

3 Ways to Help Your Team Recover from Disruption

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Summary. Companies need to find ways to improve their people's capacity to adapt when things don't go well. Swarm intelligence refers to the ways in which decentralized and self-organized organisms behave. Their ability to know when to switch — without anyone...

Many organizations wrestle with how to excel in rapidly changing times. At some point or another, they encounter challenges that force them to modify the ways they do things so they can continue to meet expectations. Some do it better than others, and it usually comes down to how confident they feel about their teams' ability to absorb disruptions. What is it about teams that are successful at recovering from disruption? [Previous](#) and ongoing research suggests swarm intelligence could be part of the answer.

Swarm intelligence refers to the ways in which decentralized and self-organized organisms behave. It's what makes ants, bees, birds, and fish display sophisticated collective behaviors that even humans can find inspiring — for example, how they search for food or distribute the work that needs to be done in a colony.

In ant colonies, ants can quickly exchange places when a disruption happens — they're instinctively interchangeable. For example, if they're out looking for food and a dog gets in the way, they recognize that something disruptive has happened and quickly swap tasks in order to protect the colony. Their ability to know when to switch — without anyone telling them to — is what gives them the capacity to recover and adapt to life-threatening situations. Since this behavior is only possible at the level of the colony, we refer to it as *collective self-healing*.

Extrapolating this idea to humans, collective self-healing happens at the level of the team, not the individual. It's enabled when team members take the initiative to swap tasks, even if those tasks are outside their traditional roles. This way, they become interchangeable — in the same way as ants do — as a strategy to adapt to unexpected situations.

In our ongoing research, my colleagues and I have built on [previous work](#) by conducting in-depth interviews with members of action teams, including emergency response teams, police SWAT teams, trauma teams, and military healthcare teams. We've found that through training, these teams have developed an instinct for interchangeability that makes them very effective at collective self-healing. In essence, we've learned so far that three key features bestow these self-healing teams with a formidable capacity for adaptation. The following three techniques can inspire your team to recover from disruptions more quickly.

Get things done — regardless of who does it.

Since everyone on a self-healing team is focused on the same goal, they don't get stuck arguing about who should be doing what — they just see what needs to be done and do it.

This is a behavior we observed in trauma teams in the midst of the pandemic. For instance, as part of Covid-19 planning, clinicians were asked about where in the hospital they would be comfortable being deployed if needed. In thinking about that question, many members of these health care teams realized that even though they hadn't worked in a particular service for a while, they would be able to go there. And some of them ended up saying, "plug me in wherever you need me." In the past, a strong hierarchy and very rigid roles had to be respected. Nobody was allowed to perform tasks outside their role.

However, the pandemic challenged that hierarchy as team members began to work outside their traditional scope to ease the team's workload and enhance its capabilities. While at first, the idea of doing tasks that conventionally belonged to another specialty was unnerving, team members told us that when things become grim, it's possible to become interchangeable.

Capitalize on distributed leadership.

Self-healing teams adopt a cross-training mindset to help each other learn how to fill in the gaps when a team member can't. It doesn't matter if you're the leader or not. What matters is that everybody is ready to step and to take on tasks outside of their role if needed. This often happens in emergency response teams. Different from trauma teams, which have an established composition, emergency response teams are made up of whoever is available at that moment. Therefore, a team could end up with many paramedics or a few paramedics, with the fire department or no fire department, or even with a student emergency response team. They have to function with whoever they've got, and those circumstances inevitably necessitate swapping of tasks, particularly among the trained professionals. It's not uncommon for leadership tasks to get redistributed or assumed by whoever is better equipped to lead in the moment. Therefore, if something happens, they can get back to work as quickly as possible.

Realize the limits of your own expertise and seek help when needed.

Self-healing teams understand that when things go awry, there's no place for people with big egos. They know they must call out bad behavior, and if you're the one being called out, you better shake it off fast so that the team continues to operate as a cohesive unit.

Hierarchy is an innate condition of humans, and no human team is exempt from its influence. While highly effective, swapping leadership tasks in emergency response teams is not straightforward — it requires a certain degree of insight. Sometimes a triggering event prompts a person from the fire department to know that they must take on a leadership task even though the paramedic was supposed to perform it. In those situations, the conversation must be crafted carefully so that everybody on the team knows that the switch happened because of the circumstances, not because of a judgment of incompetence.

In military health care teams, hierarchy is doubly established. There's a hierarchy regarding military rank and also one regarding the health care culture. On these teams, the issue of ego naturally arises. However, in deployed situations where resources are scarce and danger is imminent, team members need to remain open-minded. In many instances, we heard stories of "that" medic who was the "jack-of-all-trades" and knew how to troubleshoot better than even the surgeons.

Because of their deployment experience, they've been exposed to a variety of situations, and if needed, can perform tasks as an anesthesiologist or a nurse in an intensive care unit. They can do triage. They can assist with airway management. And that's fine, because these teams are willing to accept that someone with less professional pedigree might possess the skills needed at a critical moment.

As these teams have taught us, collective self-healing demands that team members understand that the group is more important than the individual. While sensible, it's not an easy premise to embrace. In social insects, like ants, collective self-healing is a natural ability. Ants are very primitive — they can't make decisions by themselves, and their organizational system is biological, not social. Because of that, they don't have the ability to argue about who's more important or who has the best ideas. But humans do, which creates challenges.

Collective self-healing in human teams is not a natural trait; it must be nurtured and developed. As emergency response teams, police SWAT teams, trauma teams, and military health care teams showed us, it requires a strong learning and teaching mindset. You know you've struck gold when you have a team member who's willing to gain knowledge and learn skills and attitudes outside their professional scope. And this mindset implies that any time that's available to team members is used to train and retrain so that there's no gap or lack of proficiency when it comes to an unexpected event.

Leaders trying to keep up with the ever-changing challenging issues of our society should reflect on a few questions:

- Do our teams currently interact in ways that enable a collective self-healing capacity?
- If not, can our organizational values, roles, responsibilities, and mindset evolve in ways that will enable collective self-healing?
- If we opened up opportunities for working outside of our assigned tasks or roles, what would that make possible?

Although the answers to these questions might not be straightforward, they at least should provoke thought. Ultimately, the end result for the trauma, police SWAT, emergency response, and military health care teams is a much more cohesive team and a higher probability of a positive outcome. Isn't that what any organization is looking for?

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