

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAMS FOCUS FOR 2021 AND BEYOND



The end of the year traditionally marks a time of reflection for leadership teams. Given the dramatic events of this year, it is even more important for teams to take forward what has worked and question - what do we stop, start, or would be even better if we did in 2021?

During such a demanding 12 months, which often directed focus onto the short-term and immediate challenges, it is a good time for leadership teams to strategically take stock, reflect, consider and set a plan for the future.



Merryck's [David Reimer](#) says, "Crises are good moments to really navigate the terrain we're in and not stick to the map we have. It's not that we throw out the map and lose sight of it, but in my experience the companies that try to really understand what true north is in these moments inevitably do better over time. We will get to the other side of this, and it's really important to treat this as a learning experience that permanently changes that map you started with."

It is unclear what the next 12 months holds, but effective leadership teams who are continually evaluating, learning, and trusting each other will ensure their path is strong and carries with it a greater chance of success. This appetite for continued learning helps them to adapt, remain agile and create greater impact for their organisations.



"The best leaders have a continuous thirst for learning. The best leaders ask questions, they don't make statements. They're always probing and they're curious. What's interesting is that if an organisation sees its leader as a learning animal, people are likely to replicate that, leading to greater levels of feedback, insight and collaboration."
[John Donahoe](#), CEO of ServiceNow

USING THE 3 LENSES TO FIND ANSWERS ALONG THE WAY

Over this [article series](#), we discussed how leadership teams collectively create positive impact throughout organisations when they use three lenses to strengthen their approach. Trust is the foundation of the lenses as, with trust in place the team can more easily focus on strengthening their capability, impact and performance, and that of the organisation.

The three lenses are:

1. [Create clarity and focus](#)

This lens centres on the purpose and outcomes that both the team and business need to achieve. It encompasses prioritisation, mutual accountability and the communication of the purpose, as well as the narrative of the leadership team's plan. In today's uncertain environment it helps teams avoid indecision and mixed messages which can slow process, constrain clarity and make strategic implementation riskier.



Key discussion points

- Are we aligning around a clear and common purpose?
- Are our plans simple and do they reflect our purpose?
- How good are we at communicating our plans in a way that inspires and engages others?



2. Build Cohesion and Engagement

This second lens focuses attention on the people practices that help teams sustain and build cohesion and engagement around the plan. It includes making more of capability, diversity and inclusion, as well as building trust and psychological safety among team members. It also involves the team encouraging learning and engaging in it as a collective.



Key discussion areas

- Are we prioritising capability, diversity and inclusion to enable share of voice?
- Do our discussions and interactions encourage the sharing of points of views, challenge and contribution to the conversation?
- How well do we learn together and review our approach?

3. Foster Agility and Innovation

The third lens looks at how leadership teams can execute at speed, experiment and create new sources of value. The focus is on innovation to ensure that the team and the organisation remain agile in an increasingly complex and uncertain environment.

The lens concentrates the team's attention on leveraging the enablers in the organisation as well as, identifying and then removing any obstacles. It often fosters greater empowerment and less emphasis on control in the leadership approach. Leadership teams also need to strengthen their own adaptability, resilience and personal renewal in order to lead the organisation through whatever opportunity or disruption that arise. From this learning experience often flows a more collaborative culture and a shared set of values.



Key discussion areas

- Are we encouraging innovation from and listening to the levels below?
- How good are we at identifying and removing obstacles to accelerating our strategy and sustained growth?
- Are we looking after ourselves as a team and strengthening our resilience and renewal, as well as that of others?

BUILDING A SECURE FOUNDATION OF TRUST

Trust is paramount for sustainable success, particularly when the team faces adversity and change as many do now. It enables robust challenge and makes team members more comfortable to tackle the tougher conversations that are needed. Trust enables greater clarity of intent and ensures less reliance on guesswork and assumptions.

With trust in place the team mindset switches from the individual to the collective – there's a shared purpose and commitment to the success of the organisation.



Trust takes time to build, but is worth the investment and if nurtured by team members, understanding each other beyond their role and title, continues to grow. Merryck's [Martina Muttke](#) encourages leadership teams to pose a very simple question in this respect;

“‘What is your biggest dream?’ You never quite know how people are going to react. Some people freeze and are uncertain what to say. I have even seen one person start to cry. And some tell wonderful stories about what they want from life. The question is meant to create a safe space, because people have to trust you to share their dreams.”



Merryck's Andrew Dyckhoff stresses, "If there is trust, leadership teams move that much quicker and so do their organisations. Without trust, people are not able to have real conversations. The art of good leadership is to encourage debate and ensure people are comfortable to disagree with each other."

LOOKING TO 2021 - THINKING POINTS FOR LEADERS

We have found in our conversations with leaders, that there is appetite to learn from their responses to 2020. One thing they are asking themselves is whether the fabric of the leadership team is right for what lies ahead; do we have the right skills, and mix of capabilities? Are we using the team's make up to best effect in different strategic discussions?

SIZE MATTERS IN STRATEGIC DISCUSSIONS



Merryck Mentor, Peter Hutchinson, says "Most executive teams that I have encountered are too big. A team of four or five always works. A team of six or seven has a pretty good chance of being a good team. I often start conversations by asking how the team is constructed. How many people are there? How productive are the team meetings? How many people should be on the team? Often the answer that comes back is a lower number than is on their team."

However, Mentor, Rudi Kindts, recalls a highly effective leadership team in his career which had a dozen colleagues. It did at times, however, sub-divide into smaller groups for certain strategic discussions and to facilitate a share of voice. He found the outcome of this was greater inclusivity that benefited the team's approach as a collective.

THE DIGITAL LEADERSHIP TEAM

Some organisations were already reliant on digital communications before the pandemic. Other leadership teams have had to switch suddenly to this during 2020. The move has brought both upsides and downsides to the leadership team dynamic, with some thriving, and others finding it difficult.

Many leaders accept that digital meetings and ways of working will continue as pandemic restrictions ease and allow teams to reconnect in person. Executives we are talking to feel that the stronger debate is better suited in face to face discussion.

BUILDING A SHARED PASSION TO LEARN

As we said at the beginning of this article series, unlike business crises of old, the pace, global scale and profoundly human nature of the pandemic has meant there is no leadership playbook to reference. Those leadership teams which adapt will continue to deliver positive impact in their organisations. This is supported by a recognition and appetite to learn and evolve together.

If you are keen to build a shared passion to learn in order to navigate successfully through 2021, we encourage you to consider these three things:

1. Invest time as a team to have the bigger conversations.
2. Keep listening to the levels below to nurture innovation from deep within your organisation.
3. Recognise the importance of understanding and caring for one another to aid resilience

Here are some questions to kick-start your plans for the year ahead:

- What do we stop, start, and would be even better if we did in 2021?
- What has got us this far and is it right for the journey ahead?
- Do we learn as a team?



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