

Why Business Leaders are Going through the Stages of Grief

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As a business leader, it probably hasn't occurred to you that you would be going through the stages of grief.

After all, you were coming off a strong 2019. You had a plan. You built a team. That goal you were chasing? It was just in reach.

Then an unexpected global pandemic hits, and you watch those plans

evaporate. Now you must face a steep learning curve of survival.

Emotionally, you are reeling.

Of course, it probably doesn't feel or look like reeling. Instead, it feels like intense frustration. We feel a dark cloud of negativity. We may come across edgier or lose patience. We attempt to numb the body blow with busyness. Or, we experience the flatline of inertia.

The thing about market downturns and drops in company valuations is that everyone feels it.

It's the reality of loss.

And big losses of any kind—at least the losses of things that matter to you—kick off the very human cycle of grief. Business grief is real.

Definitions of the stages of grief for business—and how leaders experience them

Each of my clients is at some stage of the [Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief](#). Here's what that looks like:

1. Denial

Some clients are saying, “We'll get through this in a few months and things will get back to normal. It won't hit us that hard.”

You might experience this from a client who will not make contingency plans or have a conversation about potentially unfavorable outcomes.

The denial mindset short circuits the immediate steps needed to triage and stabilize. Leaders who stay in this stage find themselves having lost valuable time and resources because they didn't move fast enough. The suddenness of the coronavirus caught everyone off guard. In fact, I spent a week of, "wait and see," instead of taking my own advice to make sure our boat was ready for this storm. I did have a plan ready.

Denial can harden if you've taken the initial brunt. On the surface, it looks like resilience. It's not. Hunkering down is still denial. It remains stuck on short term decisions hoping for things to eventually return to the old normal.

The power of a plan is it separates you from the emotional grief cycle and into strategic action versus emotionally reacting.

2. Anger and irritation

A client snapped at me a few weeks ago.

I was on a call with a leader developing an agenda for a 50-person workshop in September. When I commented, "We are in a 60-day period of uncertainty. Should we start by nailing down some goals and deliverables and come back to see how the crisis is playing out?"

The anger was immediate. "Put your paranoia aside and stick with the agenda."

We know we are in the anger stage when we respond with hostility to inconveniences. Or when we bristle at new demands that cut across our plans and expectations. It can erupt when the learning curve to adopt something new is longer and messier than you thought. If you find yourself on the other side of a reaction that feels disproportionate to the issue, you can be sure the other person is reacting out of the stress of fear.

Your best move is to pause, take a break, and re-engage when the atmosphere calms down.

3. Bargaining and Buffering

Bargaining is a weird phase, but we all do it. For business leaders, we start making odd tradeoffs.

For example, those of us with OCD tendencies can feel as if our performance on small, inconsequential things will improve outcomes. (If you find yourself spending too much time catching up and cleaning up emails, this could be you.)

We can also make moves in this phase where we give up something, believing it will help us get something we've lost back. Or we make weird, unhealthy compromises. (In a breakup, this would be responding with, "Could we still be friends?")

Bargaining looks different for each person. If you are in this stage, you may also find yourself becoming angry when the bargains you make don't pay off.

4. Depression and Despair

This one is hard to see in others, and easy to miss in ourselves.

For the most part, we experience depression as a lack of response—either in our emotions or action. Our internal fire doesn't spark. We find it hard to engage.

While there are lots of causes of depression, in grief, we tend to experience it as hopelessness. We feel as if we can't impact our situation. And that lack of belief keeps us from investing the effort. Despair appears in two forms: the fog of inertia or the knee-jerk reactions of panic.

These are three sides to our primal survival instincts of fight, freeze, or flight. When faced with what feels like an overwhelming threat, we either avoid the issue, withdraw into a mental form of the fetal position or we lash out like a cornered animal.

I'm watching many of my clients make wholesale decisions with this frame of mind. Decisions made during this stage of personal stress will do the greatest collateral damage to your company's psyche and culture.

The alternative is having the mental clarity to make intentional strategic Triage decisions.

Leaders don't have the luxury of staying too long in the depression phase. If you do, the loss will be greater than it is now.

5. Acceptance and Adventure

This stage varies based on the leader, but it results in some emotional detachment and objectivity. You stop trying to get back to “normal” (whatever that was). You are reconciled with your loss.

In this phase, you are more able to make plans based on the current reality rather than being colored by the emotions or drivers of the other stages.

When you reach this stage, you feel a surge of energy, a renewed sense of purpose, a clarity of action, and a calm that will calm others.

Stages of grief for business leaders —and the outliers who have moved through them quickly

About 5% of my clients are still in denial. About 20% are simply angry —some feel the whole thing is a conspiracy. Up to 50% are in stage three, and about 20% have reached the point of panic.

Grief is a natural response to loss—but we rarely notice it in ourselves when it comes to our businesses. But once you become aware you are moving through the stages, then you will notice when your decisions are being colored by the stage you are in. With awareness, you can take steps to mitigate it.

Some of my clients in the acceptance phase, see the current challenge

as the new adventure.

I had one of those inspiring conversations this week with [Bob FOX](#), founder of [FOX Architects](#). He is a competitive sailor. He compared the current business conditions to running into a sudden storm on the high seas. His adrenaline surges and heightens his sense of curiosity and anticipation. These conditions test all of the training and preparation of the crew. There is typically some damage, mistakes are made, but the crew knows in advance what they are signing up for. Most of the time the seas are sunny, challenging, and exhilarating. But on occasion, that sea can suddenly turn into a monster, producing a pit of fear in your gut. That fear, however, quickly turns into disciplined action. On the other end Bob describes the relief of surviving, the satisfaction in the new lessons learned, and the stronger bond the crew built together.

Bob's story reminded me of this scene from Forest Gump that highlights some of these stages of grief to acceptance.

When leaders like Bob talk, they discuss this time as an opportunity to innovate and reinvent. ***These leaders are experiencing the same external circumstances, the same pressures, but have a genuinely different level of energy.***

Why?

They have processed through the four stages that *preoccupy our cognitive and emotional energy*. They've moved through to acceptance quickly, and in a way are set free.

You can't skip a stage of grief. You have to walk through it. Your pace of moving through these stages will depend on how quickly you can

recognize what is happening inside of you. When you embrace the emotions fully without trying to outrun them and really let yourself feel the loss, it accelerates the path to acceptance.

These outliers are performing at their best and are inspiring their companies. Not to mention, they are reducing stress for others and adding confidence to their teams just through their positive energy.

(Note: People in denial can express positivity too, but it rings hollow to those around them because it isn't based in reality.)

Why business leaders have no choice but to manage their stages of grief

As a leader, people will look to you as an emotional barometer.

We are emotionally contagious, happy, sad, calm, or present. If your mind is consumed with the personal loss and disorientation, you spark it in others—whether you intend to or not.

The thing about grief is that it is real and unavoidable—but being unaware of it makes it difficult to inspire or lead. You can direct, order, and react but that zaps the potential for your teams to rise to the challenge.

If you think the disengagement number of 70% is bad during normal times, just add a leader with unmanaged grief into that mix and the 20% of toxic employees' balloons.

Negative mindsets are just as contagious as a virus. It is called, social contagion.

So, what's the solution? How does a leader process business grief?

A few people have the toolkit to process through these four stages rapidly (usually because they've been through it before).

But not everyone comes equipped and will yo-yo back and forth through these four stages.

If you feel you are moving too slowly through the stages of grief as a business leader, I have some recommendations to help.

1. **Find someone to process with.** The preference is to find someone who is wired differently than you. If you are outgoing and confident find someone who is calmer and more reflective, and vice-versa.
2. **Realistically assess where you are on the Kübler-Ross scale.** You will be at different stages depending on your personal circumstances and how emotionally you are connected to those circumstances.
3. **If you don't have a mentor you can process with, hire someone you trust.** Here is a short plug for [my firm](#): we do this work, every day. We specialize in leaders navigating crises. We're trained at it and can get you through the four stages quickly and shift your energy and the energy of your organization to approach this as an opportunity.
4. **Find people in your office who are good emotional barometers for how your people are feeling.** These people may not be leaders, but they will have the pulse of the team.

5. **Ask for our soon to be released course *The Ultimate Recession Survival Kit*.** We have links to two of our pre-launch samples; [Why You Can No Longer Look Like an Amateur Online](#), and [Preparing for the Great Return to Work](#). If you are interested in enrolling when we launch you can sign up at [The Launch](#).
6. **We have several consultants who specialize in different areas of triage.** Some can review your budget and find hidden waste or opportunities. Some are experts analyzing current staff to help you identify those at risk, those who may be hidden leaders, and those you may need to let go of. Send a note to receive the complete list of triage expertise we can provide.

I am going through this with you. I am out to save my business and preserve the future of my kids. I am embracing this journey with its own form of fury because I have made it to the other side before and I've come out a more vital human.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote, "The most beautiful people we have known, are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen."

No one seeks this kind of crisis and its stress. However, the transformation only comes by walking through a crisis and making it to the other side.

My firm has been a reliable guide to leaders getting to that other side for more than ten years. You can [START NOW](#).

Resources:

Burnout - <https://bit.ly/2TD5LX5>