



Legacy leadership lessons from our viral trial

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused businesses to adjust quickly to new disruptions in the workplace. An unparalleled period of “big” leadership learning developed as leaders and organizations around the world worked their way through the challenges. The authors asked more than 400 front-line business leaders from a wide variety of industries to discuss the lessons that they learned in helping their organizations rapidly adapt to the new environment. That input led to the creation of “legacy lessons” that provide important leadership questions.

If we could go back to January 2020, we would see business leaders betting that year would be one of the best in business history. This widespread enthusiasm and optimism cut across the full spectrum of industries. Then came COVID-19 and the unprecedented sharp economic downturn, worker shortages, market volatility, supply chain uncertainty and general chaos that cascaded through the world's economies and their general societies.

There is no question that the coronavirus pandemic caught the world off guard. Virtually overnight, businesses worldwide were asked to adjust their model and pivot into a “virtual workplace.” As leaders and organizations around the world worked their way through the challenges created by the pandemic, this has been an unparalleled period of “big” leadership learning.

And while the TV stations, newspapers, bloggers and the breadth of virtual media bombarded us with large-scale stories and accounts of the difficulties experienced by organizations and workers during this “viral trial,” surprisingly little has been communicated about what has been learned to operate in the workplace trenches during this unique period.

“To say that these are unprecedented times is a large understatement. Our workforce, our customers, our suppliers, and our leaders are being challenged to their very core as we work our way through the pandemic. ... We are learning a lot about the impact our leaders are having as they step up and do the things that are needed to keep our workforce safe and focused, while doing their very best to quickly solve the problems created by the pandemic. This has been a great time of new learning as we take care of our customers and keep our



operation moving forward. Our leaders are being called to perform at a whole new level and in different ways than ever before!”

– A division manufacturing president’s reflection

Our leadership study and legacy lessons

Since the pandemic’s outbreak, we have asked front-line business leaders from a wide variety of industries to discuss the lessons they learned in helping their organizations rapidly adapt and overcome the challenges of COVID-19. In total, we have solicited structured input from more than 400 U.S. leaders participating in virtual focus groups that were part of a leadership development curriculum.

We asked individual leaders this question: “What are the biggest leadership lessons that you have learned to date in helping your organization work its way through our pandemic?” Upon completion of this exercise, participants were assigned to five-person virtual breakout focus groups to share their responses with each other and identify a consensus of eight to 10 specific leadership practices that were then shared with the larger group. The responses for each focus group were content-analyzed, and from this analysis a list of the top 10 key leadership lessons were identified as being critical to successfully leading through the pandemic.

“There is no getting around the fact that as a leader I feel like I have learned more during this pandemic than I have during the previous five years of my career and I know I’m not alone. ... This plague hit our company hard and we have all had to take our game up a notch or we ran the risk of going under like so many other companies in our industry. No one wants to go through this again but I know that I’m a better leader because of this tough experience as are my people.”

– Observations of a front-line supervisor

We would like to share the “legacy lessons” from the pandemic uncovered from our research project and provide some important leadership questions to help readers draw better value from this information. The term “legacy lessons” refers to practices that should be applied during this crisis and in future crisis situations.

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Legacy lesson No. 1

People are your most important resource, so take care of them.

Participants in the study strongly indicated that the pandemic has caused them to increase the value they place on

their workforce and the need to take care of their people. They recognized that before COVID-19, organizational cultures, practices and policies often did not support the contention that their people were their most important resource. The pandemic forced leaders to reevaluate their views and deal with the reality that without their workforce, they were not able to effectively operate or compete.

The health and safety of employees became a critical part of top-to-bottom discussions that leaders had about how to keep organizations open and moving forward during the crisis. The term “essential worker” quickly came into being in select industries, but participants in this discussion made it clear that for an organization to survive the pandemic, all workers became “essential.” Leaders made it clear that without a present, engaged, safe and well-equipped workforce, operations would grind to a halt.

One participant summarized this by stating, “We clearly needed our people to survive but the onus was on us to lead them with empathy in a way so that they felt safe and appreciated.... And it really caused all of us to make sure that we were taking care of our people.”

Legacy leadership lesson question No. 1: As a leader, do you demonstrate exceptional care and concern for your people in both word and deed on a consistent basis?

Legacy lesson No. 2
Attitude is everything; stay positive, poised and control what you can control.

Leaders admitted that they had to stay positive and poised regardless of how difficult their circumstances were, and that was a real challenge. In the earliest days of the pandemic, organizations scrambled to stay up and running while transitioning their workforces to a redesigned workspace or working remotely.

Leaders found themselves unnerved by operating in the unknown and not having answers to important questions that impacted their operations. In this regard, leaders shared with us that it was imperative that they step up and take

control of things they could control and not burn time, energy and resources on activities outside of their control. This required leaders to frequently admit they did not have answers to certain questions or solutions to certain problems.

What they could control was their ability to provide their people with clear direction, effective communications, the tools needed to perform and updated information on what was going on in the organization. The words of one participant captured this valuable lesson: “Taking control of my attitude and what I can control helped me not worry as much about the things that I couldn’t control, which were many.”

Legacy leadership lesson question No. 2: As a leader, do you work hard to stay positive and focused on the things that you or your employees can control rather than on the things you wish that you could control?

Legacy lesson No. 3
Get mission-focused quickly; hit the reset button on performance roles, goals and expectations to stay aligned.

Any course in leadership will discuss the importance of clearly defining a work group’s mission in a way that can be translated into individual performers’ roles, goals and expectations. This allows employees to focus on their core mission and to best engage in the most important, value-added activities to best serve the organization given the realities of the pandemic.

Our leaders stated this was very much a top-down exercise, but at each organizational level leaders needed to clarify and operationalize their departmental mission to the new reality. Creating refocused job descriptions, roles and goals were critically important early in the pandemic. At the same time, hitting the reset button allowed employees at all levels to identify “nonvalue-added activities” given the new set of circumstances. Our focus group discussions were replete with keywords like “mission,” “focus,” “purpose” and “core values,” all of which point toward the fact that not all organi-

zational activity is value added, especially in a crisis.

Legacy leadership lesson question No. 3: As a leader, do you help your people stay focused on their most important value-added activities and role responsibilities?

Legacy lesson No. 4
Equip your people for safety and success.

Early in the pandemic, organizations had to pivot quickly as many workers began to work from home and on-site workspaces needed to be quickly adjusted to take into account social distancing mandates, masking, sanitizing and temperature checking.

Our front-line leaders stated that they found it important to ask their workers, whether virtual or in the workplace, a vital question: “What do you need to successfully do your job?” As workplaces made physical safety adjustments, accommodations were needed to allow workers to function and stay productive. When employees switched to working from home, technology and other accommodations had to be put in place quickly.

In these scenarios, front-line leaders stated they were constantly asking their people what they needed to be able to perform their jobs at the highest possible level in terms of technology, workplace-people connections, tools and access to information. Our participants stated that asking their employees what they needed to be successful became a bigger leadership practice during the pandemic and greatly helped them understand and support the needs of individual performers.

Legacy leadership lesson question No. 4: As a leader, do you take great care to ensure that your people are operating safely while properly equipped with the tools, technology, connections and information that they need for success?

Legacy lesson No. 5
Leaders must be 360-degree, 2-way communicators and power listeners.

In the early days of the pandemic, many leaders were placed in the unenviable

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position of having to communicate with their workers without having a great deal of accurate information to share. As the crisis unfolded, leaders realized they needed to become more proficient in both sharing information and quickly improving their listening skills.

Workers were in possession of important information that could benefit leaders' understanding of many of these new and challenging situations and their ultimate performance on the job. In our focus group discussions, the term "360-degree communications" was frequently discussed, coupled with the term "two-way" communications. Leaders needed to communicate up, side-to-side and down in their working relationships.

Participants in the study shared that listening became an even more critical part of their job to stay abreast of things going on around them and to be in a better position to both understand what was happening, identify problems and opportunities and make effective decisions. Leaders are used to having "the answers" and controlling and sharing information. During the pandemic, they found themselves dependent on others to understand what was taking place around them.

One of our participants captured this issue when she said, "I had to become a better listener at a whole new level if I was going to be in the best position to know what to do, get things done and help my people succeed." Thus, the pandemic forced leaders to improve every dimension of their leadership communication skill set to be able to operate in an optimal fashion.

Legacy leadership lesson question No. 5: Are you an effective leader who practices ongoing and effective 360-degree, two-way communications, while being an active and powerful listener?

Legacy lesson No. 6
Don't underestimate the power of performance feedback, being a great coach.

Early in the pandemic, leaders were

immediately called upon to help their people develop new and safer work practices, habits and routines. Employees in many cases found themselves either working at home and isolated from face-to-face contact with colleagues or having their workplace redesigned in a fashion to separate them from co-workers to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

In either case, leaders in this discussion realized the importance of providing their people with both performance feedback and coaching to reinforce desired safety practices, new workplace routines and/or best practices to aid virtual workers. Participants stated that engaging in these important practices were challenging in this new environment and were frequently pushed aside by more pressing matters, "fighting fires." But they also realized the importance of monitoring employee behavior and offering encouragement, support, praise and accountability for COVID-19 safety demands and new performance requirements of their subordinates.

These leaders suggested that regularly checking in with employees via phone, email and/or virtual meeting was generally well received. Leaders also admitted to having to find creative ways to provide feedback to employees operating within the workplace given some of the restrictions for close personal contact.

In the end, leaders made it perfectly clear that performance feedback and coaching were critically important to keep employees motivated and on track and, at the same time, keep themselves informed about the important and pressing issues of the day.

Leadership lesson question No. 6: As a leader, do you provide your people with ongoing and relevant feedback and coaching to maximize their alignment and performance?

Legacy lesson No. 7
There is no substitute for teamwork, cooperation in a crisis (or normal times).

It has been said that "teamwork makes the dream work," and according to our leaders, that principle has been front

and center in the survival story of many enterprises. While many organizations are quick to say that they have a "great leadership team" or that their "workforce thrives on teamwork," these can be hollow statements in many organizations. Our leaders were replete with accounts of how teamwork solved real customer problems; how unusual cooperation between sales and accounting made a big difference in an outcome; or how leaders at all levels were forced to better work with each other to remove an organizational performance barrier.

Truth be told, necessity is and always has been the mother of invention, and the necessities created by the pandemic have forced organizations to become much more effective at fostering and nurturing teamwork and cooperation they hopefully will carry forward post-pandemic. The words of one participant captured this powerful necessity: "We didn't have a choice – if we didn't function as a team, our department would have exploded!"

Legacy leadership lesson question

No. 7: As a leader, do you take proactive and purposeful steps to increase the level of teamwork and cooperation that exist in your operation?

Legacy lesson No. 8
Stay situationally aware; remove performance barriers, solve problems, make changes faster.

According to the leaders in our study, a great lesson coming from this pandemic is that when leaders have to, they can solve problems and make changes much more quickly than they realized. The pandemic has required leaders to become much more situationally aware of how their work groups are functioning at any given moment, and when performance is not where it needs to be, they say they are much quicker to take action.

The many workplace problems during the pandemic have included staffing, cash flow, supply chain issues, loss of customers and technology meltdowns. Many say that the pandemic has created a newfound sense of urgency in many organizations that did not exist beforehand. This sense of urgency and

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the necessity of better engaging with the workforce to find solutions to real performance problems has taught leaders a valuable lesson about the importance of continuously monitoring both individual and work team performance and taking quick action to remove performance barriers.

In the words of one leader, “I feel as if I have gotten 10 years of experience in problem-solving and driving change during the pandemic.... And these are skills that will help me the rest of my career!”

Legacy leadership lesson question No. 8: As a leader, are you situationally aware of how well your team is performing and are you quick to solve problems and remove barriers that damage performance?

Legacy lesson No. 9 **Think beyond the current gloom.**

There is no question that the pandemic has caused organizations to focus a great deal of time, energy and decision-making space on the immediate issues related to keeping their operations running and workforces safe. Having said that, many leaders in our study clearly stated that a host of both internal and external business opportunities exist when you look for them. They identified a wide variety of these opportunities, including creating new partnerships, strengthening supply chain relationships, streamlining an outdated organizational process, infusing new technologies into outdated operating platforms and, as previously mentioned, making changes more quickly than thought possible.

The importance of thinking through how to handle future opportunities is driven by the simple reality that responding to a post-pandemic upturn will not simply be a matter of throwing a switch for most business leaders and their enterprises. It will require planning, time and forethought to avoid a new crisis caused by a surge in business when some of the organization’s operational capacity has been degraded by the economic downturn and loss of key employees.

Legacy leadership lesson question



No. 9: As a leader, are you spending sufficient time looking for both internal and external opportunities to improve your business and prepare for the future?

Legacy lesson No. 10 **Leaders must take care of themselves and always lead by example.**

We have saved what we consider to be the most powerful legacy leadership lesson for last. Our leaders made it clear that it is critically important that they always lead by example and that they must be mindful of their own mental, physical and emotional health to be the best they can be in leading others.

Discussions among these leaders included a great many points about the importance of taking care of one’s physical health with regular exercise, meditation, diet and sufficient sleep. In addition, leaders identified the importance of taking time to think, reflect and articulate life priorities, reestablishing the practice of family dinners and investing time in important relationships, all mentioned as a key to taking care of themselves. Based on these comments, it clearly is best to take a holistic approach to personal health. Self-care can have a powerful impact on their professional performance.

Legacy leadership lesson question No. 10: As a leader, do you make it a real priority to lead by example and

take care of your physical, mental and emotional health so you might best lead others?

A call for reflection and action on legacy leadership lessons

The purpose of this study was to get a better understanding of what lessons have been taught to leaders dealing with the problems created by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that the leaders in our study admitted they were all “works in progress” as leaders, and while the pandemic has been painful on many levels, it also has been a time of unprecedented leadership learning. While many lessons expressed by our participants fall into the category of leadership fundamentals, is important to note these fundamentals have allowed organizations to work their way out of the difficult circumstances created by the pandemic.

We encourage you to keep asking yourselves the legacy leadership questions. If you are coming up short in any of the areas these target, make immediate changes to your behaviors to achieve the best results for your organization. It is our firm belief that one of the biggest legacies of this pandemic is that it has created a new generation of more qualified and experienced leaders who are in a better position to lead their organizations into a post-pandemic marketplace and to deal with future challenges and crises. ❖

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