

The Shifting Challenges for Leaders

*Increased Self-Awareness and Greater Resilience
Required for Post-Pandemic Leadership*

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In January 2020, when we had only vague and incomplete information on a new strain of virus, The Economist published a column entitled A Manager's Manifesto for 2020: Eight Resolutions to Adopt in the New Year.¹ It highlighted many wise practices and behaviours we knew about but which the authors thought we might pay special attention to, e.g. "give out some praise", the "buck stops with you", "listen to your staff" and similar important reminders.

And then along came a global pandemic and leaders found themselves in deeper and uncharted waters. The advice cited above from The Economist still remains sound and helpful. What changed, however, in my experience is best described as the need for some aspects of the leader's role to become "more vivid".²

Leaders realized that the need to balance both task and relationship was central to being consistently effective in their role. The task part of the equation was always central but now the need for attention to, and support of the safety, security and overall wellbeing of teams, was very much a central part of the work of leading others.

Nine months into the pandemic, I conducted a survey to see what changes teams were experiencing and how they continued to operate effectively. What emerged was a parallel series of changes, namely those which leaders of teams were also experiencing. (See [Team Effectiveness: From Pandemic to Promise in the Learning Organization \(Research Report\) | Queen's University IRC.](#))³

My continuing work with coaching clients, along with the ongoing literature around leadership skills and related topics,⁴ prompted this further look at the role of leaders today and what might remain important over the next many months.

¹ Bartleby. (2020, January 4). A manager's manifesto for 2020. The Economist. Retrieved September 9, 2021, from <https://www.economist.com/business/2020/01/02/a-managers-manifesto-for-2020>.

² Kingwell, M. (2020). On Risk. Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis.

³ Roxburgh, R. (2021, June 23). Team effectiveness: From pandemic to promise in the learning organization (research report). Queen's University IRC. Retrieved September 9, 2021, from <https://irc.queensu.ca/team-effectiveness-from-pandemic-to-promise-in-the-learning-organization-research-report/>.

⁴ Wucker, M. (2020, June 10). Why managing uncertainty is a key leadership skill. strategy+business. Retrieved September 9, 2021, from <https://www.strategy-business.com/blog/Why-managing-uncertainty-is-a-key-leadership-skill>. Wucker's article is one example of opinion as to where leaders need to develop and master specific competencies. Other useful perspectives include the significant work on creating psychological safety as in the research by Professor Amy C. Edmondson; see Fall 2021 'The Best of HBR' for her article entitled 'What Psychological Safety Looks Like in a Hybrid Workspace', co-authored with Mark Mortensen.

Self-Awareness as a 'Hot Skill'

In order to grow further in achieving this balance between task and relationship, leaders were recognizing the need for greater self-awareness in order to understand how to be of most value to those they lead. Examining one's own emotional intelligence (EI) has become an important aspect of growth for leaders. (For some very thoughtful work on this dimension, I recommend that you explore some of Linda Allen-Hardisty's writing on the IRC website, including her recent article entitled [Trust Yourself First: Addressing DEI Using Emotional Intelligence](#)).⁵

While empathy is a key dimension for today's leaders, so also are other dimensions of emotional intelligence (EI). And increasingly we see – and I experience directly among my clients – the need for leaders to practise 'self-care', given the enormous demands on the energy of leaders and the equally important need for reservoirs of resilience. In one client organization, emerging senior leaders are required to complete an emotional intelligence instrument to ensure that they are strongly positioned to bring a heightened level of self-awareness and ability to identify any salient 'blind spots' which might impact their overall effectiveness. And some relatively current research points strongly to the need within senior leadership ranks to have some level of mastery in the area of emotional intelligence.⁶

A recent and powerful example of the value of EI emerged in a coaching conversation. Working with a client I think of as a highly talented 'partner-in-waiting' at a global consultancy, she observed that in leading her practice, she pays particular attention to applying a 'people lens' as well as a 'business lens' to decision-making.

There are at least three additional areas in which we see the role of leaders shifting and adapting to new realities and expectations by those they lead.

Shared Leadership

The concept of 'shared leadership' was once discussed primarily in terms of leaders working with other leaders as they focused on organizational priorities. Today, leaders

⁵ Allen-Hardisty, L. (2021, August 18). Trust yourself first: Addressing DEI using emotional intelligence. Queen's University IRC. Retrieved September 9, 2021, from <https://irc.queensu.ca/trust-yourself-first-addressing-dei-using-emotional-intelligence/>.

⁶ Shafer, J., Bryant, A., & Reimer, D. (2020, April 29). Revealing leaders' blind spots. strategy+business. Retrieved September 9, 2021, from <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/Revealing-leaders-blind-spots>.

are expected to consult more widely with team members in identifying approaches and potential solutions in the achievement of organization outcomes.

While the leader remains the leader, such collaboration serves to reinforce engagement, an especially important objective when leaders are often required to “lead from afar”.⁷ In some sense, that focus on shared leadership supports team members ‘engaging from afar’.

Communications v.2.0

The second area which has undergone change and will probably continue to do so is that of communications. And there are a number of dimensions to the broad concept of communication. What we have learned during the pandemic, and through virtual work, is that clarity of communications takes on an additional level of importance. Nuances in conversation are more challenging to discern, and agreement on ‘common ground’ and understanding is potentially more elusive where we do not have the benefit of in-person meetings.

In continuing to examine communications by leaders, the need for transparency has not disappeared. On the contrary, transparency and trust become even more closely linked given the uncertainties of the environment and the unpredictability of the next few months. Employees expect leaders to be open and willing to not only share what they can, but also say when they don’t have the necessary information and answers. That openness goes ‘hand-in-hand’ with the need to keep communication channels open and two-way. Again, that commitment by leaders is central to reinforcing trust and engagement. And while it is certainly important when all are working virtually, the era of ‘hybrid teams’ will bring further challenge to communicating effectively between and among employees and their leaders.

Naturally, with the learnings and experience from the virtual world created by the pandemic, technology and a number of digital solutions will continue to enable, support and enhance effective communications.

As a final point around communications, it has become increasingly clear that beyond the building and nurturing of trust, our facility and effectiveness in communicating has

⁷ Bartleby. (2021, July 24). How to lead from afar. The Economist. Retrieved September 9, 2021, from <https://www.economist.com/business/2021/07/24/how-to-lead-from-afar>.

direct impact on performance management, culture change and the overall health and wellness of individuals and teams.

The Learning Organization 2021+

The third and final point I want to highlight has to do with growth and development. Ongoing learning (and the reference to both the will and the ability to ‘un-learn’, something which has taken on greater prominence in this era of shifting realities) takes on a much more central role. Today, it is not just *what* we learn, but equally *how* we learn.

Habits that have served us admirably in the past may no longer be of the same value, and new habits need to be in place, whether for a short or longer time. In the same way as leaders increasingly share leadership, so they are also finding that what and how we learn is no longer theirs to figure out alone.

Teams and individual employees know what their learning needs are, and through the experience of the pandemic, are in a stronger position to identify how they want to learn and learn most effectively.

Looking Ahead

At the risk of stating the blindingly obvious, the role of the leader has shifted over the past 18 months in terms of required energy, focus and accountability to self, team and organization. That said, as we explore the next realities for organizations and employees, there will be a continuing and heightened emphasis on such areas as:

- Finding, managing and developing talent;
- Sorting out how hybrid teams will be defined and operate in a specific setting or sector;
- The non-negotiable requirement – table stakes – for becoming deeply skilled in and committed to balancing task with relationship and team wellbeing.

The lessons learned through the pandemic will serve leaders very well, especially those which led to increased self-awareness, greater resilience and recognition of the imperative of self-care. With the expectations we have of leaders today, I am reminded of the airlines’ pre-takeoff safety demonstration and message to “Put on your own mask before helping others”. Perhaps that same message can be thoughtfully applied as leaders move with their colleagues and teams into the next phase of recovery.

About the Author



Ross Roxburgh is a leadership coach and organization consultant with several decades of experience with a wide range of clients, both domestic and international across the private, public and para-public sectors. He has a strong interest in the effectiveness of individuals and teams in complex organization environments; in many cases he brings both coaching and consulting experience to client engagements.. Ross holds the designation of Certified Management Consultant (CMC) as well as that of Master Corporate Executive Coach (MCEC). He has been certified in the use of the EQ-I 2.0 instrument as well as the LEA 360. He is a facilitator with Queen's IRC on a range of programs related to Board effectiveness, Committee evolution and [Performance Management](#).

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