



Matt Collomer

Will the pandemic leadership phenomenon continue?

Has this cataclysmic pandemic provided leaders with enough experience to understand the value of people-centric leadership and sustain these newfound skills? Or, will leaders return to previous ways in spite of the changing needs of the hybrid workplace?

by Wendy Lenton

Throughout the pandemic we have seen a leadership phenomenon emerge of people-centric leadership.¹

Globally, leaders have acted 'boldly and decisively' during the pandemic, even with imperfect information. They communicated honestly and vulnerably and connected compassionately in the face of enormous personal suffering and historic levels of stress and anxiety.²

Covid outcomes, i.e. lower death rates in countries where leaders have placed people first over economic or political motivations, have shown the positive impact of a more people-centric leadership.

Prior to the pandemic, we were more likely to experience a different type of leader, one acting in a stereotypical alpha way, highly assertive, competitive, and often valuing results over people, in pursuit of financial gain and improved shareholder return.

Decades of research has proven that a more people-centric approach to leadership attracts greater success; and yet there has been very little movement towards this way of leading.

Will leaders resist reverting to old ways of leading?

Unfortunately, many CEOs fall into the trap of what psychologists term the 'hubris syndrome'. Rising in the ranks, acquiring more power, attracting 'yes people' around them and falling victim to biases and growing egos.

Coupled with this is the lack of intellectual humility, in the assumption they are the smartest person in the room and therefore their opinions are the ones that count. It creates a stubbornness for their solution and low acceptance for re-thinking and innovation.

Regardless of whether leaders see the value of people-centric leadership, the external context sets an imperative case for change.

The context for change is strong

Work is no longer a place to go, it is something we do; which opens up the opportunity for individuality, less formality and a blurring of work and life.

In the new hybrid world, traditional business and operating models will need to dramatically change. According to McKinsey, 'only 11% of companies think their current business model will be³ economically viable in 2 years' time'. We are already seeing workplaces re-designed into open-plan spaces for collaboration, innovation, and connection.

'People have choice in how to spend their time and where to direct their talents. People are aligning themselves with organisations that have purpose, that mirror their own values, where they can take pride in their efforts and feel a sense of accomplishment. People are seeking organisations that actively support flexible work, balancing working from home with office-based work.'⁴

While the pandemic is changing the way we work, the climate crisis and the need to achieve zero emissions by 2050 will accelerate the total transformation of every industry at lightning speed. The pandemic is just a preview of what's to come; and to change radically, we will need different leadership to get there.

'Leading in a crisis is never easy, but hard times leave the most indelible imprints on a company's identity.'³

1. The term People-centric leaders - create room for alternative views and greater inclusion, engaging people in a purpose they contribute to, genuinely caring about people and inspiring loyalty and performance.

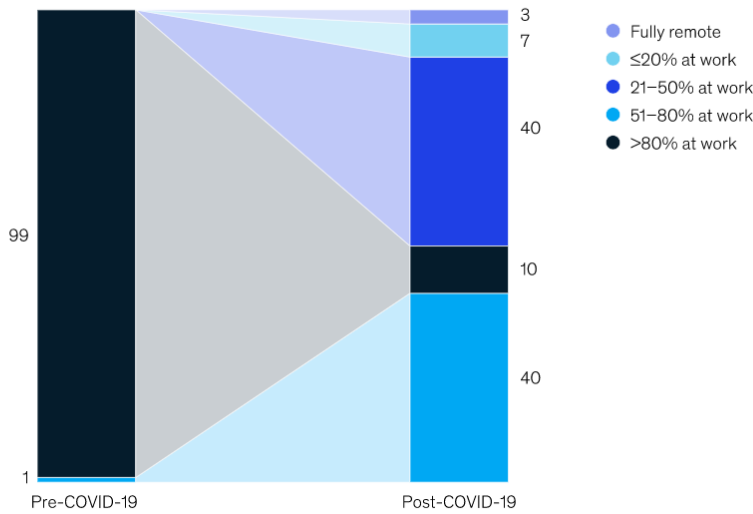
2. What The new digital edge: Rethinking strategy for the post pandemic era, McKinsey, 2021

3. Does Leadership Look Like Post Crisis? R.Hougard, Forbes, 2021

4. The Experience of Work, Valley2Valley Women Leaders' Study Tour Report, 2021

In the post-COVID-19 future, C-suite executives expect an increase in hybrid work.

Past and future expectations of time spent at work location,¹ % respondents



¹Question: What level of remote working (for roles typically associated with being office-based) does your organization have?

THE FUTURE WILL BE MORE HYBRID⁵

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the majority of organisations required employees to spend most of their time on-site. But as the pandemic eases, executives say that the hybrid model—in which employees work both remotely and in the office—will become far more common. The majority of executives expect that (for all roles that aren't essential to perform on-site) employees will be on-site between 21 & 80 percent of the time, or one to four days per week.

CEOs need to align culture & leadership to people-centricity

We all need to build confidence to embrace hybrid working. HR Directors, working with CEOs and Executive teams need to re-shape company culture, the way of working and prioritise key people practices; creating congruent company-wide experiences for people. This is both challenging and liberating as it gives the opportunity to remove and simplify current practice with little value and quickly mobilise towards a better future.

On a personal level, CEOs need to role-model people-centric leadership and set the expectation for their leaders to do the same.

Three leadership imperatives enabling momentum include:

#1 Embrace leading through uncertainty

Leaders need to become more comfortable leading through uncertainty and not having all of the answers.

We are operating in greater complexity, and adaptive challenges require extensive input from a number of sources for organisations to get the right outcomes and be successful.

Real inclusivity requires greater advocacy and inquiry beyond our personal sphere.

CEOs and leaders who master listening, and value divergent ideas are far more likely to foster team motivation and insight, and ultimately cultivate a stronger, more capable team.

#2 Be more 'other' orientated

Particularly in the current environment, the most impactful change any leader can adopt is to be more 'other oriented', which is thinking about the perspective and needs of others before yourself.

During the pandemic, many leaders have built a strong caring foundation, and ongoing they will benefit by creating environments where people continue to talk openly about their feelings, free of judgement. Leaders need to continue being courageous, moving towards people in need, recognising signs and changes in behaviour, and not letting these opportunities for deeper discussion go by. The earlier these discussions are had, the more likely solutions will arise.

Leaders who leverage their talented people will be rewarded; by seeking input and encouraging thinking, they unlock greater innovation, motivation and importantly, ownership by people to follow through and deliver business outcomes.

5. What executives are saying about the future of hybrid work, McKinsey, 2021

PURPOSE MATTERS

Research from the Science of Purpose

Exhibit 1

Companies with a connection to their purpose experience:

PROFIT: \$9.1k per person per year; higher margins, as 55% of global customers will pay more for a product that has a higher purpose, up 10% from between 2011 and 2014; and customer loyalty, as 73% of global consumers will switch to higher-purpose brands.

EQUITY VALUES: higher stock prices, outperforming the market 15-to-1 and industry peers 12-to-1.

HUMAN CAPITAL: higher levels of tenure (7.4 months), net promoter scores (+47%), fulfilling work relationships (+54%).

Individuals with a connection to their purpose experience:

CAREER: increased levels of income, wealth, leadership effectiveness (+63%), fulfillment (+64%), learning (2x), engagement (4x), productivity (5x)

HEALTH: better memory, cognition, executive function, mood, contentment (+42%), stronger cells and DNA and longer lives (+7 years).

ROMANCE: greater levels of attraction, sexual pleasure and love (+31%)

#3 Give people meaning & fulfillment

We know through research (Exhibit 1) when people believe their work matters, they are four times more likely to be engaged, are more motivated, learn faster, and feel more fulfilled. Importantly, purpose can improve resilience.⁶

Harnessing your peoples' belief towards a successful future is amplified in these pandemic times.

Leaders must find meaningful ways to connect their people with company purpose and share heartfelt stories that bring this to life.

Amongst the uncertainty, anchoring people to what is important gives them a foundation for the way forward and lifts company engagement.

What are other companies doing in the pandemic?

The challenge many companies face amid the crisis is the need for a coordinated response by CEO's and the top team to allow leaders the autonomy to implement creative and pragmatic solutions. Here are some highlights of people-centric practices that are critical as foundational support in these uncertain times.

Building trust is critical

Trust is complex, both in its definition and in earning it; particularly when the majority of our interactions are via technology.

Self-orientation is the only denominator in the trust equation (model by David Maister) that considers whether leaders have their people's best interests at heart or if they are selfishly motivated. If people sense you care more about your own needs, they are less likely to trust you.

Leaders in one-on-ones are carving out time for people's personal needs and mental well-being, with a deeper level of enquiry to understand specific support required. At the team level, we are seeing new ways for connection. A simple 'check-in' process gives everyone the opportunity to share how they are and allows for team understanding, and follow-up support where required.

Transparent and thoughtful communication is needed

We are seeing leaders act with greater transparency, enacting less 'polish and scripting' in their messaging.

Transparent and thoughtful communication is needed cont'

The more 'human' you are as a leader, the greater trust and empathy you build. Giving people insight into your own personal challenges helps to normalise and encourage a supportive and open culture. You want to create psychological safety and ensure people feel comfortable bringing their 'whole selves' to work.

'Many CEOs we have spoken with have been positively surprised that bringing more of themselves into the workplace has created connection and motivation' says Steve Collis, CEO of AmerisourceBergen.

During the pandemic, people are thirsty for information and a regular update from the CEO is an effective way for this to occur. At Adobe the CEO is providing a daily 5-minute update to the whole organisation.

We have also seen new approaches that symbolically reinforce respect, transparency and inclusion. Brad Banducci, CEO of Woolworths, has been sharing Board CEO update reports with his whole organisation (against advice) which brings his people up close to the truth.

These pandemic times allow you to consider how you can authentically connect with your people in different ways, reflective of the context we are in.

Help people feel they belong

Belonging is the key driver of employee engagement in 2021, identified in the Qualtrics global engagement study.

'In a sea of uncertainty, employees feeling like they belong is the one anchor that can strengthen your organization'. For many of us, our connection to our work and our colleagues has been a haven from chaos; a place and a community to belong to. We all know what it feels like to belong, or to fit in with others.'⁷

Managers have the most significant influence on people having a sense of belonging, by building trust, showing care, genuinely listening, and providing feedback and recognition.

Corporate and social responsibility has a powerful impact on people's sense of purpose, connection and belonging. CEOs have the opportunity to be at the heart of this, sharing the impacts of CSR initiatives aligned to company purpose and the broader good in the world.

More hours, more stress, more burnout

Burnout was always there, but in times of heightened stress, it explodes.

Leaders and their people are working longer hours, with travel time slipping into the work ledger, there is growing concern for significant health issues. The lines between work and home are blurred and everyone has a unique circumstance to deal with. Taking a one-size-fits-all approach to prevention does not work, you need to understand and meet different needs.

One of the most important ways leaders can reduce peoples stress, is to show empathy and 'rethink the definition of empathetic leadership' — particularly as it pertains to preventing burnout. We tend to connect empathy to the golden rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you". But I don't believe that goes far enough. If you authentically want to demonstrate empathy you have to "Do unto others as they would have done unto themselves". That requires stepping outside of your own needs, assessing and removing bias and privilege, actively listening to your people and then taking action.'⁸

7. Employee Experience Belonging: The new top driver of employee engagement, C.Herbert, 2021

8. Preventing Burnout Is About Empathetic Leadership, J.Moss, 2020

In summary

Leaders need to acknowledge the future is here and there is no turning back, employees cannot unsee what they have seen. A hybrid working way is the workplace of today.

And, even prior to the pandemic as Hougard & Carter⁹ conclude, 'organisations and leaders aren't meeting employees' basic human needs of finding meaning, purpose, connection, and genuine happiness in their work'.

There is an opportunity in this period of uncertainty which allows leaders to transition to a better way of leading.

Enlightened leaders will change organisations and themselves, showing the courage to lead through ambiguity, knowing they will not always get it right, but knowing they can try again. They will harness their people to redefine workplaces and ways of working, and with people at the centre of their business.

There has never been a more compelling opportunity for people-centric leadership, as we are all in transition, 'A passage to something new and in some ways where you will find yourself all over again.' (Michelle Obama).

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MATT COLLOMER, PHOTOGRAPHER

US Boston, 2018

'I met Michael in a Boston subway station. I told him I liked his sign. "What matters is what it means to you," he told me. I asked what it meant to him. "Doing a deed or expressing kindness to another person without expecting anything in return," Michael said. I love approaching strangers wherever I go. Listening and talking to them teaches you about people and how similar we all are to one another. Just like Michael, we're all seeking human kindness.' Matt Collomer, Editorial Spirituality

