



# Executive Briefing

Getting ahead of the curve



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The pandemic has been the ultimate leadership test. It has created fault lines within teams, disrupted organisational norms and exposed leaders' strengths and weaknesses.

For some, the journey has been invigorating. For others, the demands have been overwhelming, whisking them away from their comfort zones at full throttle. For most - as we discovered by talking to a wide range of front-runners - it's a mixture of both.

No wonder that a recent study - *The next normal arrives: trends that will define 2021 and beyond* by McKinsey & Co - predicts a 'dramatic restructuring of the economic and social order.'

**We asked leaders what does the 'new normal' mean for them. Is there a wider shift from more traditional pace-setting leadership to something more human and vulnerable? How do they get ahead of the curve in the current climate and beyond?**

## Is empathy a skill that outshines all others?

'Leadership, if nothing else, is becoming more empathetic,' believes Quique Vivas, consumer director at Vodafone Czech. 'What I'm seeing is a wider shift from more traditional pace-setting leadership to something more human and vulnerable. Empathy creates a safe environment and safe environments are going to be the key to mental wellbeing.'

Smitha Massey, head of learning and development at the BBC, recalls a meeting in which a leader in her organisation exposed a more vulnerable side of himself. 'All of a sudden, it gave everyone the licence to feel safe to do the same. **It was this very powerful moment of this new shape of a leader emerging that is less about being superhuman and more about "we're all in this together".**'



But creating psychological safety isn't the only reason empathetic leadership has moved from a 'nice-to-have' to a 'must-have,' says Massey. While previously, a narrative was emerging about leading with a heart and having EQ, empathetic leadership takes this a step further as it focuses on leaders spotting signs, irregularities and patterns

so they don't miss the important stuff, she believes. 'Now I regularly have people coming up to me asking how they can be a more compassionate leader. To me, it's a no-brainer, but now even the hardcore business leaders are looking around and seeing that they simply can't compete if it's not there.'



'I refuse to believe leaders cannot be compassionate and strong,' said Jacinda Adern, empathy having long been her trademark quality. The New Zealand prime minister believes that **too much focus on power and strength means leaders feel unable to expose their failures, their vulnerability and their honesty, without which leadership becomes manufactured** – something that David Leigh, CEO of global total workforce solutions firm AMS, agrees with. 'I was hyper-alert to giving off cues I didn't intend to. But now I'm pretending less because I want to show others that it's ok to bring the whole of yourself to work and that it's actually a good thing to unlocking creativity.'

### Insight perspective

**By fully appreciating the human environment in which they operate, leaders make deeper connections, communicate better and come to wiser decisions faster.**



## Is diversity just a politically correct fad?

It's one thing to be invited to the party, but if you're left out of the conversation and the dancing when you get there, it can be worse than having stayed at home. The same is true for diversity in business, says Smitha Massey: 'For us, looking at the processes by which we hire and promote talent is only the first step.'

The time has come, she believes, **to become braver in ensuring everyone has a voice, even if that means getting uncomfortable and opening up some difficult conversations.** Billie Major, executive vice president at Capgemini, agrees: 'We need to let people talk, let them explain. The Black Lives Matter movement and the events which drove it have been so impactful emotionally for our employees and it's obvious to me just how essential it is for people to **have the space and support to voice** that.'

David Leigh has had some success in this area with 'time to talk' sessions, in which people from minority groups come together at work to talk about their personal experiences: 'It's been phenomenal in encouraging discussions that you wouldn't normally think to have in the workplace.'

Embracing different perspectives isn't easy. Conflicting ideas and opposing perspectives that are brought to the fore can rub up against each other to generate negative tension. A good leader has to create and role model a culture where diversity of thought is promoted and appreciated, **where conversations come naturally, where expanding mindsets is an expectation and where learning is continuous.** This more progressive approach in which a more enlightened outcome is always forefront of everyone's minds allows diversity to connect rather than polarise people.

Leaders must be aware of hidden bias too. 'If you're in a performance review with your boss, you'll be measured on things like commercial effectiveness then compared with your peers. But the problem is all these metrics are highly subjective to hindsight bias and conformity bias, as well as ignoring the influence that individuals can have on wider teams,' says Junta Nakai, global industry leader for financial services at Databricks.

### Insight perspective

**When leaders embrace diversity and multiple points of view, companies can gain the competitive edge on innovation and performance and serve the interests and prosperity of consumers, suppliers, employees, stakeholders and wider society.**

## Have teams lost their spark?

'My biggest bugbear in large corporates is the silo culture,' says Richard Mayhew, chief people office EMEA at Edelman. 'The good thing about COVID is that it's forcing businesses away from that model. If you put a recruitment freeze in place, suddenly people are screaming out for additional resources and so it forces them to look up and around to get it. In our case, we've put **more focus on resource management and skills transparency** so that we can say, "Ok, this talent exists here, so let's tap into it" and thereby **disrupt the silos** we've been used to.'

For Dr Miles Adcock, president of space imaging at Teledyne e2v, the key lies in team members improving their understanding of each other's roles. 'Some time ago, we began to notice a real gap in this area. So, we started rotating a number of people within our team to either fully do someone else's job or adjust the roles so they move

around. Right now, for example, my previous finance director is my operations director, and the previous operational director is in business development. It's been a massive development for them and the business.'

But the real challenge, believes Billie Major, lies in **getting people to see things from others' perspective** – 'for example, trying to get technical people to put themselves in the shoes of the business professionals and see things from their world.'

Similarly, problematic, says Smitha Massey, is ensuring team performance is optimised without those pre-COVID water cooler moments or informal coaching or feedback sessions on the walk to meetings. **'The need to find ways of bringing people together more informally is critical.** We've all tried and tested the Zoom coffee break, but it's still contrived.'

### Insight perspective

**Teams that invest time considering their internal dynamics and external stakeholders, and build a culture of trust and accountability reap the benefits in performance and engagement.**

## The future of work - should we ditch the short-term lens?

'Most organisations are used to asking what the business looks like today to work out who will be the leaders of tomorrow, but I think we need to flip that thinking,' says Smitha Massey.

'The new question is **what will we need tomorrow and how do we go about building the skills to meet that need?**

Much more work is needed on creating a talent pipeline, not just from a business continuity pipeline, but for the changing needs of the future.'

Growing technological innovations such as **artificial intelligence, big data, virtual reality and more means that everyone will need to feel more comfortable around technology** in the future, believes Quique Vivas. Analytical skills will become particularly important, he predicts, because **most roles will be required to access data and determine how to act on it** – in other words, to navigate the division between human and technology at work. 'In the past, for example, you knew your left-hand-side-of-the-brain marketer could get on just fine, but now this role increasingly requires the **critical thinking skills needed to analyse data, spot trends, find innovative solutions and solve complex problems.**'

Educating for future skills and mindsets will need to be higher on the agenda for schools, colleges and universities, believes Vivas. Memorising facts is, after all, of limited use to employers, whereas young people who not

only know how to find accurate information, but also how to critically analyse its reliability and usefulness is increasingly important. And the same can be said for teaching people how to collaborate with others not just in their peer group but across the world. Resilience, communication and proactivity should also be prioritised.



Due to the speed of change in the workplace, **people will need to be more agile and not just embrace change, but celebrate it**, adds Vivas – our brains will need to be more flexible, to see change as an opportunity not a burden. 'But for now, the hardest thing to recruit is an in-depth knowledge of something intrinsic to the organisation. I find you easily get people attracted to the sexiest part of the business, but not the most boring bits. But you need that balance of strategy and detail – I think that's one of the hardest things.'

### Insight perspective

**With 90% of executives recently surveyed stating their companies faced skills gaps in the next five years, strategic workforce development must be a priority. Without a clear view on critical future skills for the future and a senior commitment to learning, investment in skills development could be a costly mistake.**

## Is it time to re-imagine the workplace?

For Joanne Dewar, CEO of Global Processing Services, the starting point is recreating the physical office space – one with no allocated desks, only collaborative spaces: ‘Of course, we will need to continue to see people for face-to-face meetings and projects but there’s absolutely no point in getting people to commute for an hour or so in order to sit at a desk and do the same thing they can do from home.’



Leaders should **expect to flex to a more fluid kind of working contract**, adds David Leigh: ‘People have already worked out that if you join an organisation as a contractor, you may well stay longer than someone joining as a permanent employee and I think we’ll see more of that kind of situation where the value proposition is the same for all.’

Portfolio careers – a term coined by Charles Handy in the 1980s – has never been so relevant. ‘For the first time in the human experience, we have a chance to shape our work to suit the way we live instead of our lives to fit our work,’ he said. ‘We would be mad to miss the chance. **Look for customers not bosses – the important**

**difference is that the price-tag now goes on your produce, not your time.’**

Miles Adcock believes a new kind of performance management will emerge: ‘If you’re in the same factory or office as your team, it’s easy to be seduced into thinking it’s performance management at its best simply because you can see everyone. But actually, what I’ve learned is that **trying to understand people when they are all remote actually makes me better at understanding** that side of the job,’ he says.

A **greater emphasis on wellbeing** will come into play too, he predicts – not only because the more flexible, home-oriented working culture doesn’t suit everyone (flat sharers, those with young children etc), but because there is greater risk of burnout without a physical separation between work and home.

Digital transformation and the evolving nature of work are changing how we work. Many prominent figures, like former Bank of England deputy governor Sir Charlie Bean, believe that post pandemic the traditional office-based working week is over. PwC, Unilever, Nationwide and BP have all stated an intention to offer staff more control over their working patterns, with others likely to follow. PwC chairman Kevin Ellis said he hoped this would make flexible working the norm, stating **‘We want our people to feel trusted and empowered’**. Companies must consider what more flexible working means for them, in the context of changing future needs, to avoid being left behind.

### Insight perspective

**Re-imagining the workplace is more than just working patterns - it means reinventing the traditional employee value proposition and breaking down silos to build shared purpose. Underpinning all the ‘new normal’ ways of working is trust. It is the glue that binds organisations together, enabling them to navigate and even thrive in unprecedented times. And that starts with leadership.**

## Does values driven leadership hold the key to trust?

It's a given that leaders need to understand what drives their employees. In the COVID crisis, these drivers have been critical in ensuring that employees stay motivated. No wonder so many leaders have been **shining the spotlight both on their own and their organisation's purpose and the values they stand for.** Having recognised the benefits, they are keen to keep up the momentum.

'Values driven leadership is having its day,' declares Guillaume Chesneau, managing director of Nespresso UK & ROI. 'I have a strong sense of what's important to me, but I'm recognising that I need to talk about it more than ever.' He adds, 'In particular, I've noticed a really strong need, particularly among the younger generation, towards understanding corporate social responsibility – in our case, how can we make sure that every single cup of coffee we sell can be a force for good and the environment?'

There's never been a more important time for leaders to embody the values that are important to your organisation, agrees Junta Nakai: **'Leaders are stewards of the culture and should be the person that people can turn to in order to see the values in action.'**

Juliette Regisford-Montague, Head of People & Culture, Aviation at BP agreed and adds **'It's not just about embodying the values of the organisation, but a leaders own personal values. When leaders are more authentic and become better story tellers, this in turns engenders trust.'**

Research increasingly shows that **companies perform better and grow quicker when leaders create visions that reach beyond the bottom line.**

Leaders need to embrace that deep sense of purpose, says Joanne Dewar - 'not just with the big ethical social environmental responsibility stuff but **demonstrating a commitment to values like honesty, integrity, humility and care for people.'**

It's not without its challenges. 'What is the culture of the company? And how do you get that across when people are working more remotely? These are the kinds of questions leaders need to be exploring.'



### Insight perspective

**Whereas in the past, leadership was deemed to be about your vision and strategy and leading through that, it is increasingly recognised that the best leaders empower others and that requires a fundamental shift from traditional leadership.**

## Are you bringing your whole self to work?

If you think about it, many leaders have one persona for work, with their 'true' selves saved for outside work. 'Leadership is acting,' is a common perception among those at the top, yet these same people are surprised when their employees don't trust them. **Far from being 'soft,' authentic leadership makes leaders dependable, constant and honourable.**

**'I learned a long time ago that trying to do anything that didn't come from deep within – and that goes for both flaws and strengths – meant getting it wrong,'** says Colin Hall, headteacher (and one of an elite band of 'superheads') of Holland Park School, who turned the school around from failing urban comp to a widely celebrated Ofsted Outstanding school. 'I also learned that it grows and changes shape over time. If you're not alert to that, I honestly think you're doomed to failure.'

Hall recalls his early days at Holland Park School, 'when everyone wanted mission statements and straplines.' 'But I don't believe in those and I didn't have one singular driving force that could be neatly summarised. In the end, I decided not to try to convince people by words, but by actions. **As a leader, you just have to understand who you are and be true to yourself.'**

Richard Mayhew says he's lost count of the number of organisations he's seen where people don't believe a word that's said. 'It's so easy to fall into that trap, but **it's ok to sometimes say "I just don't know"!**'

So what does authentic leadership look like and why does it matter? **'Being your true self, sharing real experiences, taking personal risk and admitting failure** is what it looks like,' concludes Miles Adcock. 'And it matters because without it, you can never get the most out of your teams.'



### Insight perspective

**Authentic leaders inspire trust in their team and build deeper connections and that means being your true self and admitting failure – which takes self-awareness, courage and humility.**

## Leading post-COVID

There's a common myth that the best leaders have the most answers. In fact, the most successful leaders are those that ask the best questions. How can I work here and still be me? When do I support and when do I challenge? What assumptions am I making? How can I help others succeed?

Leaders who ask rather than tell find they are enlightened by what they learn. Those who recognise that there are no simple or easy answers can shift their mindset to see other perspectives. And once you embrace the natural tensions of other perspectives, you can balance stability with change, pace with reflection, control with empowerment and confidence with humility. In short, you can unite rather than polarise. This sets the tone for an organisation to reflect, learn and grow.





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