

# LEADERSHIP

'IN THE BALANCE'

*Talking points from our  
facilitated virtual discussion*

# INTRODUCTION

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Throughout the last 12 months, Hemsley Fraser has been attempting to determine the most important traits for business leaders in 2020 and beyond. Following a year that has dramatically changed the way we live and work, we have found that good leadership involves a delicate balance between different traits. There will be certain times and scenarios in which a leader needs more of one trait than the other, but the complementing trait should always play a part, bringing our leaders' focus back in balance.

We put our 'trait pairings' to the test in a virtual event, facilitated by our Head of Virtual Learning, Nick Mongan, our Innovation Consultant, John Shepherd and featuring a panel discussion with a group of global L&D professionals. During the event, we discussed the most desirable leadership traits, and how we can equip leaders for the future. We asked participants for their thoughts on our work, 'Leadership in the Balance' and which traits would be most valuable in the future. Here's what they said.

# RELIANCE ON RESILIENCE

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The topic of resilience was a primary discussion point, with our participants agreeing that this had been - and would continue to be - incredibly important this year and beyond. The workload for many leaders in 2020 has increased, leaving them with a lot to do, learn and adjust. No single advanced training programme could prepare us for the challenges we've all faced this year and leaders have had to adapt at the same time as everyone else. One of our panellists likened this to the moment during a safety briefing on a plane, where the flight attendant tells passengers to put on their own oxygen masks before helping others. All of our participants recognised the importance of supporting their leaders in building resilience, with the intention that this would help equip leaders to support others.

In our trait pairings, we matched resilience with focus, and our guests mentioned that focus had been difficult for leaders this year. Managing a hybrid workforce has been a particular challenge, as has been determining new priorities and engaging employees with the changing business objectives. While it is positive that leaders have become more resilient, we must balance this with maintaining focus in order to move the organisation forward.

In relation to resilience is the notion of antifragility, which was raised by one of our participants. Antifragility is about learning to benefit from shocks and unexpected circumstances, rather than simply bouncing back from upsets. Again this demonstrates a natural tension between resilience and focus – leaders must be more than resilient; they must be focused enough to look for the silver lining in every cloud.



# PACE AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Pace stood out to some of our participants because leaders had fared better – in terms of demonstrating pace – in some respects compared to others. Most agreed that as organisations they were pleased with how quickly people had adjusted to new ways of working, including working remotely, using a hybrid model and working more independently.

However, several guests commented that there was a disconnect internally. Because people are getting through individual tasks more quickly, there is an expectation that all work will be completed at a faster rate. In reality, limited physical collaboration has sometimes resulted in work taking longer than it would have previously.

Some participants reported that pace had slowed compared to the start of the pandemic, as employees struggled to get back into a proactive mindset. When forced to be reactive at the beginning of the lockdown, leaders were quick to respond to changes, but as we settle into the next normal, behaviours and attitudes would need to shift to encourage leaders and their teams to work more proactively.

In our trait pairings, we have matched pace with sustainability. This was reflected at the event, with many of our participants stressing the importance of wellbeing. By making time for personal wellbeing, it was hoped that this would sustain leaders, helping them to keep working at the required pace without risking burnout. In a similar way to the previously mentioned plane analogy, our participants reported encouraging leaders to look after themselves first so that they could better look out for their teams.



# EMPATHY

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Asking “how are you doing?” rather than “what are you doing?” has been an important change for leaders this year. Our participants all noted how vital empathy had been in 2020 and reported dedicating significant resources to building and demonstrating empathy, in particular how to create the time and feel comfortable enough in doing this remotely. Leaders must hone their listening skills to allow for a greater connection with teams, in turn, building understanding and trust.

One of our guests raised the point of compassionate leadership, which is perhaps one step removed from empathy. Their organisation has been struggling with how to lead in a fair way when people are experiencing different personal issues which can affect their working lives. While they encourage their leaders to understand and appreciate how others feel, there is a danger of going too far and treating individuals differently.

There clearly is a line to be drawn when leaders could be at risk of acting with too much empathy, to the detriment of the organisational objectives. Even though this will likely be different within each organisation and scenario, it further reinforces the need for a balance of traits, for pairings which complement each other and create a natural tension. Organisations must find a way to support employees in a 360 way while still allowing leaders to make fair decisions.



# FUTURE TRAITS IN DEMAND

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It was highlighted that leaders are going to need to be able to deal with much ambiguity and uncertainty and that storytelling would be a useful way to engage employees and help bring them along with you. Leaders will need to relate to individuals on a human level, and storytelling helps them to buy into the vision of the business.

Our participants also felt that leaders would need to foster curiosity and become more comfortable with challenging others and raising objections or discussing different approaches, particularly within the virtual environment. Some reported an 'unspoken sense' that there would be issues in the first few months that would be easily forgiven because these changes would be temporary. However, our world is not just changing, it is changed, and leaders will need to get accustomed to handling delicate issues virtually.

There is also the challenge of managing a hybrid workforce. As organisations are granted the freedom to determine their own working practices, employees will have lots of different perspectives and preferences. It will not be possible to please everyone, and so leaders must find a way to compromise which suits both employees and the organisation. This will require some bravery, in making bold decisions, and storytelling will again help leaders to relate to their teams.

In order to make these bold decisions, our participants suggested that leaders could benefit from practising "bounded optimism", defined by McKinsey as "confidence combined with realism". Leaders who were overly optimistic at the beginning of the pandemic lost some credibility, but teams and organisations still want to see leaders who project confidence and inspire hope. Bounded optimism allows leaders to appear calm and confident while also understanding and recognising the uncertainty surrounding current markets. This is another example of leadership that requires balanced consideration.

Aside from the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 will be remembered for the Black Lives Matter movement and international outcry following the killing of George Floyd. Diversity and inclusion became more significant than ever and, some of our leaders felt ill-equipped to respond to questions relating to the organisational and team perspective on such emotive topics. We must support our leaders in feeling able to answer difficult questions and to be comfortable enough to be vulnerable with their teams. Saying "I don't know, what do you think?" or "Let's talk this through" is something our leaders need to adjust to. We had previously highlighted the need for this vulnerability when making organisational decisions, but the blurring of our work and home lives intensifies the need for this trait to be used in other conversations, too.

# WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR LEARNING?

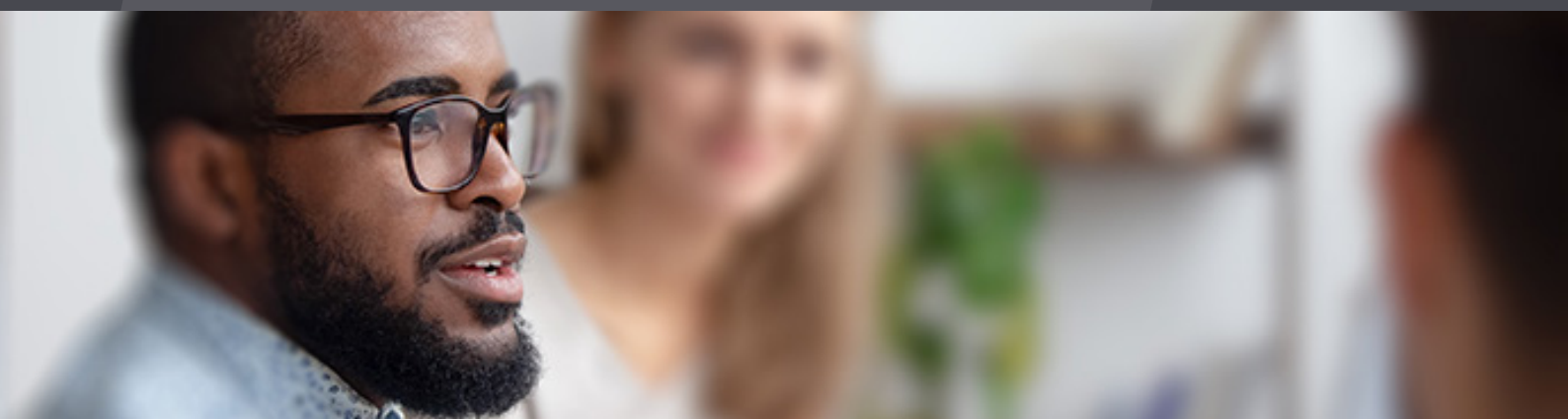
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We've mentioned that leaders have a lot to do, and this means that learning will really need to excite them in order to support our leaders and embed new skills and behaviours. The attention economy plays an even bigger part while working remotely, so learning must be able to compete. We must give them a reason to commit to personal growth and dedicate their limited time to developing themselves.

Leaders need blended learning experiences which can help them to develop their own learning agility, taking more responsibility for learning. To help alleviate time pressures, we should be focusing on practical bitesize and snackable content. We must deliver as much on-demand learning as possible so that our leaders can dip in and out as they need. Similarly, content should be multi-modal, so that we can meet people where they are. Leaders must be able to learn in the time that they have and in the way that they like. There is a balance to be found here too, as we must ensure that the volume is not overwhelming.

Ensuring that our leaders are not isolated is also vital. Learning from and supporting each other, sharing information and updates can help to improve wellbeing and to inspire. L&D and HR practitioners can assist this by providing expert-led facilitated conversations with leaders.

If leaders were walking a fine line pre-2020, it now feels like a much higher and much thinner tightrope with no end in sight. Everyone is watching, waiting and it feels as though there is no safety net. Through learning, we can support leaders to walk more steadily, with more confidence and certainty in their actions.



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