Stop Pretending It's Business as Usual

Nothing about right now is normal.

By Tiffani Ashley Bell

Corporate America keeps plowing ahead. With the stock market hitting a new high early in September and businesses trying to resume normal business hours, it's not hard to think we are in the midst of a rush to return to "business as usual."

But nothing about this situation is normal. A global pandemic has killed over 200,000 people in the United States. Millions are living in the path of destructive wildfires which have left dozens of people dead and many more missing. Black people are still reeling from ongoing police brutality and exhausted from having to deal with a system that continues to fail us as seen in the miscarriage of justice with Breonna Taylor this past week. Latinx people continue to confront abuse at the hands of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Parents are trying to homeschool children as they juggle their jobs. These same people are expected to show up and be productive at work. An impossible task.

It's understandable why companies would want to go back to "business as usual": The SBA's Paycheck Protection Program couldn't provide funding relief to every business, and businesses, large and small, are hurting. Some pivoted. Some shut down—permanently. Millions of people lost their jobs.

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People are powering through, though, because their hand has been forced. More people are working from home than ever before. Every calendar invite is a Zoom invite now. Executives remain fixated on deadlines and targets. Layoffs are still happening, even when companies can actually afford to retain employees. Some of them claim they will rehire many of those workers (perhaps into new positions), but they make no

promises. There seems to be an unflinching corporate desire to carry on, despite this exhausting, highly unusual moment in which we all find ourselves.

It is jarring to experience, because far too many of us had a conversation with someone this year not knowing it would be our last due to Covid-19. For a time, I was nervous about texting or calling to check on family, friends, and business partners in certain Covid-19 hot spots for fear they wouldn't answer. One of my team members lost her mother to a non-coronavirus-related illness. She couldn't be there for her mom's last moments, though, because the hospital wasn't accepting visitors due to Covid-19. Countless people have died alone. These losses are immeasurable, but real.

The drive to go back to business as usual is running roughshod over our collective loss, the grinding uncertainty, the grief. Whether or not business leaders are adequately addressing the repeated blows to employee morale and mental health arising from having family, friends, and co-workers who are laid off, sick, or worse is highly questionable. We've already seen this with the poor treatment of essential workers, many of whom were still required to come to work while Covid-19 swept through their company.

In many workplaces, people are still subjected to metrics-based performance reviews as if 2020 were a typical year. Indeed, a performance review my organization received from one of its partners made them look clueless about the impact of current events. They asked questions about and sought to evaluate us on goals we set in better times, in a "normal" year.

While events this year have led to increased funding for our organization, this has been anything but a normal year. Certain customer service contacts we rely on were infected and sidelined, delaying some of our work. Worst of all, a friend and longtime team member in Detroit passed away after contracting the coronavirus. I, like countless other managers, have never had a team member die so unexpectedly. I will never forget how the woman on my team who had just buried her mother instantly started sobbing when I broke the news. Those were the darkest moments I've faced as a leader. Against this backdrop of loss and grief, a conversation about missing our targets felt insensitive and beside the point, but it happened anyway.

That experience made me think about all the other people forced to act as if it were "business as usual" even when so many things are increasingly unusual. How do you proceed in this environment? Is it not delusional to think you can? Is anybody thinking about the toll this period is taking on everybody?

Every day on Twitter, I see someone complaining about how they are working now more than ever. Everyday I see the lamentations of the blurred lines between work, home, and school. Every day I see expressions of fear — and then later, tweets about needing to get work done anyway.

So, let's be honest with ourselves as we head into Q4 of 2020: We are not returning to business as usual any time soon. In this kind of environment, it's okay to acknowledge this — and act accordingly.

This moment calls for more empathy, more grace. More empathy and grace for ourselves and for others, including our co-workers.

Business leaders should consider adjusting leave and sick policies to be more accommodating and flexible. Adjust priorities and ask people what support they need to meet their deadlines and goals. Pay freelancers and other contract workers on time and in full. Offer parents more support and tangible resources for childcare. Be proactive about providing clarity and transparency around raises, promotions, and bonuses. If you've decided not to give raises and bonuses, perhaps postpone annual performance reviews related to compensation and find alternative ways to evaluate progress. If people must interact directly with the public, reassure them that you will continue to protect their health and well-being. Offer free or low-cost access to mental health services or grief counselors. Give people the day off to vote, volunteer, and work the polls.

And lay off the Zoom meetings. Last week, I saw somebody tweeting about having eight to 10 in a row. All I could think was, "Why?!" Part of having more empathy for myself has been accepting that my limit is three or four calls in a row with 15–30 minute gaps between.

Unlike before Covid-19, I refuse to let guilt — and other people's unchecked desire to return to business as usual — govern my days and my productivity. I spoke to a grief counselor and she recommended journaling. In fits of angst (usually after watching limited amounts of the news), pouring my feelings into a Google Doc has been a tremendous relief.

People might be having chips and dip on the patio of their favorite restaurant again. Executives might be making acquisitions and setting aggressive targets again. But, make no mistake: We will not be back to business as usual any time soon. (Frankly, we should be striving for better than that, anyway.) But, while we're striving, let's extend

each other a little more grace and empathy. Don't forget that burnt-out employees are not good for the bottom line.

https://marker.medium.com/companies-need-to-stop-pretending-its-business-as-usual-39f184845ed8