

**ROADMAP SERIES:  
BUILDING HEALTHY TEAMS:  
MENTAL HEALTH AS ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICE  
BY TANYA GINWALA  
MAY 19, 2020**

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Tanya started by explaining the goals of the session, with the hope that by the end of the session, attendees would have an understanding of how mental health impacts organisations, teams and individuals. How could we support and sustain the emotional well-being of those around us?

Tanya opened the session with a series of polls aimed at better understanding the audience. The first poll displayed a set of images on screen; with attendees being asked to choose the one which best described their feelings at the moment. The second poll mapped the professional roles of the attendees and the third asked them what brought them to the session.

She followed up the polls with an activity, asking participants to take a piece of paper and do as they pleased with it barring tearing and writing on it. Asking them to return it to its original form, she asked them what differences they could observe on the paper. Responses included references to neatness and cleanliness. She pointed out that the world is unlikely to be the same after the lockdown, with COVID-19 bringing different challenges and creating a new normal. As leaders, the task then becomes to chart the course through these cloudy times while supporting and still sustaining the well-being of the emotional health of the people around us.

Tanya divided her presentation into “What”, “So What” and “Now What” for ease of understanding.

#### **WHAT**

Given the audience’s basic understanding of mental health, Tanya focused on what can be done in the current scenario. According to the Indian Psychiatry Report, there has been a 20% increase in mental health issues since the outbreak of COVID-19. Today, 1 in 5 people are suffering from mental health issues. The Keiser Family Foundation working with Mental Health and Mental Health Policy in

the US found that nearly half of Americans report that the virus is harming their mental health. There is also an increase in anxiety, depression and stress disorders, and suicide rates. Given the insufficient availability as of now on COVID-19 specific data, researchers are also using data and models from environmental conditions like natural disasters, and terrorist attacks to study the effects on mental health issues now. The shadow of the economic recession and the unpreparedness of healthcare systems also have translated to collective trauma that will impact mental health beyond the duration of the pandemic itself.

In the social sector, people are worried about going to the field and volunteering, especially in high contact environments. Many organisations are also dealing with funding uncertainties and economic consequences of this. This in turn leads to downsizing and cutting salaries of the team which makes it a high-pressure environment to work in. In some cases, the overall morale is low or people are juggling multiple roles simultaneously.

## **SO WHAT**

This section spoke about what these problems mean to us and what we can do in the face of them. As a leader, it is really important to wake up to the emotional and relational needs of your team, even changing organisational culture to address them. The cultural shift can be done through introducing interventions like workshops. An individual's fluidity, flexibility and a willingness to adapt can have a larger impact on the organisation as a whole. Given that everyone is in survival mode, this phase is the "survival of the nurtured."

Social media is filled with conversations on productivity and coping mechanisms. Some people need to do different things and be engaged all the time while others need to rest. Tanya reminded everyone that the pandemic situation is new to everyone and thus, productivity is likely to take a hit. Tanya stressed the importance of taking care of our mental health, arguing that productivity would soon follow. With everything going on, we need to focus and be connected to a purpose, to each other and to what gives us meaning.

Tanya then talked about the work of Dr. Brene Brown, a social science researcher who studies shame and vulnerability. She touched upon Dr. Brown's definition of a Daring Leader, spending some time describing what courageous leadership is not:

- Not knowing how to have hard conversations
- Not attending to fears and feelings
- Steps and setbacks
- Problem-solving and action bias
- Inclusivity, diversity and equity
- Corroding trust and disengagement

The final takeaway was that "courage is teachable, observable, and measurable, and starts by letting go of your armour." This armour is made of perfectionism, scarcity, always knowing, and cynicism, weaponising fear and hustling for validity. Instead, courage is characterised by rumbling with vulnerability, living into our values, braving trust, and learning to rise.

Tanya asked the attendees to answer some questions on their piece of paper as a way of reimagining the current scenario. The questions were:

- What are your hopes for yourself, for your organisation, for the people you are meant to serve and support, and for your organisational culture?
- What are some things you have learnt about yourself during this time? (Resiliency)
- When were you/your team at your best during the past few weeks? (Possibility, new learnings)

She touched upon this exercise as a tool for enabling circle time in organisations and amongst teams.

## **NOW WHAT**

This section dealt with hands-on takeaways to address issues of mental health. First and foremost, Tanya stressed the importance of reducing stigma and prioritizing self care by conducting workshops, inviting professional trainers into the workplace and speaking about mental health. Leaders also need to create spaces where people can talk openly about their struggles. Employees should also have access to resources such as 24-hour helplines as well as accessible counsellors in order to seek the help they need.

Looking at more preventive measures, Tanya spoke of coaching as the best means at an individual level. Peer group training and creating buddy systems can also inspire more bonding, collective learning, and collaboration over competition.

Tanya also called for leaders to not shy away from being an example. She asked them to seek the help they need, go to therapy or consult a psychiatrist if necessary, and be vocal about receiving the support. This becomes an effective way of reducing stigma.

She reiterated the difficulties and struggles of this time, stressing on the need to share vulnerability and create an environment that is more empathetic. By means of conclusion, she urged team leaders to start meetings with 'circle time' to check in with people and how they feel.

## **RESOURCES**

- **Brene Brown on Daring Leadership** – Netflix special, Unlocking Us podcast.
- **The Circle Way** – Questions for Check-Ins  
<https://www.thecircleway.net/articles/2016/12/27/questions-for-check-in>
- **Mental Health and Psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak** – WHO website
- **Mental Health America screening tool** – <https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools>
- **Icall Helpline** – Free Telephone and Email counselling – <http://icallhelpline.org/>
- **mPower Helpline** – 1800-120-820050
- **The Mindclan** – Mental Health Platform

## QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

1. Sometimes team members disclose they have mental health issues. What are the ways in which we can respond without getting swamped with something we cannot handle?

I understand that there is a fear of handling people with mental health struggles in our organisation and there is some uncertainty with regard to steps that need to be taken in response. This is why it is important to redirect them to somewhere they can seek help. It is not necessary to take on each other's mental health challenges but to create a de-stigmatized environment that helps them open up. Just because they are going through mental health challenges, it does not mean you need to take care of them personally. We just need to direct them to people who are trained to support them better.

2. With limited resources (the situation of current environment), how can we deal with insecurities about jobs among employees?

It is really scary and that insecurity is also real. The fear of losing our jobs is real and there is no simple or easy answer. Maybe all we can do is hope that we use this time to skill ourselves in other ways which are relevant in the current scenario. Like I talked about adapting to new scenarios, we also need to adapt to this new normal that exists.

3. We have done a lot during the pandemic and now we are exhausted and feeling hopeless looking at the number of challenges that are coming forward. How do we keep our hopes up and energy going among the team?

If we get into the habit of asking each other questions [like we did in the session] that open up alternative narratives and other stories, we may be able to keep our hopes and energy up. If we only focus on the problem, it becomes very overwhelming, and that's when we feel completely drained and all of these hopeless thoughts come. It is important to create those spaces to touch base, connect, have these conversations and remember what brought you to this work in the first place. Remember the times when you felt hopeful.

4. What is the difference between coaching and therapy?

Coaching is more in the field of wellness. It is more preventive. The training is also entirely different. Therapy deals with mental health issues, mental illness, diagnostics, etc.