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Lead with confidence this year

Start 2021 from a strong place with these tips from the LBS Leadership Institute

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Leadership The future of work Leading teams Emotional intelligence Personal development



It's the start of a new year, and who knows what it might bring... We asked six London Business School faculty who teach both degree students and Executive Education participants for their top tips for leaders looking ahead to 2021 amid continuing uncertainty. Here's what they suggested:

Prepare for the next stage of the pandemic

Randall S Peterson, Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Academic Director, Leadership Institute

As successful vaccines to fight Covid-19 are emerging, it is very easy to believe that all will soon be "returning to normal". But please do not expect that we are anywhere near the end of this crisis just yet, and start preparing for the next stage. There are predictable stages in dealing with a crisis that are in the human psychology of dealing with trauma, and the actual events operate around this.

Stage 1 – Fear: This is the stage of fear that the event is happening. In that stage there is, a) narrowed thinking where the search for solutions is restricted to what is immediately around and what you know well, b) deference to leaders as we look upwards for help and direction, and c) strong pressure for collaboration as our instinct is that we are stronger together rather than as individuals. The role of the leader is to reassure followers that there is a future and to clearly communicate what followers need to be doing.

Stage 2 – Exhaustion: This is the fight against the threat, where we put our heads down to work and fight the crisis. This is where all of us start working evenings and weekends because the threat does not take weekends off. The result of this stage is sheer exhaustion. Having worked so hard, we just want the world to be like it was, or to stabilise so we can all stop working long hours and making extraordinary effort. As breakthroughs happen, it is easy to hope that the crisis is over. The role in this phase is to maintain energy for the fight by focusing on resilience and maintaining energy in the fight.

Stage 3 – Anger: Once the immediate threat is past, and everyone is exhausted from the fight, this is where those who have suffered start to express their regrets and sadness at the losses in the crisis.

Emotion starts to grow and people start to talk. As they talk, the anger emerges. The anger is about loss, but here is where the most helpful thing a leader can do is to direct that anger towards building back a better future, rather than recriminations. When groups look for causes and people to blame it is very easy to displace the anger and identify the subgroup that is different in some way. Once it starts it is very difficult to stop, so leaders need to get out front and direct the anger to productive cause rather than recrimination.

Stage 4 – Sensemaking: Once the emotions of the crisis start to subside, now is the time to search for causes and fixes for the future. These decisions are best made after the emotions have calmed rather than when people are feeling scared, exhausted, or angry. Here the role of the leader is to ensure that lessons are actually learned and real problems are addressed for the future.

Get a side project

Herminia Ibarra, Charles Handy Professor of Organisational Behaviour

A lot of leaders focus singlemindedly on their current jobs and companies. Many believe they simply can't be successful without that kind of focus. But, now more than ever, involvement in personal projects, strategic side gigs and extracurricular activities is critical, not only for an executive's personal development but also for his or her ability to stay relevant in the day job.

The reason is simply that the pace of change and disruption is relentless and new ideas invariably come outside one's industry, organisation and inner circle. As a result, leaders who want to help their organisations thrive need to find ways to expand their field of vision and build their knowledge, skills and connections even as they carry on their daily work.

Side projects are even more important when you consider how frequently executives change jobs and careers (and we know that Covid-19 has led many managers and professionals to reconsider their trajectory). The most common path to a career reinvention involves doing something on the side — cultivating knowledge, skills, resources, and relationships until you've got strong new legs to walk on in exploring a new career. On nights and weekends, people take part-time courses, do pro-bono or advisory work, and develop start-up ideas.

In the research I did for my book *Working Identity*, which is devoted to the subject of career reinvention, I found that most people work on several possibilities at once, comparing and contrasting the pros and cons of each. This activity is crucial. It helps you work through not only the practical questions but also the existential ones that drive career change: Who am I? Who do I want to become? Where can I best contribute?

We learn who we want to become by testing fantasy and reality. The point is to do new and different work with new and different people, because that process represents an opportunity to learn about yourself, your preferences and dislikes, and the kinds of contexts and people that bring out the best in you.

Re-dedicate yourself to leading your people

Kathleen O'Connor, Clinical Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Teaching in our Executive Education programmes over the past year, I have worked with hundreds of dedicated employees who have been pushed to their limits. Many are juggling home responsibilities with work demands that have only increased as their colleagues have been made redundant. They report feeling exhausted, undervalued, and, as they struggle to deliver to their former high standards, some have come to see themselves as incompetent. This is what burnout looks like.

What leaders need to do is re-dedicate themselves to leading their employees. For some, this will be as easy as picking up where they left off. Take one executive I worked with this year, Etienne. Previously, each morning and afternoon on his commutes between home and the office, he would call a report to have a chat and check in. When the pandemic struck, the executive dropped his habit along with his commute.

Six months in, concerned about one of his reports, Etienne picked up the phone for an early morning chat. While the call was made from his home office and not his car, the effect on the employee was the same. She told Etienne how much she had missed their chat, and that she felt a bit better knowing that he wanted to connect to provide support. My advice: consider picking up some of your good old habits, reworked perhaps, to better lead your employees in 2021.

Access your personal highlights to be exceptional

Dan Cable, Professor of Organisational Behaviour

In 2021, follow a process that I call the Positive Method for telling others who they are at their best, and learning from others about you at your best. The end result is better relationships and a “personal highlight reel”, a collection of memories from people close to you that describe those times when you were the best version of yourself. Here’s the process:

Give before you receive. Identify people who have made an impact in your life: parents, siblings, a mentor, colleagues, friends. Write down some memories where their strengths and talents were on display. Avoid generalisations, such as, “You’re so smart”. Frame your feedback with tangible examples of when their actions were particularly impactful. These added personal touches will also help your reader to relive the memories you describe.

Then, write a short introductory note along the lines of: “You are an important part of my life and I wanted to share some of my memories of you at your best. If you were willing, I’d love for you to share with me a few times when you’ve seen me at my best or making a positive impact too. I can remember a time when...” [add your story]

The stories you receive in return will create a showcase of you at your best and most impactful. Having access to a highlight reel can be very powerful: it can improve your productivity, help you be more aware of your strengths, and allow you to go after your dreams with added confidence.

In addition to improving your relationships, your highlight reel will help you understand those parts of you that are uniquely outstanding. It’s a version of ourselves that already exists. All we have to do is access it more often.

Go over the top: more than you can believe is necessary

Tammy Erickson, Adjunct Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Leadership shows up in the way we allocate our time and attention. Particularly when leading a virtual team, how to spend your time and the conversations you initiate are essential to fostering a continued sense of community and tapping into the discretionary effort of all. The key elements of creating a great environment remain the same: leaders must disrupt, intrigue, connect and engage. But now the approaches to each must be more obvious, more overt – even, at times, over the top.

Disrupt: schedule online sessions specifically for “sense-making;” to discuss and digest together the implications of the bewildering events of the year.

Intrigue: invest in good training in design thinking tools and experimentation approaches; use them to work together on the “How might we...?” questions for your business.

Connect: again, schedule time – in this case, time for people to connect at a personal level regarding the professional challenges they are feeling and even about non-work issues. Strengthening the social fabric of your group has never been more important.

Engage: create rituals and symbolic representations of what it means to work in your organisation; of your identity. Here’s where “over the top” is really key. Do memorable things worthy of retelling.

Facilitate connections between people in your organisation

Selin Kesebir, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

It has perhaps been the most-repeated leadership advice during the pandemic: Leaders should communicate frequently, transparently, and emphatically.

This is certainly true but the need for effective communication is not limited to leaders addressing followers. To successfully adapt to changing conditions, organisations need to significantly increase communication within and across their units, departments and teams.

In a new and challenging environment, different parts of the organisation face different pressures, to which they develop their own solutions. In the absence of communication, these local solutions may lead different parts of the organisation to come out of alignment, while good ideas get trapped in small enclaves, and parts of the organisation develop antipathies for others because they don't know about real constraints.

In contrast, high-density communication allows for efficiencies and synergies to emerge, as information and good practices are shared quickly across traditional organisational boundaries. Leaders at every level thus need to facilitate exchanges within and across their units – professional or social. They should also make an effort to understand what is going on in different parts of the organisation and share it with others so that different parts of the organisation stay in step and move in unison.