



BEYOND CRISIS LEADERSHIP

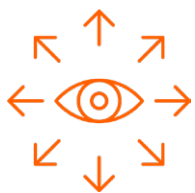
“Like it or not, most leaders have essentially been leading for the present – now they have to lead for the future, and it’s a totally different skill set and way of working.”

Leaders and their people were thrust into a firefighting mode in reaction to the unprecedented global pandemic. There was little time to plan. Many leaders found themselves managing a crisis for the first time in their careers. Sure, they had put out fires previously – but more often than not, these were spot fires that required containment. COVID-19 presented leaders with multiple, unplanned, and uncontrollable wildfires. Leaders needed to react quickly to ensure business continuity where possible, control costs and ensure their peoples safety.

Whilst crisis leadership is by no means easy, there are advantages for leaders. In a crisis, people rally together, leaders have the licence to make quick decisions, provide tactical clarity to direct activity. People are running on adrenaline, so they have capacity take on more and teams collaborate better than they have previously, as they channel their energy into immediate priorities. Many leadership teams surprised themselves and were impressed by their people's ability to step up and manage the crisis situation. Unfortunately, putting out the fire may, upon reflection, end up being the more straight forward part of the COVID response. The phase of leadership that follows the initial crisis reaction, that determines how you move forward as a leader and an organization, is more demanding and complex.

Most leadership teams are now left with burnt out parts of their organization or parts that are no longer required. So, what now? Tear down the building? Try to salvage parts? Create something entirely new? Build a replica of what was there before? Use the land? Pack up and get out completely? To recover and, where relevant, reinvent organizations, leaders need to envision and work towards a future for people, customers, partners and shareholders when large elements of the future are still unknown.

Many leaders are finding it hard to create the thinking space and difficult to know where to start. We are bombarded with different articles and webinars telling us what to do. But there is no one answer. We need to pause to understand our own unique context and use that to inform what we need to do, and how best to communicate the steps leading to the next wave of change.



LOOK UP AND OUT FOR REBUILD INSPIRATION

When we buy or rent a property, even though there may be plenty to like about the property, we inherit legacy issues or elements of living that we would like to change. Over time we stop noticing and end up accepting some of the issues we originally wanted to change. Organizations and teams are much the same – strategic priorities and related structures are often based on past successes, team composition based around historical roles or legacy issues and some leadership behaviors might represent organizational culture values of the past. The disruption of COVID provides an opportunity to stand back to re-consider the architecture; hold up the essential structures that will continue to hold up the organization in this new world and where are the opportunities to redesign parts that are no longer suited to the new environment.

Thinking differently is not easy. More often than not, we are constrained by what we've seen work before, and

we hold assumptions that limit our ability to reconfigure what is closest to us. Add to this, the relentless stress that people are feeling - when we are under constant pressure and living in a background of ambiguity, it is easier to become insular and myopic. Focusing on our own immediate worlds and short-term decisions, gives us a sense of control; it 'feels safer and gives leaders greater confidence that they will make good decisions. Although it feels safer – it limits our ability to look at our reality through a future focused perspective. If you were to rebuild or renovate a property, you would look to other sources for inspiration. To re-invent parts of an organization, leaders need to anticipate a different future to build toward. Taking note of other organizations that have had the courage to redefine their strategy, reshape their portfolio and repurpose teams will help you to challenge your assumptions. Grocery chains quickly re-directed resource and future investment from stores to their online sales platforms. Luxury brands created new lines of designer face masks. Ecommerce platforms restructured their verticals to respond to significant changes in consumer buying. Pausing to consider what legacies those organizations had and the courage to acknowledge where no longer relevant in our changed world, can inspire leaders to challenge whether their plans and priorities are still relevant. Leaders need to look up and out, to shift their thinking from fixing present day issues, to start leading the future of their business.



SIGNAL A NEW PHASE

The demanding nature of a crisis makes it easy to get caught up in the event itself and expect a marked ending to the event. But with the COVID crisis there is unlikely to be a 'marked event' that denotes the next phase for businesses. So without a known timeline or expected external event, leaders risk staying in a never ending state of transition, in a holding pattern where they are no longer in immediate crisis management and not yet leading to shape the future of their business. Leaders need to demarcate for their people the move from managing ongoing disruption, to start leading toward a new future.

Bridges (1991) offered the insight that change is an externally forced event; whereas transition is the internal adjustment we all go through to make sense of the change, let go of past attachment and get excited about the future opportunities. The unique and unusual reality of our current context is that we find ourselves in a place of knowing we need to let go of our past – but we are looking into an undefined 'next normal'. The term next normal has become over-used, but without true shared meaning. Leaders know they need to create some form of clarity for their people, to refocus them on a new future. Post COVID life will be different, but we are still hypothesizing how it will be different. Planning



is difficult when there are no definitive parameters. Leaders need to have the confidence to lay out a hypothesis with the humility to expect that some of the predictions will be wrong and there will be a need to course correct along the way. This requires a reset in leadership focus and an ability to create a future for people, customers, partners and shareholders when large elements of the future are still unknown.



BEYOND THE OPERATING MODEL

Depending on industry or market, leaders will be re-evaluating their organizations to a different extent pre-COVID life. In heavily disrupted industries, leaders need to re-imagine their commercial and operating context and reshape around new lines of revenue. In other markets, some elements of the business will still be viable – they may solely need to be reconfigured through technology. These decisions are not easy ones, and yet they are likely to be the more obvious ones, or those that shareholders demand answers to. The less obvious but equally important piece is to articulate the culture and the leadership needed to realize the renewed strategy. Structures can be remodelled, teams redeployed, but behaviors won't change unless organizations clearly outline mindsets and behaviors that are valued and required for success in a changed world. This may sound straightforward, but it is often overlooked as it requires the 'naming' of unwanted behaviors or previous ways of working, that made many existing people successful in the pre-COVID context.



DELINEATING WHAT TO CHANGE VERSUS WHAT TO SUSTAIN AND EMBED

When it comes to people and culture, many organizations have seen positive behaviors emerge in response to the crisis – and they have equally seen dysfunctional dynamics emerge. Most organizations know they need to use this transition to redefine what they value and reassess leaders against a new set of expectations. Indeed, many want to use the disruption as a catalyst to re-set their culture. Desired cultural norms, such as inclusive leadership, or agile working are no longer a long-term goal to strive for, they are imperative foundations for organizations to survive in a volatile, unpredictable world.

CONCLUSION...

So what do you and your organization need to do. Reinvent or reshape? Remove or re-affirm? What we do know is that it will not be a static solution, post-COVID context signals a new era in which leadership and culture will need to constantly evolve and respond to disruption. There is no one answer, there never will be, but leaders need to continuously re-evaluate their choice points in their path to regenerate their organization and re-energize their people.

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