



SUMMARY



Tactical approaches and experiences of Forum CEOs during Alert Level 4

These experiences come directly from discussions with Forum CEOs during New Zealand's period of Alert Level 4 in late March and April 2020.

Key themes are:

Communication

**Connection outside
of contracts**

**Capturing learning to
lock in improvements**



Communication

Making it regular, transparent, consistent and personal

The single most universal lesson from Forum CEOs during Alert Level 4 has been the importance of communication with workers, contractors and clients.

“Some of my managers were getting frustrated about the amount of communication they were needing to do, and how ‘it’s keeping them from their work’. I’ve had to remind them that engaging our people is the work.”

It was striking how many CEOs emphasised the importance of personal communication and leading that by example. Evidence and experience tell us that this empathy helps reduce some anxiety.

“If I’d written a letter to myself a year ago knowing what I know now, it would’ve said – get to know your people and let them know you. That personal connection has created a space for people to actually hear what we’re saying, and us to hear them.”

Equally, a number of CEOs cited the need to be honest and transparent with people about the vulnerabilities of the business and the reality of change. Practically, a number of CEOs talked about chunking the current environment into different “horizons” or “phases”, such as *react (now) refocus (2-3 months) and growth (4-18 months)*.

“I know some of my people are still getting to the grips with the vulnerability of our organisation – especially when we’ve lost 90% of our revenue. My work is to provide them context for that reality, and the change we didn’t create, but must respond to.”

Mixture of approaches:

- Virtual “town hall” meetings
- Recorded messages
- Weekly emails
- Small updates during the week as required
- Multi-level communication with managers and supervisors stepping up
- In person (and appropriately distanced!) presence at “tool box meetings” during night shifts.



Connection

Connecting with your value chain “outside of the contract”

The lockdown and Level 3 work has meant huge changes for how businesses work with their contractors and clients.

A powerful and recurring experience from CEOs was of the value they got from themselves and their leaders directly engaging with key contractors and clients. These discussions didn't focus on contractual terms – rather they focused on *listening to understand context, sharing information and then looking for solutions.*

“Having our COVID plan is fine, but we're one of 8+ contractors on site – how those plans come together is critical – so the conversations matter.”

“Other clients haven't matched actions to words – with the priority being about getting to 110% productivity on day one, or moving from 30 to 60-day terms by decree not discussion.”

These CEOs were clear that this relationship approach:

- strengthened the relationship with their key client or contractor
- identified solutions for both parties that a contractually-defined conversation would have missed
- highlighted how narrow their pre-COVID approaches to contractual relationships were
- flagged the need to develop the capability of managers and leaders to have those discussions as a core competency.

“Some of our clients have been great, and moved to weekly payments that has meant cashflow has been managed. They also agreed week one of Level 3 was about planning, preparations and getting set for week two, when productive work gets underway.”

“We picked the phone up and talked to our contractors as people – I don't know why we've not always done it this way.”



Learning

Be deliberate about reflecting and capturing learning to lock in improvements

Almost all CEOs we've spoken with have talked about the pride in their people and leaders adapting to the demands of working in a COVID-world.

In combination with the difficulties and pressure on organisations to respond, CEOs referenced examples of small but material improvements or innovations that were accelerated by COVID-19, such as:

- implementing different roster and shift approaches
- use of virtual or remote approaches for inductions
- broadened relationships with key clients and suppliers
- digitalised work processes
- identifying refinements to recruitment criteria and retention approaches.

A smaller group of CEOs, however, talked about creating the time, space and bandwidth to deliberately reflect and debrief on those lessons. The examples of how some CEOs were capturing that learning weren't elaborate or sophisticated, but were deliberate, such as:

- scheduled debriefs by the leadership team at Alert Level transition points
- setting up an internal taskforce to consider work processes to *start, stop or improve*
- focused 'think tanks' to explore flexible work arrangements post-crisis.

“There's a productivity gain in this if we look for it – we're identifying good people, we're exercising our ability to adapt, we're trying new approaches and using technology in ways we wouldn't have thought practical just a month ago. We have a real opportunity to be better.”