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# The Human Side of Business Resilience

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Case Study

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## Company Background

Colleges and universities faced enormous challenges throughout 2020. COVID-19 required a transformation to remote learning and highlighted social inequities and systemic anti-Black racism. Here we share how one faculty at a highly respected Canadian university (name withheld to protect confidentiality and herein referred to as “University X”) built resilience into operations using the steps presented in CPA Canada’s guideline “Business Resilience: Strengthening Your Organization”.

With more than 20,000 students, University X is seen as one of Canada’s top post-secondary education providers and is highly ranked in Canada for the student experience it provides. Focusing on interdisciplinary academic excellence with a view to provide students with the agility required for today’s workforce, University X is proud of the community experience it provides as it strives to create an inclusive and equitable environment for all students. Academia has very much become a business in recent years, with strong competition for both “customers” (students) and funding, a higher level of accountability in expenditures and strategic results, and a push to bring in the best talent to provide the highest quality experience in the marketplace.



With reduced revenue, concerns about enrollment and the implementation of a completely different delivery model University X was facing one of its biggest challenges ever. All of this occurred within a multi-layered and complex administrative environment involving many stakeholders with different needs.

One of the larger groups in the university, Arts & Sciences, led by their dean, had already been on a path of strategic planning and aligned purpose, and was able to quickly pivot towards what needed to be done to best serve their community. With a similar number of employees to a mid-sized company, each faculty area largely operated independently during this time depended on their leadership team to drive the plan forward. During the pandemic, their faculty delivered over 800 courses, respecting their mandate of delivering the curriculum as well as ensuring job stability.



## Approach taken by University X

As shown in Figure 1, not only did University X follow the resilience building block framework presented in the guideline but, due to a strong learning culture already in place they were ready to adapt as needed, assisted by a strong sense of purpose and clear strategic initiatives.

FIGURE 1: FOUNDATIONAL BUILDING BLOCKS TO STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE



- 1. Set a long-term vision and a short-term focus.** This is about prioritizing immediate needs and being proactive while focusing on long-term success.
- 2. Align purpose and values with organizational priorities.** Highly resilient individuals have a strong sense of purpose. The same is true of organizations. It is essential for individuals and teams to know why they show up for work every day and what impact they are making.
- 3. Build internal capacity.** Embedding knowledge of the business and ongoing upskilling in the organizational culture will ensure your people are ready to adapt and pivot as needed.
- 4. Create opportunities for cross-collaboration and problem-solving.** The ability to see an issue or challenge from many points of view will help you identify and mitigate risk and seize opportunities.
- 5. Make trust, ethical behaviour and accountability your brand.** Today's uncertainty coupled with widespread access to data and the power of social media to disseminate information continues to accelerate just how quickly a company's reputation can change. Operating in an open, honest and ethical manner will earn goodwill from your stakeholders.



## Implementing the strategy

### Step 1

#### Set a long-term vision and a short-term focus

Under the dean's leadership, the three to five-year strategic vision of making learning more accessible by expanding the offering of online courses was accelerated to a three-month time frame. The leadership team adopted a "survival" approach to the immediate changes that needed to happen to ensure the continuation of operations. They were able to frame projects in terms of their longer-term vision and values. The dean made sure to communicate constantly with their team. This helped the team stay focused and keep momentum going.

Below is an example of the level of communication that was being shared with the leadership team at the beginning of the planning phase:

This afternoon the university will be sending email messages and other social media strategies to prospective students, current undergraduate and graduate students, staff and faculty about class delivery for Fall 2020. While maintaining our commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion and Indigeneity, teaching excellence and academic integrity, we will move together to be as transparent, fair and accountable as possible and to further the goals of our strategic plan.

It is very important for you to know that the decisions that have been made about an undergraduate remote fall and a wider range of course delivery for graduate instruction have been shaped by:

1. public health and physical distancing regulations
2. commitment to strategic plan principles:
  - equity, diversity and inclusion including anti-racism, decolonization and Indigenous resurgence
  - excellence in teaching research and service
  - transparency, accountability and fairness
  - continuous learning, professional development and global engagement
3. "we are all in this together"
4. financial prudence

These messages will be posted to Teams and attached to this email so that you are aware of what has been sent to our various communities.

Again, on behalf of the faculty, thank you for your thoughtfulness, hard work and leadership.

Constant communication and the calm acceptance of inevitable moments of panic supported the team and enabled them to keep going.



**Step 2****Align purpose and values with organizational priorities**

The leadership team were mobilized primarily from a place of care: care for their community, their students and the jobs that would be at risk if they were not able to adapt the on-campus experience to a virtual one. They used their values (taken from their long-term strategic plan) as their decision-making filter when they had to make hard choices. Their strong guiding principle of having a united faculty promoted increased collaboration to problem-solve the almost daily challenges that emerged. The need to follow public health guidance further united and focussed the leadership team on common goals.

**Step 3****Build internal capacity**

The leadership team focussed on their commitment to excellence in teaching, research and service when making decisions about the design and delivery of virtual education.

Tasks were aligned to individual strengths. The ability to apply each person's skills to the multiple short-term projects required to meet their deadlines was fundamental to success in implementing the changes.

Agility was further supported by the shared value of continuous learning and professional development. Many individuals on the leadership team were required to refresh a certain skill set or take on entirely new functions within certain projects that were essential to implement the pandemic strategy.

**Step 4****Create opportunities for cross-collaboration and problem-solving**

The best ideas come from a diverse group of minds. By branching off into sub-groups and committees which made the best use of their individual strengths and areas of interest, the leadership team was able to solve problems quickly. Using each other as a sounding board for the different phases of the plan allowed them to identify gaps and create customized, comprehensive solutions.

The CPAs on the team served a key role in the following ways:

- provided rapid analysis of the potential outcomes of proposed solutions and mapped out different scenarios to aid in decision-making
- advised on procuring the technological platform and tools needed to make the plan happen
- reallocated budgets to provide funds for the technological investments, necessary research and external consultants to help execute the strategy
- provided an overview of the short-term strategy's sustainability and what the leadership team would have to do heading into the fall of 2021 and beyond
- provided an objective sounding board and moral support for the key members of the leadership team



**Step 5****Make trust, ethical behaviour and accountability your brand**

The behaviour and accountability of the leadership team was fundamental to the success of the plan. Using their values of transparency, accountability and fairness as guidelines kept communication flowing, responsiveness high and ownership strong.

They did not always make the right decision or give the correct answer, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, but these values allowed the team to be agile and move through issues quickly while maintaining trust with each other and their community. Individual resiliency came from sharing a common goal, from the level of resolve towards maintaining a service culture and from remaining aligned with the overarching vision and purpose.



**Speed Matters.** In all of the steps listed above, time was of the essence. Regular meetings were set up to offer accountability and maintain momentum; a decision-making process ensured that decisions were made with the most accurate information available, and adjustments were made as needed. The team was learning as they went, so last-minute pivots became the norm, and an urgent energy very much became part of the team's culture.



# Key Learnings

The faculty successfully applied the RAISE philosophy and foundational building blocks necessary to build resilience. In doing so, it was able to continue selling its products and services through an entirely new and untested delivery method while protecting its people, assets and brand.

Routines and practices were adjusted in realtime. Through the complete transformation of operations, the faculty was able to deliver more than 800 courses and support its employees and students through a highly uncertain and stressful time.

University X now finds itself entering a phase where there is more choice regarding future strategy. The leadership team knows they have a proven capacity for rapid decision-making and innovation, and they can establish more ambitious goals for the future.



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About the Author

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### Jennifer Gervès-Keen

Ranked one of the world's top 100 outstanding consultancy experts by CEO Today magazine in 2018, 2019 and 2020, Jennifer Gervès-Keen is a master corporate executive coach and author of *Show Up Like a Coach*.

After 12 years working in France to hone her communication and business skills in English and French, Jennifer moved back to Canada in 2005. In 2008, she launched JGK Consulting with the goal of raising the bar in executive development to develop better leaders who are able to create and sustain great organizations.

A passionate lifelong learner, Jennifer completed her master's degree in adult learning during her time in France. She became a certified coach in 2013 and won the prestigious ICF Prism Award for excellence in organizational coaching in 2014, along with completing her foundational training in neuroleadership. In 2019, she completed her certified change management practitioner (CCMP) training.

You can learn more about Jennifer and JGK Consulting at [www.jgkonline.com](http://www.jgkonline.com).



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