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YSC'S LEADERSHIP INFLECTION POINT SERIES: PART ONE

THE FUTURE IS AT THEIR FEET

Business leaders are not only navigating through pandemic-induced, uncertain market conditions but are leading people at a unique time as we see a metamorphosis of the workforce taking place. Added to this, societal pressure is mounting for corporations to play an expanded role in tackling systemic, global challenges. Whilst the future is at their feet, it is no wonder that leaders also feel the world is on their shoulders.

We are at a leadership inflection point. Leaders must adapt their thinking orientation, people leadership and stakeholder engagement to the fundamentally reconfigured internal and external forces that organizations need to embrace to lead into the future. Part one of this series addresses the internal elements, equipping leaders to reconnect to the essential human element of leading change and making the case for organizations to in turn invest in their leadership.

EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED, NOTHING HAS CHANGED

Advancements in technology have changed our world. On one hand, it connects us like never before and creates intimacy through virtual windows into people's lives. Ironically, it also creates isolation. A screen is no substitute for in-person connection and for some it is too easy to retreat into one's own digital world. Technology has also generated a deluge of information where it can feel daunting to choose what to pay attention to or know what is factual versus fake. Social media continues to mediate our lives, on and offline, as a powerful tool for amplifying social movements, spreading (mis) information and changing sentiments.

Concurrently, the fallout from the pandemic has put everything into a perpetual state of change. Organizations have had to deal with unforeseen disruptions and solve complex problems at speed. Employees found themselves in a remote-working revolution and an existential reckoning around the role that work plays in our lives. Change and uncertainty continue to have a familiar impact on behavior. For some, fear of the unknown has led to inertia, exhaustion or confusion, whilst others are motivated to spot new opportunities and create yet more change.

Whilst everything is changing around us, the age-old human drivers remain the same. We all still need a sense of belonging, a degree of autonomy and opportunities to develop our competence. Whilst unchanged, these three needs are considerably heightened by the pandemic and have shifted the social contract that people have with work. Add in the context of hybrid, remote working fundamentally changing the nature of our interactions, leaders must be creative and intentional to meet these same needs.

Heightened humanness

Leaders create the conditions for others to thrive in service of change and positive impact. Leaders may feel like they don't have all the answers and that they are learning through every new decision they make. Yet, when it comes to their people, going back to the basics is what matters most. Belonging, autonomy and competence are fundamental human needs we all seek. Leaders who refocus on these three needs will re-energize people, generating connection and a shared belief in the ability to adapt and shape a new future together.

Belonging

Humans are social animals; we have an innate drive to be part of a tribe. People need a sense of connection and belonging in their workplace. Positive team interactions build confidence and stimulate creativity. Creating a sense of belonging is not new, but hybrid working and the pressures of Covid have underscored the leadership role in creating connection with a team identity. Leaders can meet these needs by:

- **Connection & inclusion.** When working in a remote or hybrid pattern, it is easy to neglect the relational elements of team working. Create time at the beginning of team meetings for personal connection that would have naturally taken place in-person and demarcate time for specific relationship building sessions periodically. Ensuring all voices in the team are heard and listened to is a crucial tenet of fostering inclusion and respect.

- **Team culture.** Teams are the essential units of change in organizations, so creating a positive and binding environment to provide a source of support, confidence and inspiration is of paramount importance. Facilitate the team to work together on challenges and to recognize what they value about each other. You do not need to be physically together to create alignment or foster commitment and belonging.

- **Meaning.** The great resignation shows the importance of meaningful work in career decisions. The newer generations in our workforce expect purpose in their work and will readily move should they find it lacking or misaligned. Leaders need to intentionally create a clear team purpose to help people connect their individual role contributions to the value the team has to their business and in society.

Autonomy

We all need to feel we have choices in life, that we have a degree of control today and tomorrow, and that we have an influence over our environment. It is a sense of autonomy that fuels the goals that we set for ourselves, the plans we create for our teams and the visions we have for our future.

- **Give choice.** Pandemic-induced uncertainty and government-imposed restrictions reduced people's freedoms. Leaders can give definitive choice points and focus on spans of control to renew a sense of agency in their people and highlight where they have influence in the business and on its outcomes.

- **Empowerment.** Giving clear ownership and accountability is even more important in a hybrid/remote working context where inputs can be opaque. Empowerment is not delegation – it needs to be supported with coaching from leaders or peers to work through roadblocks.

- **Two-way trust.** People are looking for greater transparency from their leaders and expect to be trusted to deliver in a flexible way. Remote working has accelerated a shift towards more focus on outputs than time spent working. Spotlighting where people have the freedom to meet objectives in their own way helps to highlight trust.

Competence

Humans inherently want to grow and feel a sense of achievement. This is about both using and extending one's expertise and knowledge.

- **Ownership.** Providing new experiences with clear accountabilities gives the opportunity to meet both competence and autonomy needs. The complexity of today's challenges demand collaboration and collaboration demands shared accountabilities - but people still need individual responsibilities to tangibly see where they personally add value.

- **Growth pathways.** For those working from home, career opportunities may be less transparent. Leaders need to explicitly outline potential opportunities, and where possible connect them to the skills and competencies needed in this new world.

- **Social learning.** You need to recreate the conditions for 'social learning' virtually that happened more spontaneously in offices – such as shadowing, partnering and informal feedback. Coaching from line managers is essential to convert experiences into learning and to identify new solutions where changes have meant previous approaches aren't applicable.

BUT WHO CREATES THE CONDITIONS FOR THE LEADERS?

Whilst the demands of leaders have changed, the capacity of leaders to meet these expectations does not increase overnight. Leadership is a lonely and often exhausting place. Organizations need their leaders to create the conditions for their people to succeed and in return organizations need to create the space for leaders to lead. There needs to be a willingness to change corporate culture to equip leaders to take their business into the future. If there is no investment in building collective capability or supporting leaders to learn how to lead differently, we will see leaders burnout, tune out or get out.

Value humanness

A significant amount of people leadership boils down to being human. Listening, empathising, encouraging and sense-making. The pandemic has spotlighted that compassionate leadership is just as important as commercial leadership – and that is here to stay. Changes in the nature of our workforces mean that leaders who understand that people leadership sits at the heart of their business success will be the leaders of the future.

Value each other

Leaders are humans too. Their needs have also heightened from the change around them. Organizations can create leadership forums that provide space for leaders to share their challenges. This is not about wallowing in the difficulties but providing a space to acknowledge the extra load and normalize for each other that there is a shift in what is being asked of them. This form of emotional and practical support is essential for leaders to diffuse their own struggles and gain inspiration to lead through their dilemmas.

Value learning

Rather than leaving leaders to figure out the new recipe of leadership on their own, organizations can create opportunities for leaders to find new answers together. Reconnecting leaders around the organization's vision and values, and bringing in partners, customers or suppliers for outside inspiration, is a simple way of connecting leaders to a shared future so they can then shape this for the rest of the business.

IN SUMMARY

The impact of the pandemic still looms large and continued advancements in technology, heralding further shifts in society, are certain. Leaders are navigating new terrain so it is no wonder that setting out new paths, when they themselves are unsure of the ground underfoot, is a daunting task. However, many of the answers lie in reconnecting to the essence of being human. Meeting people where they are is critical to enabling them to succeed, particularly in such unprecedented times. Creating a sense of belonging, autonomy and competence for people generates connection and a belief in the future. Simple changes can have a powerful impact. But, whilst leaders are creating the conditions for their people to thrive once again, organizations need to value the changing role of their leaders. They too are human and need the space to learn, grow and connect. Organizations must invest in supporting their leaders to lead as the future is at their feet.

IN PART TWO

There is an increasing societal expectation that corporations should use their resources, talent and influence to help solve the world's systemic issues like climate change and racial inequality. This places a revolutionary responsibility on business leaders to fundamentally re-think their strategies to meet not just business needs, but the needs of future generations. In the second article, we explore the skills and mindset shifts that are crucial for leaders if they are to succeed in expanding their ESG footprint for the benefit of society at large.

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