

What has COVID taught us?

If there is anything that the pandemic has taught us, it is to live with uncertainty and discover ways to cope with the suddenly altered reality unfolding before us.

1. Be prepared for the unexpected

The pandemic hit fast. When we left our offices in March 2020, there was no way of knowing most would not even begin to return until the second half of 2021. But the biggest lesson we learnt over those 18 months is that like any other business we too needed a scalable and efficient emergency plan. A plan which would avoid learning interruptions for our learners and confusion for our employees in a crisis.

For instance, as soon as we realised the tremendous impact that the pandemic would have, we realised that AGILITY was the only way to cope with an ever-changing environment. What being agile behaviour meant was communicated organisation through a formal course which every employee was mandated to complete. This helped e recalibrate employee mind-set, our offerings and operations to the new reality. When students could not come to the training centres, we ensured that the learning does not stop by adopting 'Blended Learning' formats.

We further strengthened our ecosystem by adapting to digital learning methodology and extend required support to our partners, youth, faculty and institutional heads.

We launched 'Expand Your Horizon,' a first of its kind intervention designed to help facilitators to explore, enrol and expand skills in other domains of interest that excites them. This enabled Tata STRIVE to optimally utilize facilitator resources as a result of difference in demands in certain courses due to the impact of the pandemic.

2. Encourage collaboration and healthy workspace

We operated in crisis mode for much of 2020 and the first half of 2021, figuring out how our employees could work from home, trying to provide extra mental and physical health support, and working more than ever on C-level strategies to keep our functions going. In many ways, the pandemic renewed the emphasis on the people part of HR's job.

One of the lessons we learnt during the pandemic is to put 'human' back into human resources. We laid great emphasis in understanding the life experiences our employees went through, to support them not just in their experience as employees but in their personal lives too.

We made sure that the roadblocks we came across during the lockdown never diminished our enthusiasm. We addressed feelings of isolation, anxiety by providing access to counselling, we spread positivity through organisation wide town halls and created a 'fun space' through online talent shows and by starting interest groups or STRIVE TRIBES: **Photography, Knowledge, Cooking, Fitness, Talent and Volunteer** in order to encourage collaboration amongst employees and create a healthy workspace. This helped to keep our community stay together and stay resilient through these difficult times.

We also introduced STRIVEvoLVE, a unique learning initiative to help our employees connect and learn, in a fun way during these tough times. It was a collaborative and gamified intervention for

different roles ranging from facilitators, mobilizers, project coordinators, admin team, and other roles at Tata STRIVE.

3. We can be flexible and do more with less

The pandemic forced us to speak to our community in different ways, and to learn to do more with less, in times of uncertainty. We had to move away from our centre based learning model to a digital one, board room meetings were shifted to online meeting rooms, events went online- seminars and employee engagement activities transitioned to a 100% online mode. This approach made it easy for our learners to access expert lectures, webinars, and online interactions. It really reinforced the value of an adaptable team and flexibility in how we speak to our audience.

4. Cultivate strong relationships

At the onset of pandemic we wouldn't have imagined the reaching our target of impacting 1 million lives and that too before the target date we had set for ourselves as an organization. We struck new partnerships with corporates and governments who placed their confidence in our ability to serve the community in difficult times. Their support however, didn't come out of thin air. We had cultivated these relationships through various outreach initiatives and by extending the much needed support to our partners during these testing times while maintaining quality of our offering.

The Takeaway

One of the best lessons that we can all learn from the pandemic is renewed commitment to resilience when our organization was tested by a worldwide crisis, we collectively learnt our strengths and the areas in which we could improve.

With the onset of COVID 19 and the associated challenges STRIVE decided to capitalize on the existing strategy and thinking that had led to the Phygital learning model – and take it a step further. Thus, developing the 'Blended Learning' model. Considering a large part of our audience comes from marginalized and economically weaker sections access to gadgets and uninterrupted bandwidth was a luxury few could afford. We circumvented this by design Learning plans in a way that did not require long periods of internet connectivity at a single time. Sessions were broken in a way that learners could login at a time flexibly, thus providing them an opportunity to attend to their daily chores and other responsibilities in the wake of the pandemic. And access learning when they were best equipped with internet connectivity.

We applied our learning and came out of the other side of this pandemic stronger. It's through these difficult times that we find what matters most in our business and in life.

When times are tough during something as unprecedented as a global pandemic, it reminds all of us of the empathy, love and grace that we should treat ourselves, our co-workers and our partners with each day. Reminding ourselves of that and prioritizing it in all our interactions has made us stronger through the adversity we faced during the pandemic.