

FlexBulletin #119 – “Houston – we have a problem”

By Paul Rupert

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What if you were in a freezing, spinning capsule hurtling without GPS, maybe toward earth?

Many of us first encountered these conditions in the reality-based but fictional film *Apollo 13*. A hastily assembled team of astronauts suffered an internal explosion in orbit followed by a loss of instruments, propulsion and control. Big questions were raised: What might happen next? Would cooler heads prevail? Might the flimsy communication link between earth and travelers hold or collapse? Where was the horizon and true north? Speed, uncertainty, disorientation and conflict swirled about.

Imagine my surprise when this image came to mind over the weekend as I skimmed a leadership column by Jena McGregor in the Washington Post. Not the frequent best practice summary, [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2017/02/03/anxiety-unease-and-eagerness-to-move-on-workers-cope-with-trumps-first-two-weeks/>] “Anxiety, unease and eagerness to move on: Workers cope with Trump’s first two weeks” promised a hint of that first distress call to Houston. Any call from each of your unique workplaces might be different. But this quick tour is an eye-opener to a state of affairs that seems to be flying under the radar, but might have numerous impacts on when, where and how we work in the period ahead.

Managers thought they’d breathe a sigh of relief once the brutal and divisive election ended

But things seem to have only become more intense. It’s as if there was not an oxygen explosion, but a sudden feeding of oxygen into the fire. According to Jeanne Meister, a consultant who works with human resources managers from Fortune 500, “People are riveted. But unlike March Madness, this affects our lives.”

An official with a major technology firm said that on the Monday after the travel ban protests, “[P]roductivity was next to zero. People are not just concerned about the future of their jobs. They’re concerned about the future of their country. It’s a very difficult environment under which you’re expected to produce creative and innovative ideas. It is a constant, constant topic.”

Wherever your firm fits on this continuum of consternation, how might it affect flexible working?

An easy surmise might be that runaway tweet-surfing or venting is unlikely to affect the level of job sharing; true enough, that practice will likely continue to be rare. But those champions and supporters seeking diverse ways of working will find a deeper dive more instructive. Much of the eventual outcome of this aura of anxiety depends on whether the new environment waxes or wanes, whether a calmer new normal comes to prevail or deepening political battle lines persist.

The best speculation on that question starts with the basic query: what is flexibility really? It has been portrayed as a benefit, a perk, a workstyle. But what drives people to want these things? In the language of Hollywood, what is the *character’s motivation* in seeking these things, however they are packaged. Over many years and in thousands of discussions I have concluded that people are less wedded to a particular option like compressed work or part-time and pre-occupied with gaining *greater control* over when, where and how they work.

The negotiation over control is a constant in employer-employee dialogue and relationships – and it ebbs and flows with life events and pressures. Newborns, eldercare, education and severe commutes can ramp up the employee’s need for control, and lead to part-time, flextime and telework requests. Market challenges, competitive pressures and addiction to habit can cause employers to assert their control as primary – and become less flexible.

Hurling astronauts seek control reflexively; uneasy offices will likely do the same over time

If the current climate continues, the search for employee control could take many forms:

- ❖ The enhanced desire for more focus, productivity and just plain quiet will fuel telework
- ❖ Older workers will try to extend retirement in the face of Medicare and other uncertainty
- ❖ The open, sharing office with its long, sometimes raucous tables may lose some appeal...
- ❖ More fundamentally, fertilizing Mutual Respect skills will be needed to bridge the gulfs

Telework yields mindfulness For decades, advocates of working from home have cited the lack of distractions and the ability to focus as core values. We should not be surprised to see a temporary or longer spike in trading collaboration over one's tools for poring over recycled Twitter feeds.

Take my retirement, please It's one thing to be irritated by the chatter and the Hatfield-McCoy stance of coworkers, and quite another to feel that the ground is shifting beneath one's feet as decisions are being made for the rest of one's life. As the large Boomer cohort rushes toward the exits, we should not be surprised to see a serious rethinking. What's to come of Social Security? Of Medicare? Are we flirting with the end of the business cycle and new income strains? It's hard, and perhaps dangerous to be certain in uncertain times.

The too open office For several years critics of the wide open office space with its scarce privacy and abundant schmoozing have been turning their critiques into research and adding cubicles and private rooms around the fringes. It will be worth watching whether the much sought-after collaboration of shared space plays out as designed or succumbs to these unanticipated stresses. Will all this unease make the cubicle great again?

Time for Mutual Respect We will surely emerge from this tense period but in what shape and with what prospects? I will elaborate on this point in my next Bulletin. Suffice it to say that such divergent attitudes and deeply held views will not heal themselves easily. There are great fissures in whatever trust existed, and we need serious re-skilling to move on.

Apollo 13 returned to earth safely. Only extraordinary skill, intense collaboration and great good fortune got these adventurers home.

Best regards,
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