

Eight leadership insights for Joe Biden in a post-COVID world

 Sunita Malhotra  Executive Education  January 22, 2021



Joe Biden, President of the United States

As I watched Joe Biden up on the podium giving his first presidential address, it struck me that many of the major leadership challenges facing the new President (though of course magnified in his case) are similar for senior leaders within all organizations, at this turbulent time in history.

Just as President Biden emphasized the need for unity, peace, truth and tolerance, a [brand-new research report](#) out this week from the CEMS Global Alliance in Management Education finds that COVID-19 has accelerated change in leadership attitudes, expectations and mindsets. It reveals that 2020 saw a powerful shift from the rigid structure and systems that have long characterised models of leadership to something more flexible, open and agile – predicated on inclusivity, empathy, tolerance of failure and openness in communication. In other words, in both our political sphere and organizations, we are seeing a shift to something that feels more human – and we are seeing it in real time.

It is clear from the recent US election saga that a rapid change in tide has well and truly swept away traditional, hierarchical, autocratic models of leadership. The challenge for President Biden as he embarks on a monumental task, will be to embrace the power of 'we' rather than the tyranny of 'I'.

Drawing on takeaways from the new CEMS report, here are eight key leadership insights for Joe Biden, as well as senior leaders in global organizations across all sectors, in a post-COVID world:

1. **Create psychological safety.** The last administration may have notoriously missed the mark, but for Biden, nurturing psychological safety will be essential, not only to safeguard the productivity of teams directly working for him, but also the prosperity of the nation. Likewise, the post-pandemic challenge for senior leaders will be to model transparency, accessibility, tolerance and empathy in all communications and interactions – and expect it from others. To empower people to accept responsibility and be their best selves, without fear of recrimination.
2. **Be 'human'.** Empathetic, human leaders will win the day, whilst authoritarian leaders will fall at the first hurdle. 1700 global respondents surveyed as part of the CEMS report found that post-COVID-19, empathy, resilience and communication will rise to the fore as key leadership qualities, whilst authoritative and technical prowess (while sometimes still valuable) will no longer be as highly prized.
3. **Let team members know you have their backs.** Employees need to know that as a leader you will support them, no matter what, as this will encourage them to take calculated risks. Reframe how you talk about failure, looking instead at what can be learned when things don't work out as planned.
4. **Change your language.** Negative rhetoric must be consigned to history. Instead, make sure that you model transparent, positive, open communication that always seeks improvement. For example, banish the word 'failure' (or even the phrase 'what went wrong?') from your vocabulary. Instead ask 'what can we learn?' Place positive language at the heart of culture and processes.
5. **Ditch the blame game.** Often mistakes aren't anyone's fault – just an inevitable part of experimentation and risk-taking. There is no place for 'who did it?' in 2021. Instead ask what happened and how things can be done differently (or even the same) next time.
6. **Cut out the noise.** Unfortunately, the higher up leaders are, the more they tend to speak. Making noise doesn't create psychological safety. A good guideline is that leaders should speak 20% of the time and listen 80%. If you give all the solutions by constantly talking, no-one is ever going to speak up, because they feel intimidated.
7. **Lead by example.** In his inaugural speech, Joe Biden talked about 'standing in other people's shoes,' which is something crucial for any leader. This comes back to purpose and knowing your values, strengths and weaknesses. Once you know this, you can lead by example – sharing your own triumphs and mistakes. Make sure to also ask yourself what you are afraid of (as that is often where the fear of risk-taking starts).

8. **Establish a relationship of trust and honesty.** President Biden stated that 'I will always level with you' and that is absolutely right. As leaders, trust your people and make it a habit. Also admit your own mistakes. I know CEOs who go to shareholder presentations, stand up and discuss things that didn't work, which takes a lot of courage. At the end of the day, these leaders inspire others.

Adapting to this new normal and navigating the road ahead will not be without tremendous challenges for the new President, or for senior leaders as we emerge from a time of crisis. The threats to the country, business and organizations remain acute and manifold. However, there is an opportunity ahead to lead change and to build the qualities and the resilience to weather this storm while bracing for the next.

Written by [Sunita Malhotra](#).