



**Interview with Dr. Tracy Brower
Excepted from CCC Town Hall, recorded December 15, 2020**

**For podcast release
Monday, January 18, 2021**

KENNEALLY: In the coronavirus pandemic, millions of workers have retreated to safety and isolation found in working from home. Even for those able to return to offices, social distancing practices and virtual meetings have profoundly changed the global workplace.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content

In December, a CCC town hall program examined the surprising ways remote work is remaking work. Organizations are recognizing there will be lasting impacts on people and operations, even when the new normal ends.

Dr. Tracy Brower is a work environment sociologist and a Principal with the Applied Research + Consulting group at Steelcase. In a world that relies more every day on technology, she emphasizes maintaining strong human relationships is a critical survival technique.

KENNEALLY: Welcome to the program, Dr. Tracy Brower.

BROWER: Thank you. So glad to be here.

KENNEALLY: We're very happy to have you. You're a sociologist and the author of two books, *The Secrets to Happiness at Work* and *Bring Work to Life by Bringing Life to Work*. You're a contributor to Forbes.com and *Fast Company* and a principal with the Applied Research + Consulting group at Steelcase.

You have a wonderful theme to share with us around building bridges, and the Mackinac Bridge, the Mighty Mac, as I guess it's called. It's currently the fifth-longest suspension bridge in the world. It links Michigan's upper peninsula and lower peninsula. And it's become a kind of touchstone for you. Tell us about that.

BROWER: Yeah, absolutely. I think this idea of bridges is so apt. We need to bridge to the future. When we drive across the bridge, we may want to be in the center lane, because it's



a little scary sometimes, the height. This Mackinac Bridge, because we're a winter state, is regularly closed now and then during bad weather because of high wind advisories. So I think we all are in this moment of transitioning, of adapting, of building our resilience and building bridges to where we want to go from here.

As difficult as it is, as terrible as it has been, we can come back from the coronavirus. We can be responsive to the pandemic. But our real opportunity is to accelerate where we go from here.

One of the wonderful things about this is that it has caused us to think so consciously about our work, how our work gets done, about our work colleagues, about our workplaces. That consciousness, that intentionality, gives us a wonderful opportunity to accelerate from here. I loved the acceleration that you showed us, Ken. It just gives a whole new perspective on that acceleration of drug development, and we can go to some really new places as individuals, as teams and leaders and organizations.

So we have an opportunity to take a mindfulness, to take a patience, to take an intentionality forward, and to really self-reflect on our own endurance, on our own capabilities. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a really, really difficult situation, but we can think about post-traumatic growth, which gives us new perspective on priorities, which gives us new perspective on connections and new perspective on our own capabilities and endurance.

Another thing that we can take from this is really a sense of endurance and really a sense of resilience. Resilience is defined as three things – it is, number one, having a really clear sense of reality, number two, making sense of that reality, and number three, being able to improvise and solve. I like to think about this as the MacGyver effect. For those of you who are old enough, you remember MacGyver from the '90s. If you're younger, you remember the remade MacGyver. He's a high-action hero, and he's always getting into terrible scrapes. But if he's got a paperclip and a stick of chewing gum and a piece of duct tape, he can seemingly create a rocket ship. This is what resilience is.

When we can go about things in the same way, when we're not limited by new barriers or constraints, we can kind of use our same solutions. But when we are faced with really hard times, we cannot go forward in the same way anymore, and that tends to build resilience, and it tends to build this idea of improvisation and problem-solving in new ways.

Another thing that we take is our own response. We can be so innovative. We can be so creative. Fascinatingly, we've had so many essentials in this process – the essential of research, the essential of knowledge management, the essential of knowledge work, which



has helped us with velocity. That new creativity, that new opportunity to innovate, is a very big deal. It's about analysis, taking things apart. It's also about synthesis, putting things together in new ways.

Technology's a critical part of that. Our work is braided. We do focused work. We do collaborative work. We braid between our tasks, between individual and collaborative work, and technology's a critical part of that as well. One of the things we know about how technology will take us forward is that our learning about technology, our comfort with technology, and our acceptability with technology has increased. It's not that all the new technologies on the horizon haven't been there before. It's that we have new levels of openness to them, and that can take us forward in some really new ways.

The other thing that we can learn and take forward is all about community. So often, we appreciate things for their absence, and we are missing our people. Connections are critical. When we are connected face to face, we get a hit of oxytocin, which is the feel-good chemical. When we are connected face to face, it tamps down that oxytocin release, adrenocorticotropin, and it tamps down cortisol and adrenaline – very good things if we're running from a saber-tooth tiger, but not so much when they're chronic. We need other people for our physical, for our mental, and for our emotional health. We can be gracious. We can have lots of gratitude. And we can really think about holistic well-being – physical, emotional, and cognitive.

How do we get through? If those are the lessons learned and the things we take forward, what do we do from here? At an individual level, we can have a mindset where we're validating the difficulty we've been through. We can keep that end in mind and know there is a light at the end of the tunnel. We can look to support other people and ask for support when we need it. We can really do self-care and self-reflection and remember our own endurance. Sometimes, routine can actually be helpful as we endure over time and create routines that help us with that pattern.

Finally, we can take action. I think sometimes, when we go through really hard times, we can press a pause button. We can step back. We can retract. Really, there's an opportunity to keep going, to keep learning, to put our toes in the water. And we can learn incrementally, which sends important messages to ourselves and validates our capabilities. It also sends important messages to our shareholders, to our stakeholders, to our customers, and it sets us up for more success and future learning.

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you, Dr. Tracy Brower. I really enjoyed that. We live in a world dominated so much by technology that we can feel, perhaps, diminished by it, but it's



important to remember that we have our empathy and our humanity to compensate for those moments when, as you say, the saber-tooth tiger is approaching us.

You called to my attention some recent research that looked at the impact in the work-from-home environment as it relates to artificial intelligence and machine learning, and this is part of an ongoing process as well that's changing work. And perhaps you have some thoughts about the change that AI is bringing to the kinds of work we do.

BROWER: Yeah, I think this is really interesting, and your point about empathy is exactly the key. We have so much need to infuse empathy. That is the human component that AI cannot replace for us. I love to think about AI not just as artificial intelligence, but augmented intelligence. AI is about coming alongside the uniquenesses of what we bring as humans and doing potentially more of the rote, more of the routine, more of the work that is routinized. That gives us an opportunity to raise our purpose, to raise our value, and to think about how we bring those connections, how we really bring an opportunity to think in a more sophisticated way, in a way that brings in nuance. That is part of what we do uniquely as humans, is we can wade nuances, and we can think about those vital social connections in decision-making and in the way we get our work done.

KENNEALLY: Well, Dr. Tracy Brower, again, thank you so much.

Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing.

You can subscribe to this program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook.

I'm Christopher Kenneally.

Thanks for listening and join us again soon for another Velocity of Content podcast from CCC.