the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to vital organs” and “a major medical emergency which occurs after serious injury and requires immediate treatment.” Organisational shock as Sarah knows it is not so far removed.

“Organisations react to shocks in a similar way to the body,” says her website. “As the oxygen flow of the organisation is reduced it enters a state of paralysis and confused anxiety that undermines the ability of executives to function and perform effectively.” As the organizational uncertainty grows, individual level shock takes hold: the age-old question of “what will happen to me” spreads down through the ranks. “Only right senior people with the right conviction and the right degree of truthfulness will be able to carry the company with them” Sarah points out, “and if I go to the organisation immediately afterwards then I can help them identify those people, explain what's at stake, and help them understand the implications of any decisions they might be thinking of taking.”

In these charged situations, context is all: “There's no point building a recovery programme if you don't understand the context” Sarah points out, and when she first gets called into an organisation the first thing she does is spend several days speaking to people and understanding their concerns. These get fed back to the leadership, and throughout the crisis period Start Making a Difference acts as sounding board, a sympathetic ear and a survival guide for leaders looking for the best route to recovery. At no point does Sarah lose sight of the commercial needs of the company; she did, after all, cut her teeth in performance analysis/banking Supervision. Yet while contingency plans deal with the physical risk and are relatively easy to implement (indeed are often already in place), the emotional fallout of shock is both less foreseeable, and harder to handle.

“I don't think organizations are very good at dealing with personal frailty,” she observes. “Very senior people do not know what to do, how to act, or what to say.” For Sarah, the solution is simple: “Send them round the organisation to talk to people so they feel they are being involved and are part of a shared experience.” Even a short and sweet “how are you doing?” can mean the difference between cooperation and panic. What the suffering employee really appreciates is the chance to talk and share with someone who is entirely focused on listening sincerely to their feelings and concerns with no prior involvement, who isn't brandishing another staff survey.

So what should you do, if you're a manager of a professional services firm looking to minimize and prepare for risk? Obviously the first step is to put Sarah Mellor's details into your contacts book for when the wind changes. Yet even in fair winds there is good reason to contact Start Making a Difference. According to Sarah, the companies most at risk in the event of shock are those who “know subconsciously something isn't working properly but try to bury it under the carpet. They think ‘it will get better, give it time, see what happens’ – and it doesn't get better it gets worse.” Here, as before, the medical analogy rings true. Healthy organisations, like healthy bodies, are far better equipped to deal with external events outside of their control than ones in which disease – or in the organisation's case, a culture of blame, secrecy and miscommunication – is latent.

“As this idea has evolved, I have been working a lot more on how you can tell if an organization is healthy too” says Sarah bluntly, “and having a truly responsive, flat, open, trustworthy organization is the best way of ensuring a shock does not become catastrophic.” To help keep organisations healthy Sarah and her senior team has formulated a ‘health check’ which staff fill in and leaders (hopefully) learn from; and with questions like “I am silenced in meetings” and “Promotion and success is dependent on patronage” (rate from strongly agree to disagree) it is hardly



a softly softly approach.

But the sort of organisation Sarah caters for – medium to larger companies and professional service providers full of bright ambitious professionals – doesn't want softly-softly. It wants a medical diagnosis, not a stone massage and herbs. As Sarah notes, "ultimately if the organisation is an honest one it will want to improve - because until you know you've got a problem how do you go about solving it? This health check up gives the organisation a much better idea of where dissatisfaction lies. It's a real snapshot about how people behave in practice, how they think and how far they are aligned to the culture and values of their organisations."

In short, when thinking of how to handle an organisation in crisis or otherwise, think like a doctor rather than a businessperson and give yourself and your colleagues the following sound words of advice: Number one, prevention is always better than cure. Number two, acceptance is the first step to recovery. And last but not least, in the case of emergency – dial Sarah.

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