



The Real Lessons from Lockdown

Learning to Thrive in Uncertain Times

Robert Limb, TRACK NZ CEO

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5 minute read

Four panellists, two big questions, one steep learning curve.

In the middle of our second Auckland lockdown, TRACK NZ held a Webinar where we were joined by four panellists to answer two important questions.

First, what have we learned since the first lockdown about our customers, our people and how we work together? And second, what must we do differently if we want to thrive going forward?

On our panel were:

- **Jodie Armstrong-Downes, Head of Strategic Planning at TRACK NZ**
Jodie is a seasoned problem solver and her great passion is transforming the relationship dynamics between brands and their customers.
- **Mark Street, Tribe Leader Base Growth at Vodafone**
Prior to joining Vodafone, Mark was General Manager of Loyalty at Air New Zealand where he led the transformation of Airpoints to become one of the world's most successful loyalty programmes.
- **Marlene Strawson, General Manager of People and Performance at Mercury**
As an experienced HR Professional, Marlene has valuable insights on what's changed for people, teams and leaders within organisations over these turbulent times.
- **David Rennie, Managing Director DDB Tribal, Australia**
In the last 3 months, Davy has helped Australian businesses respond to huge shifts in the way that consumers socialise, work, play and connect.

What did we observe and what did we learn?

About our customers

Kiwis proved to be resilient and possess big reserves of optimism, although these are now declining as the realisation that this is our ongoing reality sinks in. The outstanding exception to that has been our younger Kiwis (aged 18-24) who have felt the weight of the world on their shoulders and continue to experience high levels of anxiety and isolation today.

“Younger Kiwis show significant disparities between the calm they claim to feel and the extremes of emotion they actually feel.”

Jodie Armstrong-Downes, TRACK NZ

Vodafone saw call volumes surge as customers started calling each other again, seeking human interactions and connection in ‘the next-best way’.

Most customers' initial reaction to our first lockdown was “talk to me, tell me what you are doing and reassure me” but they very quickly lost interest in the broader global impact of the virus and began to say “do the right thing by me first”. Kiwis generally found themselves responding to their lives in and out of their bubbles, rather than the pandemic itself.

Today our customers are again looking for value (no change there), but with it more speed, more convenience and the simplicity of online access.

“In this current Level 3 lockdown, our customers are saying don't talk to me about Covid, simply give me the next deal and make it easy.”

Mark Street, Vodafone

About our people

Within companies, it seemed teams were consistently proactive. They gave things a go and showed themselves to be less fearful of failure, driven by a sense of urgency and collective purpose.

There was something about the informality of communication during lockdown that worked. That is something we all want to keep alive going into the future.

“We used a virtual whiteboard. Execs asked for and listened to feedback. Then they made a quick decision to implement four things and committed to introducing them.”

Marlene Strawson, Mercury

As managers, we learned not to make assumptions about what we thought our people would be concerned about and motivated by. For many, there were surprises.

“One of the great things about lockdown is that I’ve come to understand my team more intimately.”

Marlene Strawson, Mercury

Critically, **we learned that being more visible and more accessible as leaders was as important to our people as giving them the freedom to find solutions.** In response, many leaders became more visible and more human as they stepped into crisis mode.

About the way we work

Traditional hierarchical structures fell away overnight. Decision making sped up and communication became more direct.

To get more digitally-led projects up and running, we stopped seeking perfect, and became more adept and improved as we went along. The ‘Launch, test, iterate’ playbook became our reality because it had to.

We reverted to texting because it was faster than email, we tested new messaging platforms. We even turned up to meetings on time more often!

We collaborated better with clients and partners. Clients and agency staff talked more often and focused more consistently on doing the right thing. More agency specialists like our creators and coders, who aren’t normally the visible part of the solution, had more regular contact with clients. All of that built trust and got us to market faster.

And Working from Home turned out to be more than just a future possibility. *It dawned on us that even if we love being in the office, we can sometimes get more done at home.*

About ourselves as parents and leaders

The sudden merging of work and home life was challenging. Entities once separate were smashed into the same space overnight. And that led to some uncomfortable revelations.

Being told by your 11-year-old son that he now understands why you don’t talk with him at night because “I can see that you spend all day talking” was one panellist’s experience of lockdown - but it was a message that resonated with most of us on the call.

This has been a time to reflect on what’s really important. And despite the intensity of lockdown, many of us have learned to prioritise the things that matter and enrich us.

How can we apply lessons learned in crisis to thrive at work and at home?

Our panellists debated the real and emerging risk that we let ourselves slip back to many of the old ways, when **so many of the lessons learned fit the reality of an increasingly uncertain future.**

Here's a snapshot of the advice they gave us.

1. Connecting with customers: Digital first, human when it matters

More than ever, we need to deliver to our customers the things that will make their lives easier - then get out of the way. And to deliver value always. That's a message for all time. Online, it's a given that we will deliver simpler and faster.

But we also plan for the long term and should let customers see our humanity too. In times of crisis many of us showed that we did have purpose and we brought that to life. Customers are our future cashflow but they have a memory too. They will remember how companies responded during the crisis, and what you're doing now to make it easier for them to buy and live better lives.

2. Enabling our people: Use this moment to propel your culture forward

As leaders we need to step up and be visible, to listen, commit and role models; always, not just in times of crisis.

If we want to accelerate faster decision making and more risk-taking, then we as leaders and managers must remain as visible and accessible as we were in the crisis. Trust and the freedom to fail will help us maintain that spirit of risk-taking.

Structure too will play a part, but not as we may have thought. Structure can mean providing a forum to express ideas about change and form teams to act upon it.

At Vodafone, Mark Street found that structure is a way to embed the lesson that we work best when we are all at work or all at home. So now Mark's Base Growth Tribe are in the office Monday, Tuesday and Friday and at home Wednesday and Thursday. New behaviours and new structures, it turns out, can help us embed those ways of working that help us thrive in crisis.

The overwhelming message was for us to make peace with the idea of people working remotely.

"Yes, I can go for a run right after work while it's still light outside. No, I do not want to waste time sitting in traffic again."

Rob Limb, TRACK NZ

3. Working together: Digital first, but human always.

In lockdown, having the tools we needed to connect was invaluable. But tools can never replace human contact and it was this unquantifiable aspect of connection that all our panellists missed the most.

The environment and atmosphere within our companies is the 'hidden magic' that is really hard to sell and pitch to clients and customers remotely. It's vital to be able to read body language and to see how the person we're talking to is responding. Just about all of us found that difficult to do on video platforms.

"What makes us different from Artificial Intelligence is our empathy. And that is what we miss in lockdown - the hand on the shoulder, the knowing look, reading the body language."

David Rennie, DDB Tribal Australia

4. Managing ourselves: Renewing our energy in order to thrive

In the first lockdown many of us learnt to create 'reserves' for ourselves and our family. A store of energy and optimism that we could draw on when things got tough.

In order to perform we must find ways to renew our personal reserves of energy. Professional athletes and their coaches have long since lived by the values of oscillating between times of stress and recovery. But for the most part, our working lives have been so relentlessly linear and unforgiving that we fail to give ourselves the time to renew.

Lockdown forced many of us to experience the breakdown of those linear working patterns. We have created our own new rhythms and habits. Keeping these alive will help us thrive in our work and personal lives as we head into an uncertain future.

"We all have to manage our energy, not just our time. That may be one of the most valuable lessons to come out of this crisis."

Rob Limb, TRACK NZ