# "Our Sense of Belonging"

During COVID-19

On Friday, April 3rd, AEC Advisors hosted a Q&A Webinar discussing the impact COVID-19 is having on our industry.

This discussion was led by Howard Ross, author of Our Sense of Belonging, and Peter Zeeb, President & CEO of Geosyntec. The goal of this webinar was to discuss the importance of understanding our need for belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic.
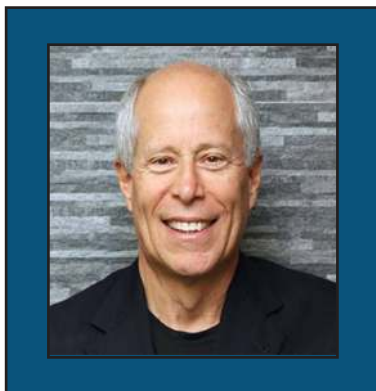
Howard Ross,
Founding Partner
Udarta Consulting
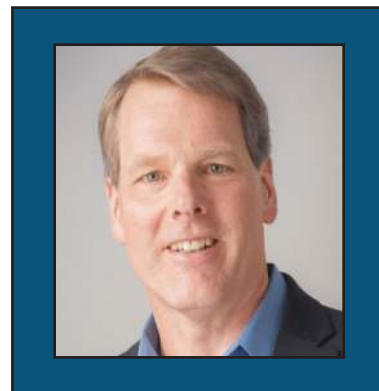
Peter Zeeb,
President & CEO
Geosyntec

Howard Ross' Introduction to the importance of "Belonging"

How do we understand the impact stress is having on us?

Daniel Goleman coined the phrase "amygdala hijack", which is what we experience when we are faced with the kinds of stress such as this crisis. We are all in a state of collective trauma, and during a "hijack" our prefrontal cortex stops functioning properly and we love our ability to reason and make rational decisions. In its place, our emotions take over and we are reacting based on what we feel.

Under these circumstances, there is a desperate need for control within us, and when we cannot find that stability, which is common, we look externally for a leader or somebody in power to offer guidance. This is why leadership during a crisis is so critical, and why you see approval ratings for leaders during a crisis go through the roof (e.g. George W. Bush post 9/11 saw a 90% approval rating).

How separation increases our sense of loneliness

Psychologist named John Cacioppo: when we are in a state of loneliness, perceptions of social isolation can increase vigilance for threat, as well as heighten our sense of vulnerability. An example of this is in the last week alone there were over 600+ hate crimes against Asians / Asian-Americans in the United States, even though the overwhelming majority of them were born in the United States. This sense of loneliness can also affect our ability to make decisions as leaders.

Does isolation and stress increase sense of belonging or create more tribalism?

Howard: One of the things we know is that pro social behavior is increased when we have a sense of connection, or co-identity with people. If we can maintain some sort of connection to our coworkers, and make sure they know that they are a part of something bigger than themselves, our firm will be better off. For example, I was just talking to Nike last week and we came up with all sorts of ideas to make people feel a part of the team, like wearing their Nike gear as much as possible.

Due to technology we have the ability to use platforms like Zoom that can help maintain some feeling of normalcy and connection during this chaotic time. I can not overemphasize the importance of doing things like this during this time.

Also, pay attention to employees who you know are by themselves and/or tend to be a little less social. We know isolation can quickly lead to downward spirals for these folks.

Peter, what are you doing to make sure that the leadership team is aligned at Geosyntec? And how do you try and let the more junior employees know that management is desperately trying to minimize the impact it will have on their firm?

Peter: One of the things I'm doing, is having transparent conversations with everybody at the firm. Make sure everyone understands the issues we are currently experiencing, and the things management is doing to try and alleviate them. I have been trying to be as "real" as possible by letting them know that as of now we have monumental uncertainty.

Another important thing is shared sacrifice. Try and avoid layoffs when possible (reduce hours before ultimately furloughing or laying off an employee). Make sure there is a "top down" mentality. (Reducing the salaries of management before other employees).

Maintaining strong networks and HR programs. Just prior to this crisis we invested in the implementation of an online mentoring program called Chronus – and we decided as a management team that this was not a cost that should be cut.

As Howard said, we are finding anyway to increase a "co-identity" among the employees such as: virtual meetings, calling your coworkers directly to check up on them and talk about non work-related topics.

Howard, If we were to conduct an anonymous survey to your employees on "Belonging", what are some of the questions you would ask your employees?

a. How would you rate your sense of well-being right now?

b. What kind of support do you need?

c. Is there anything we can do to improve your well being?

d. Are you staying in contact with people?

e. Are you going outside once a day?

f. How much time are you spending in front of your computer (people think that if you spend more time at your desk a day, you will be more productive, but the opposite is actually true)?

g. I would also make sure that if somebody is experiencing issues, your firm has a resource that they can use (HR, EAP, etc.)

Peter, I'm sure some of your employees are still in the field while others are working from home, how do you prevent this "Us vs Them" mentality in situations like this?

Peter: We do have people out in the field, in the office, and at home. We hold virtual coffee breaks once a week, and you see people from all over the company. I know this is a difficult balance and we try and rotate staff as much as possible (even during non-COVID times—junior staff isn't exclusively in the field typically).

The other thing I've encouraged, is to have supervisors hold check-ins with their respective teams on a frequent basis. That way whether you are in the field or not, you are maintaining some sort of connection to employees at the firm.

There is no denying that this issue could cause some sort of division in the firm and it's important to understand that there is no "silver bullet" on how to deal with it.

Howard: I think it is important to acknowledge that there is no "quick fix" with this issue. This is an enormous issue that could cause a "new normal" much like 9/11. I think this is important because it will cause us to think "long-term". Start using technology to touch base frequently, because what we are experiencing now will be our new reality for the foreseeable future. Once we get past the awkward nature of a virtual happy hour or coffee break, we will learn to feel a greater sense of belonging with our firm, which will ultimately produce better results for your firm.

What I have seen in the past few weeks is that work is getting done. Although there are some restrictions, this has worked out better than I would have predicted at the advent of the pandemic.

Howard: One of the things we found is that during a crisis our brain affects our ability to think rationally. We become reactionary to try and find a "quick fix" as soon as possible. I think the idea of shared risk is very important in a company.

When I was working at my consulting firm right after the financial crisis, we had an open meeting with our employees and told them "we desperately want to keep this team together, so if our income reaches a certain threshold, then the management team will take a 20% pay cut and everyone else will take a 10% pay cut. It turns out we never dipped below that threshold and nobody had to take a pay cut, but the effect that had among all of our employees was significant. By showing complete financial transparency (open book management) as well as "shared risk" our employees were motivated to, proverbially, pull the oars in the same direction to not let the company's performance slip. People knew we were all in it together.

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> Peter Zeeb, President & CEO, Geosyntec

How do you balance the difficult message of potentially needing to cut people while trying to encourage them to work hard and not cause the company to suffer more than it already is?

Howard: I think it is important to acknowledge the amount of uncertainty we have right now. Also, what Peter said in terms of letting the employees know that management will be taking an equal if not larger hit to compensation. This signals to people that you care about us enough to take on a personal financial burden. Also, just letting people know that you will notify them as soon as you have more information.

As Howard's book points out, moral code is the basis for our sense of belonging. In responding to COVID-19, what is the right balance among the different foundations of moral authority?

Moral modeling – If people see leaders making decisions based off our moral code, and shared ethics, then employees will follow. For example, if the leader is being transparent, and making "top down" decisions, all employees will start to behave similarly.

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>
> Howard Ross, Founding Partner, Udarta Consulting

A quick example of this was a merger I was working on where a leader on one side was very diligent about holding regular meetings during the merger process and sharing information (some but not all). At one point I asked one of his supervisors if he had any concerns about the merger and he said "no, our leader tells us everything about this merger." In fact, the leader was appropriately holding back some confidential information he could not share with these people, but the act of holding regular meetings and updating his people gave his staff a sense of calm and trust in their leader.

Equity & Fairness – People want to be treated fairly, and if something bad happens to them they want to know that management did everything in their power to try and prevent it.

Creating no harm – obviously, in our decisions, we always want to focus on creating no harm, if possible.

Specific information in Geosyntec's COVID-19 employee resource page:

- A chronological list (with links) to all COVID-19 internal communications

- Links to employee resources (the best ones we have found on effectively working from home,

- hygiene, mental health etc.)

- Links to Project Manager resources (updated health and safety procedures, travel procedures, how to determine if your project is a "critical project", etc.)

- Comprehensive and regularly update FAQs on our own policies and guidelines relative to a range of COVID-19 related issues

- An up to date list of offices that are officially closed due to civil orders

- Guidance on talking to clients who may want assurances that work will be completed, or may want to extend payment terms, etc.

- Cyber security updates and other IT information relevant to working from home

Additional Information:

- Harvard Business School's "COVID-19 Business Impact Center"
- Our Search for Belonging: How Our Need to Connect Is Tearing Us Apart - Howard Ross
- Howard Ross' Website

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