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Finding Serendipity During The Coronavirus Pandemic



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Leadership Strategy

I write about risk and resilience both personal and professional.



Our reaction to the unexpected defines who we are as people and as organizations. What will you do ... [\[+\]](#) GETTY

Summer is drawing to a close, schools are reopening (maybe), and the pandemic feels like it's going to slog on forever. The future is wildly uncertain and yet the days drag on predictably. How can we create moments of serendipity to break up the monotony? To find out, I spoke with Dr. Christian Busch, Director of the CGA Global Economy Program at New York University and author of *The Serendipity Mindset* about how we can pursue

moments of serendipity or “smart luck”. I hope that his words bring you some optimism and inspiration.

“Applying a serendipity mindset allows us to let go of the old illusion of control,” says Busch, “and instead helps us to turn the unexpected from a threat into a potential ally.” Letting go of expectations is important during a difficult time for so many people and businesses. The positive side of releasing ourselves from the track we thought we were on is that it leaves room for something new to take shape. By keeping an open mind and paying attention to the signals around us, we “build a muscle for the unexpected, which becomes key to survival and resilience in times of great uncertainty,” says Busch, adding that the most successful leaders and organizations “actively encourage and instill procedures that improve their ability to navigate the unknown – and cultivate serendipity.” We can still find success –it just might look different from what we envisioned prior to the pandemic.

Moments of crisis shape who we are. “Periods of crisis bring out the best or the worst in people – and often separate real leaders from the rest”, adds Busch. Leaders are under more scrutiny than ever to show a way forward with hope and courage. Building a culture of resilience and openness is a great way to do that, because crises like the Covid-19 pandemic “can be a great opportunity to really commit to one’s values and hone a truly meaningful corporate culture.”

We saw this reaffirmed commitment to values after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico in 2017 and [Best Buy was forced to make difficult choices](#). Ultimately, they chose to support their customers and the community above short-term profitability. They continued payroll while stores were closed, chartered planes to evacuate employees to the mainland, and flew in supplies. Best Buy emerged from the storm stronger than ever and with renewed loyalty from customers and employees. It is our reaction to the

unexpected that ultimately defines who we are as people and as organizations.

When under duress, how can we focus our minds to remain open to the unexpected and flexible to change? Reframing is a valuable skill that can help us get there. Simply put, it is about seeing “an opportunity where others see a problem,” continues Busch. “When we look at the world less in terms of resource needs, and more in terms of creative solutions to problems we have, perceived liabilities can become assets, and the situation is reframed from one of passivity and powerlessness to one of activity and opportunity.” That leaves open the possibility for serendipity even under resource constraints, inspiring distillers to make hand sanitizer and fashion companies to sew personal protective equipment and masks. We can rise to the challenge at hand and approach it creatively. Leadership is about modeling this behavior.

The pandemic is a unique kind of crisis in that it forces us to stay apart, which reduces the chance to model culture and the kinds of interactions that usually spark creativity. The remote workplace may feel more suited to executing tasks than inspiring new ideas. That’s why it is important to approach these virtual interactions with intention. Busch recommends “setting hooks” by “giving people potential dots to connect with.” When a colleague or customer asks how you are doing, avoid just saying that you are fine and moving to the business at hand, but rather provide them with some potential touchpoints for engagement by including some detail about a project or sharing an idea.

Who knows? These conversations could lead to the next world-changing idea. One thing we know for sure is that Covid-19 will change how we live in innumerable ways. With some mindfulness, we can find serendipity even in this most challenging of times by reframing “the unexpected away from a threat to an infinite basket of potentiality,” as Busch puts it. What can you

do to remain open and seize the opportunities that emerge even in the darkest moments of crisis?

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