

LEADERSHIP



'IN THE BALANCE'

To ensure you are well equipped to lead in a business world that is rapidly changing, consider these six pairs of traits, an essential set of competencies for today's leader.

LEADERSHIP, IN THE BALANCE

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a phenomenon like none of us have ever experienced, bringing with it dramatic changes to how we live and work, and likely long-term effects that have yet to reveal themselves. As leaders, it is natural that we feel ill-prepared to cope with challenges that come with no precedent, yet at the same time our teams will be looking to us for firm direction and calm – not to mention a little dose of ‘normalcy’. Our leadership response can be the difference between exacerbating a situation that seems chaotic and scary, versus creating an environment where our teams band together and channel their energies into creating something positive from the change.

In order to support leaders now and into the future, Hemsley Fraser have brought together the industry’s latest research and insights, adding our own expertise, to offer concise thinking and practical advice for leaders. Our thinking has led to the development of six trait pairings, which taken together, represent an essential set of competencies for leading in a business world that is rapidly changing.



RESILIENCE & FOCUS

An ability to show resilience when adapting to changing circumstances, while also being able to bring clarity to, and maintain focus on, complex and challenging situations.

Resilience is imperative for leaders in an unpredictable and fast-changing world. The pressures of unexpected complex challenges, coupled with the pace of change, means that the need to to review and adjust strategies quickly (often many times over) has become the new way of working. Leaders must adapt swiftly and move forward with resilience, as if second nature.

The danger, however, is that leaders end up spinning plates and fighting fires but not making forward progress. Therefore, the ability to bring clarity, seeing past distractions and being present in the moment is also essential for modern leadership. In short, leaders must have the critical problem-solving skills to focus on what matters and remain set on completing a goal, while also having the resilience to adjust and re-focus when circumstances demand a shift in strategy.



VULNERABILITY & CONFIDENCE

An openness to uncertainty and emotional exposure, showing one's humanity while practising self-awareness and being confident enough to inspire and empower others.

Confidence is perhaps one of the more obvious traits people look for in a leader, but while this is not new in itself, some leaders may find their confidence lacking in a more uncertain and complex environment.

Leaders must resist the pressure that comes with being 'in control' and be comfortable with admitting when they are unsure. In today's environment, our teams are not expecting their leaders to have all the answers – no one does. Pretending to know exactly what is going to happen will not instil confidence, and can have the opposite effect. Instead, have the confidence to admit what you don't know, and to ensure others understand the importance of planning for such uncertainties in the business. Being honest with the idea that you don't have all the answers makes you more authentic, and builds trust within teams.

In some ways, working in a more virtual environment in 2020 may have given leaders the chance to reveal more of themselves. In fact, there are some definite opportunities for leaders in terms of how they are viewed by their teams. This may be as simple as showing a glimpse into your 'real' life through video-conferencing, or being open about your own emotions and how you are coping during such times. New working patterns may allow for leaders to be more accessible, without the trappings and formality that were enforced by the traditional work environment. Truly listening, relating to and connecting with people on their level has forged closer connections based upon trust and empathy. Taking this more vulnerable stance will have a real and lasting benefit.

However, leaders must still embody confidence in the vision and the direction for achieving it. Confidence fosters a level of trust and comfort within the team, and without it, the leader will find it challenging to lead. A good leader must also have the confidence to take a firm stance when it is in the best interest of the organisation, and sufficient optimism to instil hope.

PACE & SUSTAINABILITY

The ability to think fast and move swiftly, in a sustainable way. Being mindful to balance self-care, energy management and peer networks, for longer-term advantage.

It's certainly not easy keeping pace with changing customer expectations, market disruption, or the fast-evolving business landscape, but leaders are expected to think quickly and move forward with creative initiatives at pace. Leaders today can no longer rely on 'old ways' of doing things, but instead must find ways to move with greater speed than ever before. Whether that is the

fast prototyping of a new product, a creative solution to a business risk, or the deployment of a new idea to boost sales, it's the leader's job to drive this pace.

The leader plays a pivotal role as a master facilitator and energy driver for the team. It is the responsibility of the leader to encourage new ideas and push the forward momentum. When the expectations, goals and drivers are clear, it's amazing what can be achieved.

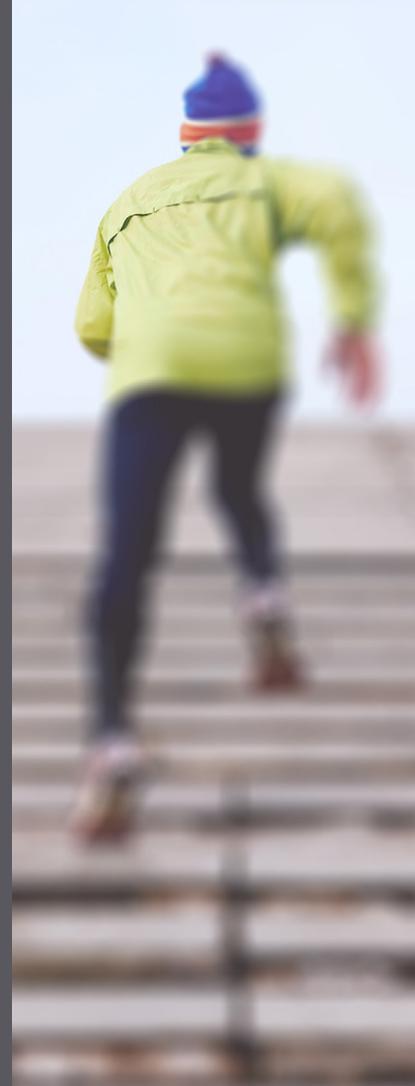
“ Leaders must avoid burnout by managing their energy with the same rigour and discipline with which they manage their time to deliver higher performance. ”

In today's virtual, hybrid and flexible workplace, it's never been more important to work effectively, productively and at speed. However, this can present a number of challenges and risks, such as staying connected as a team, remaining aligned on business goals, and maintaining overall wellbeing. Digital tools can greatly assist. Slack, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom etc have become business-critical applications over these last months.

But, balance once again is paramount, and leaders ultimately have a goal of ensuring that the team's pace is sustainable. In the context of working both virtually and productively, we are observing a growing focus on 'energy management' rather than 'time management'. Leaders must avoid burnout by managing their energy with the same rigour and discipline with which they manage their time to

deliver higher performance. Creating a clear vision and direction helps people maintain morale and energy, but we are also seeing a much greater focus on managing priorities, focusing on doing the right things with the appropriate amount of effort and empowering others to do the same.

Leaders can achieve this by changing their focus from input to output, determining the goal which needs to be reached and working backwards to ascertain key priorities. The leader must also be mindful of the need to foster self-care for themselves and their teams and be attuned to warning signs in their virtual interactions. Leveraging peer networks, as our personal and work lives (and often workplaces) are now so intertwined, is also key to ensuring change is adopted in a sustainable way.



EMPATHY & DETERMINATION

Being genuinely empathetic as a leader and truly listening to others, but driven to see things through – thinking big and taking bold moves as needed

Empathy is an essential part of building an inclusive team that celebrates diverse views. When each member of the team feels appreciated and able to contribute, it helps to create a sense of belonging. Demonstrating empathy can be a greater challenge as the pace of business increases, and the leader's actions in this must be authentic.

Pretending to care about an employee's situation or viewpoint when the leader has already decided on the outcome can have more of a negative impact than not asking for their concerns in the first place.

As digital communications (email, video calls, instant messaging) overtake physical interaction, special care must be taken to ensure that feelings and intention are adequately conveyed through non-face-to-face interactions. The need for visual communications remains, and leaders must be visible – virtual or otherwise.

Creating a culture of caring could wrongly be interpreted as 'emotions first'. A leader who is overly guided by emotion may subconsciously avoid choices that are controversial or confrontational, letting feelings get in the way of difficult business decisions. This can mean a lack of hard progress, motivation and drive; there must remain a clear determination to execute.

Conversely, single-mindedly pushing ahead to a conclusion without considering others' perspectives creates distance and dysfunction in a team. Leaders must balance their determination for results, with having the sensitivity and understanding to include the team along the way. Good leaders take the time to know and understand their team's feelings and appreciate different viewpoints. Great leaders will show empathy in their decision-making style, explaining their rationale and generating greater understanding among those involved in driving success.

CURIOSITY & DECISIVENESS

Being constantly curious with a growth mindset – always learning and encouraging others

Curiosity is imperative for leaders in the digital age. Leaders must scratch below the surface, questioning everything to get to the 'why' of the matter, while constantly learning and looking for improvements. A new generation of employees, hallmarked by their natural inquisitiveness and unwillingness to accept the status quo, will undoubtedly expect this from leaders.

Yet, excessive curiosity, without balance, could easily lead to organisational paralysis, as teams become mired in too many options, delays in decision-making, or worse still, constantly changing priorities. Digital advancements have

led to a dramatic increase in the amount of information available. Accordingly, leaders must be critical thinkers, rapidly analysing alternatives, gauging risks, and determining the best course of action.

The workforce will depend on their leaders to step up when they need decisive action. Conversely, a leader that takes snap decisions without looking for alternative solutions may be missing the broader perspective that can come from simply being more curious. Good leaders will consider and weigh as many options as possible – with the required pace in mind – before taking action, yet know when to wrap it up and follow their instincts, bringing the team along with them as they forge ahead.



ACTION & INCLUSION

Being a creative, purposeful and positive change agent in the midst of unpredictability, while also fostering an inclusive environment that motivates and engages others.

Leaders must be a positive disruptive force, bringing creativity and purpose to see and make the changes needed for the business to thrive. Leaders must also navigate the organisation through the discomfort that this disruption causes. Having the mindset to take action is critical, and takes considerable bravery.

Recent challenges have amplified the pre-existing plight of industries that have seen wide-spread re-shaping from digital disruption (hospitality, media, finance, for example), as well as affecting previously buoyant sectors – creating the need to pivot to new ways of working. Even the most 'stable' of organisations have been impacted and challenged in ways that threaten their very existence. Leading, virtually or otherwise, through this change is not straightforward, and new challenges are always just around the corner.



“ The power of good, timely and ongoing communication cannot be overstated. ”

Leaders must understand that any disruption, even if positive, can make people uneasy. And, that effective change requires inclusivity and buy-in from employees. Thankfully, there have never been more tools to assist leaders in this task, including digital options to facilitate collaboration, communication and engagement. From focus groups to pulse surveys, on-demand learning and better communications tools, technology can be harnessed to create ever-stronger levels of employee engagement and inclusion. This inclusion, in turn, creates a broader sense of awareness – awareness as to why changes are being implemented, of how employees are involved and can support the business aims, and ultimately understanding of the consequences of not being brave and taking action.

As with the other traits, the key remains in finding balance. A leader who does not engage and include those around them risks setting off boldly in the wrong direction. While a leader that seeks to achieve complete buy-in before stepping out risks creating a 'group think' culture and an organisation that is too slow to react. The power of good, timely and ongoing communication cannot be overstated, and this has become wider in scope in our ever more virtual working worlds. Good clear communication, knowledge sharing, inclusion and collaboration all help to fuel workforce engagement.



THE 'BALANCING' ACT

As with all things in life, balance is healthy. Inherent in these traits is a natural tension – a tension that can be seen in either the under or overachievement of any individual competency. These tension points can otherwise create adverse situations for the business if left unchecked.

Leaders must cultivate a sixth sense to determine when there is an imbalance, and adjust strategies in real-time to achieve the optimum balance for the situation, the team and the organisation; thus the success of the leader is 'in the balance' for any given time and situation.



SETTING THE SCALES FOR SUCCESS

With so many desirable traits, what should leaders focus on as priority? Having the right leadership traits to lead in a typical business situation is one thing; but what anchor points are more important within the context of the challenges we face right now?

To support leaders in the current moment, we have created a seven-point action plan which brings together the key traits and their pairings, with practical steps to help leaders overcome the challenges ahead. With this, we aim to assist leaders to feel more confident and comfortable at a time of uncertainty and accelerated change.

Contact us to request a free copy of the seven-point action plan.

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