Episode 9: We're All Incident Managers Now with Kirsty Marshall

Oliver Hussick: Hi, my name is Oliver Hussick, Principal Consultant at WXC for HCL. Thanks for joining us again in our Compassionate Change Management series, sharing our knowledge on what to do when the nature of change changes. And our third episode. We're going to talk about incident management, how to remain calm and convey calmness to others in your organization. How to communicate with clarity and the importance of acknowledging the new normal is hard for everyone.

This brings me to Kirsty, who in the middle of the pandemic was very much boots on the ground, getting her hands dancing with a major client, supporting their communications and directing them to manage change compassionately.

What recommendations would you be making Kirsty to any of our listeners as a sort of sneak preview to our WXC booster packs as a timestamped incident manager in major data centers? You've presumably seen your fair share of outages, accidents and unexpected occurrences. What are your top tips?

Kirsty Marshall: Thank you. Oliver. So you're right. And part of managing a number of large scale incidents over the years, affecting data centers and network, UK, EU and globally. The difference that we're facing here is that usually when something goes wrong on a technical level, 9-10 of people in the company can sit back and let the techie people sort it out. They might have to work around the problem. They might have to find another way to get their work done.

But they're very rarely involved in the root cause analysis, the problem solving. They can leave that to someone else. Which is how it should be. The problem that we have now is that this is a global pandemic affecting everybody. So for the first time, certainly in my career, we have a situation where every single person who is a line manager or has responsibilities, other people, they've been thrown into the deep end and they're having to change their management style basically overnight without any training, any preparation.

And it's very, very difficult. So what I'm seeing a lot of is that people are default to their standard management style, which is very normal, very natural. But actually, my argument is that we need to stuck away from our data management style and start thinking more like an instant manager would. So, for example, a lot of managers at the moment are very into getting their team talking. Share your experiences. Let's talk about the Corona virus pretty much 24/7, because that's on.

That's all anyone can think about in an instant war room. You don't actually sit around and talk about how terrible the situation is for hours at a time, you're focused on a resolution. I think it's actually quite dangerous people to sit around and share things they wrote on Facebook messages that are not aligned with health care professionals. And for the first time, we have a lot of managers who are having to really control the message within their team. We're shutting down conversations about essentials that will not do anything to protect you against the virus.

That can seem quite natural to someone who's used to working in a quite permissive, open and transparent team, too. This is just one of the examples of ways that I think managers need to shift their thinking away from being a lovely, supportive, good manager into being an instant manager, making difficult decisions.

Kirsty Marshall: I'm interested. I'm just checking that this isn't feedback for the management style with enough within in practice. I'm blessed with an incredibly astute and mature and wise team. We're not discussing homeopathic treatments, but my team. Thankfully, we do find ourselves discussing on a daily basis the impacts of people. Do you think there's a burning desire for people to not obsesses but miser in in the pandemic itself and use it as an excuse to move away from it? Or do you think people would prefer to be supported by their leaders and guided back towards productivity and the destruction that it brings?

Kirsty Marshall: I think the one thing that we will need to remember is that your team is still the same people that they were before this happened. So if, if you know your team. If, if you know that they are people who would welcome and kind of need emotional support for me. That hasn't changed. However, if you're managing a team of people who are very self-reliant and actually are uncomfortable with those overly supportive conversations, they have not had new personalities overnight.

So while I think it's important for managers to create a space for their team to talk about what they're worried about, what the realities are, you know, how is it for you right now, today? It's also important that the manager is the person who can bring it back into the workplace and not let it spiral. Too apocalyptic fantasies. So it's good to know that you'll have it, that your team are having a bad day because the Wi-Fi isn't very good and they'll go kick in the house.

And they're just genuinely, really worried. But you can't allow that to escalate and escalate. I think it's the hardest part of being a manager is you have to listen to these great emotional stories at the moment and you have to hold them for your team member. You take that burden away from them and then you gently direct them back into what they can do now.

Oliver Hussick: I think that's great advice. I must admit, one of the things I'm focusing on is not turning everything into an incident. So whilst we're all being required to be incident managers, my son, who is being homecschooled here for the duration of this week, walked into a conference call this morning and almost just started participating. the colleagues that he knows from the call, completely oblivious to the fact that senior leaders in far flung countries were on the call.

And the important thing is to remain normal. My personality hasn't changed overnight. I'm still a doubt is still important. It's no point in managing a child in a room like an incident. You talk about the practicalities, the things that we can do here and now. What would your top tips be then, from guiding people through the easy to remember management methods required when you've suddenly become an instant manager.

Kirsty Marshall: There's actually a short article that I wrote in graphic. Well, very busy at the moment. And he's got time to read an article and look at the pictures. So that's available to hcltech.com and on my own link. Can the. But yeah, I think it's important to remember that we are all currently operating in a state of stress. We have a lot more adrenaline in our bloodstream when we normally do. And I've noticed when I'm interacting with people that it's very easy because we are all dealing with a stressful situation.

So something small on top of that can feel like the end of the world. It is a difficult challenge for managers to recognize that not just in themselves, but also within my team and be able to de-escalate conversations and conflict before they go any further by reminding people that, guys, we're all incredibly stressed right now. We're all on high alert constantly. This disagreement we are having is not really about access privileges, but without shaming or embarrassing your team who are who are having a normal human reaction to an unprecedented level of ongoing stress.

Oliver Hussick: Absolutely. It's okay to not be okay, right?

Kirsty Marshall: Yeah.

Oliver Hussick: And I think that's an important thing to remember. You and I were chatting just before we started recording for the podcast about when you're trying to be inclusive, you've got to appreciate that this crisis is affecting people in many different ways. I don't mind admitting to the fact that I've recently moved 150 miles across the country. I've moved away from my social circle to a quiet, quiet rural village that operates in in an insular fashion.

It's only an hour from London, but it's a different life to my life in the city. And so part of my life is indoors. There are other people on our team who are regularly working from coffee shops. There are other members of the team that are exit so classes throughout the course of every day to get that kind of engagement. And those people have been impacted more. So I think to your point about de-escalate and in understanding how people are likely to react to things very differently is very prescient.

Kirsty Marshall: I think it's an important point about how we're going to measure the impact of this on our workplaces, on our own personal lives, and we'll be measuring it from for years to come. But it reminds me of when we were managing network incidents. No matter how well you measure the up time will be available to you of any service. Clients would phone up and insist that they were down for six hours. When, you know, it was 30 minutes and they weren't lying.

But to them, the impact was much more than the 30 minutes SLA fail that we were communicating about. It probably felt like six hours to them. You really can't measure the impact that this is having on us in terms of availability or uptime, like we would deserve it.

Oliver Hussick: So, I think this perception is reality. I think your first-hand insights are extremely useful here. I really want to thank you for helping us understand the challenges of change in a time of turmoil. That concludes our third episode and hopefully lead to better equipped to understand where to start,

where to go for. How can how WXC are geared up for compassionate change management, no matter the circumstances, can be enough from us right now.

But if you still have any questions on hand and inquiries via email. Its WXC@hcl.com, where we can happily guide you to the right resources, be a technology based or people based, and help you make sure your response to COVID-19 is compassionate communicative. Most importantly, user-centric. Thanks very much for listening. Kristy, thanks for joining me.

And to those of you listening, presumably at home. Be sure to look out for future content from WSC and HCL Consulting Practice.

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