

Future ready leadership

Has the bossy boss left the building? What strong leadership looks like in 2021

As the UK heads towards a post-pandemic future, traits such as empathy and agility will be more important than ever for executives, say experts

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Mon 17 May 2021 10.38 BST



▲ In an agile working environment, leadership needs to focus on consistency and treating staff comparably. Photograph: fizkes/Getty Images/iStockphoto

If you're looking for a test of a leadership team, a global pandemic is a good place to start. The last 14 months have proved a huge challenge for leaders, with many having to innovate and adapt, scrapping long-term strategy in favour of a more agile approach.

Resilience was at the heart of many 2020 discussions on leadership but as organisations look to a post-pandemic future, what skills, qualities and capabilities will leaders need?



▲ Jody Goldsworthy

Agility continues to be important in 2021, says Jody Goldsworthy, executive director at GatenbySanderson and leader of its leadership and talent consulting practice. Organisations have had to shift the way they work, and bosses need to ensure they are managing their virtual workforce effectively.

"We need to lead differently to lead an agile or hybrid workforce well," says Goldsworthy. She advises managers to define their "Covid keeps" - that is things they've learned in the past year and will take forward - and to continue to rethink and improve ways of working.

Senior leadership teams need a laser focus on consistency, she says, which means treating staff comparably and having consistent expectations of them, creating a work climate where fairness is valued and trust developed and a positive

impact is made on engagement and productivity. This is because in an agile working environment, people work in a more personalised way, with less rigid acceptable work patterns. "So leadership judgment becomes more important," says Goldsworthy.

The ability to respond to crises with creativity and agility was identified as a key quality for leaders post-pandemic in the CEMS Guide to Leadership in a Post-Covid-19 World - a report produced by the CEMS Global Alliance of 34 leading business schools and 69 multinational companies. The report found that there had been a dramatic increase in the importance of resilience and empathy, and a decrease in the importance of traditional leadership authority and technical skills.

Empathy is still vital in 2021, says Sunita Malhotra, a professor at the Louvain School of Management in Belgium and a key contributor to the report, though the way empathetic leadership looks is slightly different.



▲ Leadership teams should invest time to develop together as a group, not just individually. Photograph: filadendron/Getty Images

There has been a shift from terms such as "be human" and "open door policy" to a similar concept conveyed through phrases such as "be vulnerable" and "authentic leadership", says Malhotra. "In the future (post-pandemic), empathetic leadership will be even more critical."

That means being human or vulnerable, knowing your purpose and strengths and weaknesses as a person, being humble, not being afraid to admit mistakes and learn from failures and being able to put yourself in others' shoes, she says. This helps to nurture collective resilience in an organisation, says Malhotra, by creating a "psychologically safe" environment that allows people to have their own working routines and share mistakes with each other.



▲ Prof Sunita Malhotra

The traditional concept of authoritative leadership has changed, says Malhotra. "The command and control days are over." She suggests "reimagining work", starting with what peak performance looks like. "What we discovered in the pandemic is people are actually much more productive when they are allowed to follow their natural rhythms."

Another area that Goldsworthy identifies as being vital for the future is investing time in developing as senior leadership teams rather than just as individuals. "It's important to develop individually to be effective in your leadership role and to support your future aspirations but a lot of teams don't invest time to develop as a group," she says.

The ability to create culture change is also a key quality, according to both Goldsworthy and Malhotra. "In the public sector our clients talk all the time about diversity and inclusion, and they all mean slightly different things," says Goldsworthy. "We advise a focus on bringing people from different backgrounds and perspectives into top teams." That doesn't just mean "easy-to-spot" characteristics of under-representation, she says, but areas like different socioeconomic backgrounds.

"Organisations invest a lot of time and effort in acquiring that diversity, and then you've got to use that diverse talent intelligently," she says. "Does your culture actually support getting the best out of that diverse workforce and are you prepared for the challenge that greater diversity brings? If not, you undermine the effort you've made to bring diverse skills in."

She increasingly sees public sector organisations asking for leadership programmes that are about trying to achieve culture change. "This is recognition that culture change is a really hard thing to lead, and as a top team you've got to be really aligned, not just in what you think your culture is now but about what you want your culture to be."

For more information on future ready leadership, talent development and creating the right culture, [contact Jody Goldsworthy at GatenbySanderson](#)

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