

# Playbook Actions For The Evolving Normal

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2022 has arrived, and it feels eerily similar to our world a year ago due to the rapid contagion and spread of Covid around the world. Although everyone is exhausted from dealing with this virus, Covid-related challenges continue to be one of the top issues leaders face as we start the new year.

Forget the expression, “the new normal.” It’s an *evolving normal*, and it will continue to evolve for years to come. Leaders need to be nimble, creative, and empathetic, alongside being decisive, proactive and data-driven.

This is the underpinning of the evolving normal. It doesn’t mean that long-held traditional leadership attributes are no longer important. Rather, we now need a mix of soft and hard, as well as new and untested thinking.

## The Evolving Playbook

For starters, for the foreseeable future, leaders need to be nimble in how they handle instant and dramatic change. This is no longer an “if;” it’s “when.”

When things were shutting down at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, I often said that no one had a “pandemic playbook” to work from. We needed to figure it out as we went along.

Two years later, leaders can no longer wing it if they want to achieve the best results. You need to create the 2022 version of the pandemic playbook. Think of this as “The Evolving Playbook.” Whether it is a global virus or some other unforeseen disaster, leaders need to be prepared for what they don’t know today.

As I was writing this, one of my clients experienced a rapid downshift of business that will be either delayed or canceled until the end of January due to the rapid spread of Omicron. Another client is scrambling to hire because they are so severely understaffed that they can’t get their work done.

These are two very different problems. Both scenarios can coexist, though, and both are problematic. Both require being nimble and creative. And both are examples of what will be typical, not occasional, leadership issues in years ahead.

**Consider this:** at the end of December 30% of the members of the New York City Fire Department were out sick with Covid, and countless other enterprises were suffering from comparable staff emergencies. Staff outages have been part of the pandemic playbook since the beginning, but most employers still don’t have a well-thought-out Plan B.

Layering on to this is the impact of “The Great Resignation.” Employees are fleeing their jobs because they are overwhelmed and burned out. Many factors contribute to this phenomenon, including people who are rethinking their careers. Whether baby boomers who are cutting short their work time and diving into retirement, or millennials who no longer want to tolerate working 24/7, this rethinking crosses the generations.

The combination of massive Covid and employees bailing out of their jobs needs a playbook. What do you do if some people are isolating with Covid and their co-workers are plotting their departures?

## Playbook Actions for the Evolving Normal

This sobering reality presents an opportunity for leaders to shift gears, decide on a direction, and move forward on a positive track. Follow these suggestions for taking a fresh look at the evolving normal and then adapt what will work best in your situation. Add what works best to your playbook.

- **Be proactive and decisive.** The operative word is *proactive*; the detrimental word is *reactive*. Importantly, you don't need to have all the answers, but you need to have enough grit to keep your organization going and moving ahead. People look to you to lead, not to flounder.

**Example:** Don't wait for the inevitable staff shortage. Look for people to supplement your key positions and hire where appropriate. If you're nervous about adding to your overall payroll, you can always hire as contract workers or permalancers.

- **Beyond figurehead.** Remember that your staff looks to you for leadership, so how you behave during challenging times has a direct impact on them. You may need to spend extra time or offer additional help. Either way, be prepared to do this with compassion and confidence.

**Example:** Meet in small groups with key staff to discuss concerns and brainstorm ways to improve processes or develop new business. Be part of the team, not just a figurehead.

- **Refresh your vision.** Your organizational vision today needs to weave in the unknowns. Continually observe and solicit feedback so that you can contextualize the evolving normal that your organization faces.

**Example:** Use some of the ideas that come from the small group meetings to determine what, if anything needs to be finetuned in your organizational strategy. Share with your team and add the best ideas to your playbook.

- **Consider what's behind the curtain.** Whether it's the need to home-school children, care for an elderly parent, or face a cancer scare, your staff has so much more going on in their lives than you're likely to know. Being empathetic makes a huge difference, even if you don't know specifically what's happening. Kindness and compassion are leadership bonuses.

**Example:** This is especially important if you are working remotely or on a hybrid plan. Make sure you have one-on-one time with key employees to give them guidance or just to listen. This will enhance your sincerity.

- **(Over)communicate.** So many initiatives break down from poor communication. That's an easy fix when you're intentional and commit to making sure that your message is coming across clearly and on a timely basis.

**Example:** The rule of thumb is “don't assume.” Keep people in the loop and establish a communication plan as part of your playbook.



- **Don't try to be perfect.** None of us knows what's next and all we can do is do our best under imperfect circumstances. Explain to your stakeholders that you're all in this together and welcome insights that can help face the uncertainties.

**Example:** This only works if you, as the leader, are receptive to feedback. If you usually disparage the ideas that come to you, they may just be the last ideas that come your way.

While you're busy keeping your company afloat and providing support to everyone around you, don't forget about your own needs. It's likely that you need better boundaries and time to breathe. And you don't need to do this alone. Consult an executive coach or a counselor who can work with you.

In the aggregate, these suggestions will help move your organization forward. Don't try to do all of them at once. Start with the one that will have the biggest short-term impact and go from there.

As we continue to face Covid and jittery staff, among other challenges, make sure you maintain optimism. Having a vision with an optimistic future will give you and your colleagues hope. With the realism in your evolving playbook and the right attitude, you'll get to where you need to go – it just may not be the route you envisioned.



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