



# Leadership in unprecedented times

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# Introduction

**As we enter these unprecedented times, we are all looking for leadership. The difficulty is figuring out what kind of leadership we now need. Clearly anyone who thinks they have simplistic answers has not been paying attention to the scale of the changes that have come like an avalanche since the turn of the year. Some of what we think of as good leadership still holds good but that will need to be balanced by the need for adaptive innovation as we try to reinvent our organisations and survive. Adaptive innovation – being experimental, creative and agile does not come from top down prescriptions – people need to be able to come together (now often virtually) to create new responses and take action. People from all parts of our organisations need to step into inventing, influencing and shaping responses to an evolving situation. At the same time, people are fearful and are looking to senior executives to guide them through this and protect their interests.**

Leadership is not just about the strategy, plan and technical aspects of organisation, it is also about the human, emotional life of the organisation. Leadership enables people to work with each other, feeling safe enough to get on with their work. How can leaders enable new ways of working when people patently cannot feel a previous sense of safety, provided by the familiarity of their social world?

Senior leaders will need to work with opposing tensions. They need to balance and weigh up what people may want to make them feel less anxious with what they may need to make the changes needed. Here are three aspects of leadership that need re-balancing in unprecedented times.



# How do we need to rethink our leadership?

Many things will change over the coming months but these are three things leaders can begin to rethink right now:

## 1. Redefine what we mean by strong leadership

Even though we all know it is not possible, it is a human desire to find strong leaders who will 'make it all good'. Patently no leader can come anywhere near that with this pandemic. In difficult times archetypes of leaders such as superwoman/man, gods and goddesses/invincible warriors and magicians arise from somewhere deep in the human psyche—we yearn for that person who can offer us protection from the ills we are experiencing.

### What is new?

We have been exploring distributed, collective and collaborative leadership for many years as a response to the increasingly volatile and interconnected global situation. Usually we understand this in terms of cultural change and the need for new practices to emerge. This pandemic has hit so fast that we are in a crisis. In crisis situations we often need good command and control leadership: there's an incident and I'm taking charge. However, this is not an incident—it requires a collective response but in a crisis people will always want someone to 'be in charge' and leaders in this situation will need to balance being in charge of the crisis with creating the conditions for collective responses to the evolving situation

### What is the problem?

Leaders who feel impelled because of their own personalities to try to rise to that desire will end up taking too much on their own shoulders

People sit back and wait for someone else to wave a magic wand whereas they need to be proactive and responsible for themselves and others.

## What can leaders do?

- Check if you feel your superhero tendencies are mobilising and keep these in check even when people clearly want you to demonstrate superpowers.
- Face others up with their responsibilities – it actually is their pay grade to join in and step up.
- Recognise the need for a strong figurehead not for solutions provided by a single person or top team.



## 2. Review what we mean by good communication

Most leaders like to communicate clearly and have messages which are carefully crafted to have maximum impact and often live by the adage 'Say nothing unless you have something clear to say'. And right now people desperately want leaders to have and communicate a plan 'that will work'.

### What is new?

The situation for Co-vid 19 is that those in positions of authority cannot have an entire solution/strategy/way forward and because it is so complex they would be putting people in danger if they tried to do so. Senior leaders need to recognise this and become comfortable saying 'we/I don't know'—yet—but we are working on it and we are confident we will come through this—people are learning that experts in all fields can say this—they are hearing the scientific and medical debates daily and 'not knowing but learning' is becoming more widely understood.

### What is the problem?

Because leaders do not have answers and a definite plan they hold back from communicating. People want leaders to have a plan and communicate clearly how it will work. Leaders wait to have something concrete to say. However, we know from experience that in any crisis—even what now seems minor by comparison with what we face today, such as the failure of an expected train to arrive or lost luggage or supply chain failure—what people complain about most is lack of communication. Whilst people would like something definite, they would prefer a message that said in an appropriate way—'we have nothing to say yet', rather than silence.

Leaders need to authorise teams and other leaders extremely clearly in order to use their expertise to come up with local solutions in the specific context where they are needed. We can see already that people are eager to act and to come together. Yet too many disparate groups working on the same issues or without clear authority will cause medium and long term problems as conflicting messages and actions emerge. Quite a lot of that activity will be fuelled by anxiety—doing something is better than sitting at home doing nothing and wanting to be seen to be indispensable when they are worried for their futures.

## What can leaders do?

- Communicate constantly even if the update is 'we are on it' rather than 'we have solved it'.
- Communicate direction of travel—specific destinations will change.
- Show that you understand peoples' fears—e.g. job losses—not naming them doesn't make them go away—name them and say you are working to minimise the impact.
- Be clear about the level of authority you are giving people to design novel solutions—Can they make decisions and act on their own? Should they give suggestions for you to agree? Use what resources? Can they work in new groups - with whom?
- By contrast if they are delivering business-as-usual solutions, and many people will be needed to do that, be clear they have to stick to existing guidelines. If they are expected to be creative be clear how they can test out ideas with colleagues if needed before going live if it is a work in progress.
- Be clear about boundaries and processes rather than solutions.



### 3. Re-imagine the leader's job from decision making, strategic choices, putting in new processes to a greater focus on emotions

Leaders fail to recognise that whilst they have strategic and financial roles to play they must play a key role in the unfolding emotional dynamics of the whole enterprise. A key aspect of leadership at any time is about ensuring the social dynamics of the workplace are fit for purpose – can people work together, challenge appropriately, learn, and feel competent. Hierarchy for decisions, routines, familiar patterns of work, saying hello to the same people every day, schedules of meetings all help people to avoid being overwhelmed by the emotions that always come from social interaction. Our organisations keep the hard emotions that exist in the workplace in check – so envy, anxiety, shame, and anger do not spill over into our everyday experience. These safeguards are in no longer enough or appropriate given that previous ways of working are being dismantled.

#### What is the problem?

Leaders mistakenly think about emotions only in terms of individual stress or good feelings, which are important but not the whole story – they need to think about the emotional tone or the emotions that are circulating widely in the whole system – so whilst we may offer individuals stress counselling, our organisations as a whole need support to deal with emotions that circulate, particularly as anxiety rises.

As the usual containers for keeping anxiety and difficult emotions at bay are unravelling in this crisis, leaders need to create collective spaces (probably virtually) where people can just chatter and exchange experience. Many social platforms are being mobilised for work tasks – teaching, meetings, conferences – but the informal chat amongst colleagues is just as important. And for senior leaders a more communal pace for that is crucial not just in work teams.

#### What can leaders do?

- Have more meetings (remotely if possible) not fewer.
- Do not have a huge agenda– give people time to discuss and raise issues informally.
- Recognise the need is for conversation not information – put information online and use meetings for people to process what they feel.
- Allow people to be negative but also find positive comments – both are important to say out loud.
- Let people know what they can do – doing things is actually better than waiting.
- Think about where you hope to end up but explain the difficulties of getting there and outline the support people will get.



When the World Trade Centre Twins Towers were attacked, Dame Marjorie Scardino, then CEO of Pearson was lucky that all of her staff there escaped safely. The next day she sent an email to all 28,000 employees world-wide:

**'Dear everyone,  
I want to make sure you know that our priority is that you are safe and sound in body and mind. Be guided by what you and your families need right now. There is no meeting you have to go to and no plane you have to get on if you don't feel comfortable doing it. For now look to yourselves and your families, and to Pearson to help you in any way we can.'**

Most other companies were sending out messages about new business strategy and financial measures. We know there is a paradox, a fine line for leaders to walk: balancing business confidence with 'not-knowing', plans not just platitudes. Dame Marjorie Scardino understood that people want leaders who are connected and understand what is needed to get through a crisis. In fact your ability to strategize has been tested many times: now it is your ability to enable people to feel your support across the globe that will be tested.



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A Chartered Psychologist, Kim Turnbull James is Professor of Leadership and Executive Learning at Cranfield School of Management. Kim researches new leadership paradigms that enable organizations to respond to complexity, work with adaptive challenges, and create the capacity for rethinking leadership practices. Her work includes the political and emotional dynamics that impact strategic change, drawing on systems psychodynamic thinking. Kim designs and delivers innovative leadership development interventions, including leadership programmes, coaching and team consulting, focused on learning embedded in real organisational problems. Her wide range of clients enables her to gain insight into many different organisations, cultures and working practices.

## Background Reading

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