



LEADERSHIP IN
THE PANDEMIC

MERRYCK & CO
LEADERSHIP, ACCELERATED



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WHAT HAS CHANGED AND WHAT MATTERS MOST IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD?

The pandemic has changed leadership priorities – with a significant acceleration towards a more human leadership style and a greater focus on the wellbeing of staff.

However, the biggest leadership challenges are still on the horizon, as we reimagine work rather than a return to normal.

1

LEADERSHIP PRIORITIES HAVE CHANGED

The pandemic prompted a profound shift in how businesses work and as a result, priorities have changed and leadership styles have had to rapidly adapt. However, it's important to note these changes are not wholly new – but new insights have arisen as the pandemic accelerated trends rather than altered them.

The pandemic created universal feelings of stress, disruption and fear and this in turn created a new environment for leaders to navigate. Whilst much of the first stage of the pandemic had to focus on immediate health and safety concerns and logistical issues, now the priorities for leaders can take a much more long-term view as restrictions lift and the reimagined working environment begins to take shape.

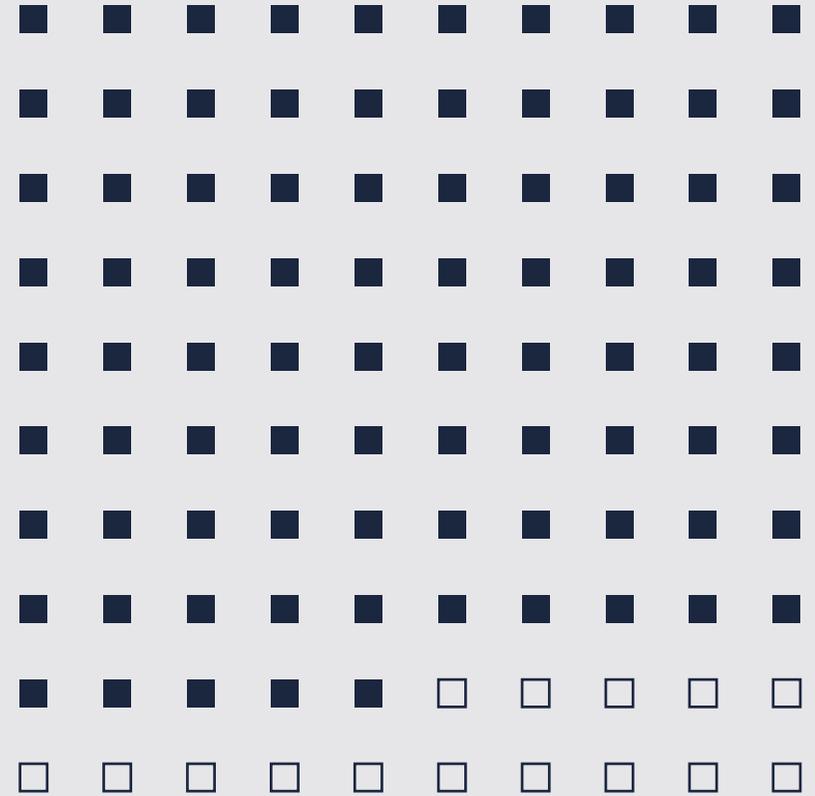
Through our survey and conversations with leaders, we see these new leadership priorities as:

A more 'human' leadership style

A greater focus on wellbeing

Increased clarity of purpose and empathy

Read more about these trends on page 11.



85% of respondents stated that leadership priorities have changed during the pandemic.

“There is a focus on a human leadership style with care being equal to performance.”

“There was a rapid need to adapt – to focus on a homeworking/hybrid operating model, more focus on flexible working, remote teams and virtual approaches - personal safety and mental health.”

“The pandemic accelerated trends more than augmented them.”

“There was a profound shift in the way our teams and people work.”

“Focus on personal safety and mental health.”

A hand with orange nail polish is shown in the foreground, gesturing towards a group of people in the background. The background is blurred, showing several people in a meeting or office setting. The overall tone is professional and collaborative.

“Our Leadership team have also needed to be far more tuned into the wellbeing of our people than ever before”

2

LEADERS WERE WELL EQUIPPED FOR THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic very rapidly created uncharted terrain for business leaders, producing a whole host of pressing and often unplanned for challenges. However, on the whole, leaders in our study were well-equipped to deal with these challenges and responded quickly.

This worldwide crucible moment meant business leaders had to dig deeper into their leadership toolboxes than ever before. Whilst responding to crises is a well-honed skill for leaders, the pandemic was an unprecedented global event which meant even the very strongest felt stretched.



90% of the leaders we surveyed were perceived as well equipped to deal with challenges arising out of the pandemic.



This pandemic has been a crucible moment for many leaders who have been tested beyond the norm. As Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas' seminal research suggests, great leaders are forged in these moments. As they write in their Harvard Business Review piece: '... one of the most reliable indicators and predictors of true leadership is an individual's ability to find meaning in negative events and to learn from even the most trying circumstances.'

This theory defines crucibles as transformative experiences. The pandemic is arguably one of the biggest crucible moments ever experienced on such a global scale. The experience of lockdowns, isolation, fear of the unknown and lack of control will have impacted most workforces. Leaders will have had to mobilise incredibly quickly to not just adapt to the challenges the virus posed from an operational and logistical point of view, but also how it was affecting their workforce's personal circumstances.

The whole idea behind crucible moments for leaders is that they shape and form their approach to leadership. Bennis and Thomas write about leaders possessing four essential skills – the same skills which allow a leader to find 'meaning in what could be a debilitating experience.' These skills are the ability to engage with others in shared meaning, having a distinct and compelling voice, a sense of integrity and adaptive capacity – 'an almost magical ability to transcend adversity, with all its attendant stresses, and to emerge stronger than before.' Our survey respondents certainly spoke of leaders being more agile and more human than ever before, quickly employing these skills once the pandemic hit. The important thing with a crucible moment is that it's not fleeting – the learnings shape leaders, further underlining that we will not be returning to 'normal' post-pandemic and our leaders will be ever-changed by these experiences.

“It stretched all leaders beyond anything most of them had experienced.”

“We had strong local capability to respond to the pandemic.”

“We are now looking at reimagining work not returning to it as it was.”

“Resourcefulness was at the heart of our leaders stepping up.”

“Our leaders have proved themselves to be good in a crisis and we mobilised fast.”

A man with short brown hair and a beard, wearing a green sweater, is shown in profile from the chest up. He is speaking and gesturing with his right hand, which is raised and open. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with other people.

“Authentic leadership, adaptability and responsiveness were in the ‘toolbox’ but weren’t deployed as much as they have been.”

3

LEADERSHIP NEEDS HAVE CHANGED

We will be analysing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for many years to come. In the immediate future it is clear that the world is not going to go back to 'normal'. Leading an adaptable business with a hybrid workforce is going to need different types of leaders in the immediate, and long-term, future.



89% of respondents say their thinking about leadership needs for the future has changed to some extent, 47% say it has changed significantly.



“I think we have to think about how we lead and inspire a workforce that’s much more fragmented and less homogenous.”

“Leading a hybrid workforce is going to be very difficult. We need to think about how to communicate, engage, motivate - all will be different going forward.”

“The pandemic has shown the importance of leadership even more and all of the aspects of it... with even greater focus on the people elements.”

“More about inclusiveness, resilience, humanity... it has highlighted the need for our leaders to be able to lead a hybrid workforce and adapt their style according to context.”

4

EMERGING (AND MISSING) LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS

The value and importance of a holistic approach to leadership has been known for some time, but the pandemic accelerated this need for more ‘human’ leadership styles in order to foster collaboration and agile working, to build empathy, care and trust. Many leaders stepped up to this challenge and quickly adapted their style to suit and support a hybrid workforce navigating an unprecedented global crisis.

Although many approached the challenge with empathy and a greater focus on staff wellbeing than ever before, some of our respondents did find more flexibility from leaders was required. Through the survey we also saw how a wholesale shift to virtual working had created challenges for leaders in relation to delegating decision-making and trusting staff to work more independently than before.

The focus is really on what’s next and how hybrid working will require a shift in leadership styles and behaviours

WHAT LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS EMERGED THAT HELPED YOUR ORGANISATION DURING THE PANDEMIC?

- Empathy
- Collaboration
- Resilience

WHAT BEHAVIOURS, IF ANY, DID YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM LACK THAT WERE NEEDED DURING THE PANDEMIC?

- Communication
- Flexibility
- Trust

5

WHAT ARE THE KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS YOU AND YOUR ORGANISATION LEARNT DURING THE PANDEMIC?

There is no doubt that as a crucible moment, the pandemic will have forged not just today's leaders but tomorrow's too. And these leaders have a different understanding of what's important and how to manage a hybrid team with empathy and understanding. However, the lessons are far from over and more learning, mentoring and support will be required to ensure that long-term, these lessons are put into practice and leaders continue to respond to our changing workforce.

The focus now is on how these lessons translate into the long-term and form the trends in future leadership.

“Importance of humanising leadership. Critical to create psychological safety.”

“Understanding people's unique circumstances is critical.”

“Be open about how work can be done differently.”

“COVID has accelerated a lot of trends.”

“Empowerment, agility, trust in workforce.”

“Trust our people to do the right thing, they normally will.”

A man with dark hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, is smiling broadly and gesturing with his right hand while talking to a woman. The woman is seen from the back, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. They are in a meeting room with a whiteboard in the background. The man is holding a document or folder. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“Continue to be amazed
by the resilience of
our teams through the
pandemic.”

6

TRENDS IN FUTURE LEADERSHIP

After a period of profound challenges for leaders it is clear what's next will be just as full of change and require further evolution in leadership style with more support than ever before. Many executives are already commenting that leadership post-pandemic will be harder than leading through the crisis.

WHAT DOES A MORE 'HUMAN' LEADER LOOK LIKE?

We have long espoused the benefits of working with senior leaders' whole person to help them become better leaders to the benefit of all stakeholders. Over the past 18 months, conversations have become more personal, encompassing how people are feeling as we all struggled with the many challenges the virus and lockdown imposed.

With more people working from home flexibly, structures became flatter and decision-making became more agile with employees trusted to do more.

We believe that the pandemic has changed what makes a good leader. This will become even more evident in the next few years as the economy stabilises and people look for new challenges – a work life balance and a focus on wellbeing is likely to be as prioritised as a good salary package. Leaders need to understand what matters to their individual employees and know how to maintain a human touch – especially with the emergence of hybrid working which creates new

“Being a more human leader means acknowledging people’s personal situations, their feelings and engaging on a much broader agency than ever before.”

challenges and raises difficulties when trying to create standardised policies towards flexible working environments. The focus now will be more on individualising the workplace so the experience is fit for everyone and their unique situations.

Being a more human leader means acknowledging people's personal situations, their feelings and engaging on a much broader agenda than ever before.

Similarly, leaders need to focus on fostering an open environment which creates psychological safety. Businesses of all types benefited from ingenuity and quick-thinking from employees during the pandemic. This shared experience also meant barriers were broken down and some people felt more comfortable speaking about personal matters.

As these feeling of fear subside post-pandemic, leaders should be looking at how to maintain this openness. From a practical perspective, a hybrid workforce means this sense of psychological safety needs to be felt both off and online. For example, feeling comfortable contributing to a big meeting will differ from person to person depending on if this meeting is online or in-person.

“This collective fear thus becomes a potential driver of collaboration and innovation, further contributing to an open environment for producing and sharing ideas that under normal conditions may have remained unshared.”

Amy Edmondson, the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, speaking about how the pandemic impacted sharing due to a shared fear.

WELLBEING GOING MAINSTREAM - HOW DOES THIS WORK IN A HYBRID ENVIRONMENT?

In a year when the personal and professional became mixed-up like never before, wellbeing went mainstream. Many of us learnt more about our colleagues' home lives – whether it was children that sat with them being home-schooled or elderly parents that needed caring for.

Looking ahead, there is another wellbeing crisis on the horizon which leaders need to be prepared for. Many have spoken about a looming motivational crisis.

The lack of control we've all felt over the past 18 months has taken a huge toll on mental health globally. Self-determination theory, pioneered by Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan, is a concept which concerns how an individual's ability to control their own lives and make decisions is intrinsically linked to wellbeing and motivation.

Without a feeling of autonomy or connection, people can struggle to feel motivated. As restrictions are lifted, this feeling of autonomy should return but leaders should also be thinking about how this impacts motivation.

Thinking about wellbeing at work isn't new, but the pandemic certainly acted as a catalyst to ensure that caring about mental health was kicked into the mainstream

After 18 months of lockdowns and personal freedoms stripped away it will be difficult for many to have the energy to beat the 'blah' and leaders need to think about how to re-engage and re-motivate burnt-out workforces, not to mention the risk of burnt-out leaders and their need for support from their mentors. Thinking about wellbeing at work isn't new, but the pandemic certainly acted as a catalyst to ensure that caring about mental health and understanding how this impacts the workplace was kicked into the mainstream and it's hard to imagine the issue will be thought of as anything other than integral to a healthy, functioning business in the future.



CLARITY OF PURPOSE AND EMPATHY

Much more attention will need to be placed on the purpose of the organisation and its wider societal role, as employees will, for a period at least, have options as to who they work for and why.

The pandemic has left many questioning the bigger things in life and working for or with an organisation with real purpose is moving higher and higher up people's priorities list. Switching to working virtually and all that involved – no more commute, morning coffees in disposable cups, plastic-wrapped sandwiches for lunch and reams of printing, meant the pandemic also shined a spotlight on sustainability and the day-to-day impact we were all making on the world by simply going to work. This, coupled with the broader business-wide focus on ESG, means leaders are needing to think very seriously about their green credentials and how to ensure they're not just paying lip service to the issue but helping to make a real difference. This will continue to grow in importance for both retaining employees and attracting new talent.

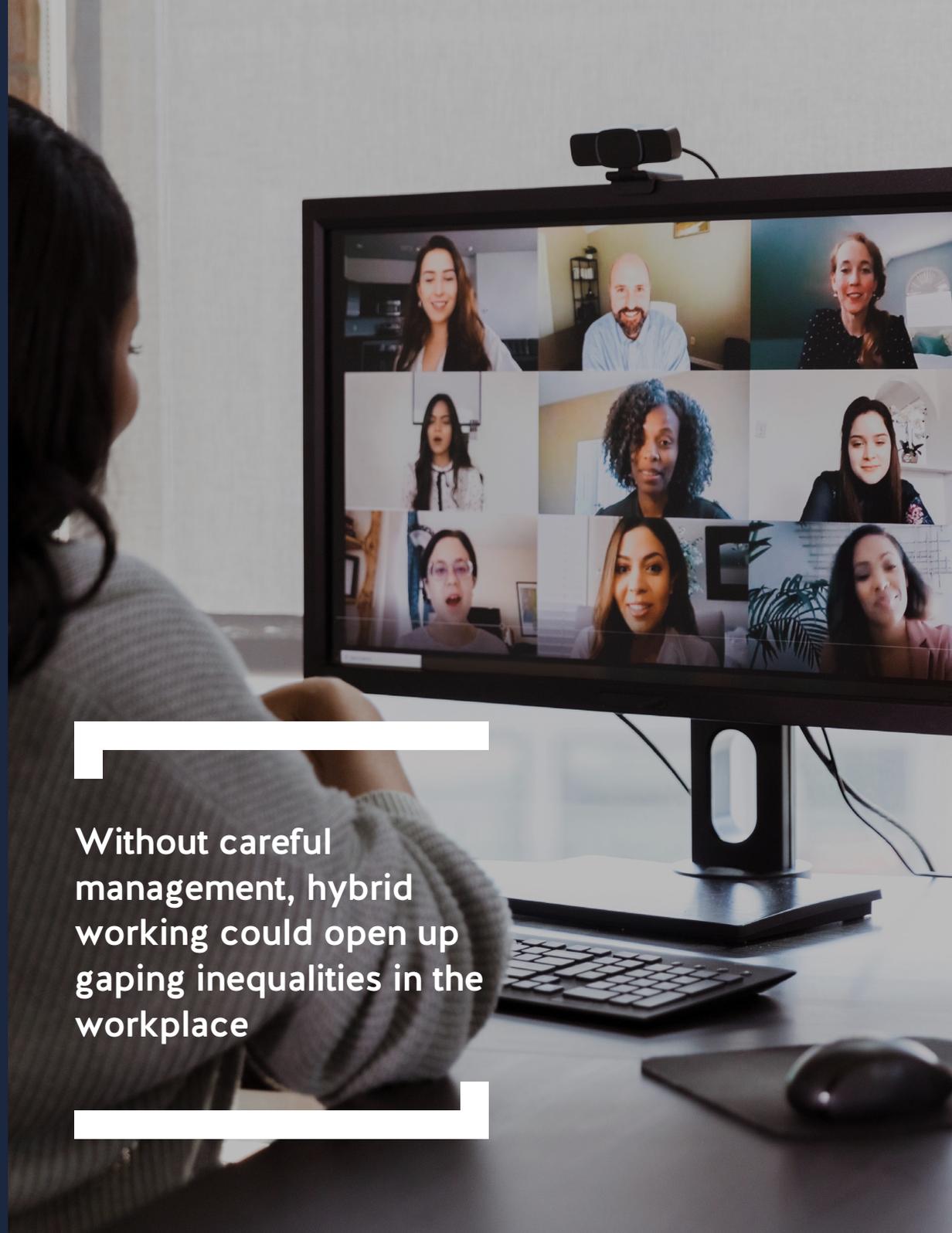
It's no longer about delivering short-term gains but looking longer-term and investing in making a positive impact on the wider world. Again, the COVID-19 pandemic didn't kick-start this trend, but gave it more legs.

DEVELOPING IMPROVED VIRTUAL AND HYBRID SKILLSETS

When the pandemic hit, some businesses were left scrambling around to source enough laptops to send home with their employees. It's amazing to think how far we've come in a relatively short period of time. Now we're all (mostly!) well-versed in the etiquette of Zoom meetings and have gotten to grips with Cloud systems and how to work collaboratively when we're all at home. But with some heading back into the office, questions around how to manage a hybrid team long-term will be something leaders will be grappling with.

Without careful management, hybrid working could open up gaping inequalities in the workplace. Managing a long-held bias which might exist around how staff in the office are more productive is important, as is ensuring those who choose to work virtually more long-term are not excluded. Bias towards working parents for example, which could have already existed, may be exacerbated as these people may decide to work virtually on a more full-time basis. Without proper thought and intervention, a hybrid workforce could become two-tiered, lacking cohesion and a common culture.

Thinking about outputs and outcomes rather than presenteeism and how to recognise what a successful employee looks like will become increasingly important. As will thinking about how to maintain a hybrid workforce that continues to feel connected and working together as one.



**Without careful
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7

LOOKING AHEAD: DO WE HAVE THE RIGHT LEADERS?

Given these trends, businesses will be asking themselves:

Do we have the right leaders? Is our succession plan still fit for purpose? And who supports the leader during this transitional time?

We need to question if we have built long-term resilience or created a pot that might boil over. Whilst a crucible moment continues to inform leaders' approaches it does not mean we're not also going to see deflation and a dip in motivation. Hybrid working and an increased focus on virtual work won't be for everyone and we are expecting to see more early retirement as leaders take stock of their lives and might decide now is the time to move, spend more time with their family or just take a well-earned break.

It will be vital to re-engage and remotivate the burnt-out leaders on how to cope with their own challenging situations.

As a crucible moment, the pandemic has created an unprecedented global experience for business leaders which many will learn and evolve from. But we will not be now returning to normal – we enter a period where work is reimagined and leadership styles and priorities will continue to evolve to suit. And leaders will likely need more support than ever before to navigate these challenges.



8

MERRYCK & CO - WHO WE ARE

Established in 1998, Merryck & Co. is a leading executive mentoring provider, supporting senior executives and leadership teams helping them become better leaders to the benefit of all stakeholders.

Merryck & Co.'s mentors are all former CEOs and business leaders with experience from a diverse range of industries and sectors. Merryck supports senior executives from a wide range of businesses ranging from start-ups to the world's largest and most iconic companies.

We work with senior individuals and their teams at any point in their journey, but particularly at critical moments of transitional and transformational change.

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**The survey questioned senior
HR professionals including
Heads of Talent and Chief
People Officers at FTSE 100
and other large international
companies**

