Transformational Leadership 2.0
NAVIGATING THE GREAT UNKNOWN

(5-6 minute read)

Welcome to the birth of the Transformational Leader 2.0.

The COVID-19 pandemic is setting the stage for the emergence of a new breed of leader who combines tried-and-true leadership models in new and dynamic ways. Some leaders are using the command-and-control style of leadership to literally keep the organizational ship afloat and moving forward while also focusing on remaining agile to respond in a rapidly changing environment where the effects of the COVID-19 virus, policy decisions, and employee and client responses can change in the matter of minutes. Leaders also are embracing relational leadership in new and deeper ways in order to throw a lifeline to their workforce, many of whom are facing pressing personal challenges triggered by the pandemic.

And the influence of this new breed of leader doesn't end at the organizational door. Many are stepping up to play an important part in their community, state, region, nation and the world. These leaders are finding ways to invent (example: Dyson), to maintain and refine regional supply-chain distribution in the time of hoarding (example: HEB), to respond to staggering sudden demand

for telehealth while also transitioning employees to work at home (example: healthcare leader [Carenet Health](#)), and to meeting the needs of impoverished communities that are at enhanced risk from COVID-19 (example: restaurant entrepreneur [José Andrés](#)).

Leaders in Absentia

This pandemic is forcing every leader to stretch in new ways. Leaders are facing decision points (such as the cleaning crew's supplies and schedules) that used to be considered mundane. Now these tasks, if not well managed, could break the company by seriously harming employee health.

COVID-19's side effects, such as social distancing, also highlight deeply ingrained issues that are emerging as members of our workforce are sequestered in their homes. This pandemic is creating a sense of isolation not only from their employer, but also from each other.

The quarantine will only intensify the feelings of loneliness that individuals already felt before COVID-19 was a blip on the radar screen. [Cigna's 2020 Loneliness Index](#) found that three in five adults (61%) describe themselves as lonely, a 7% increase from 2018. And that sense of loneliness already was infiltrating the workplace. Even before the pandemic hit, Cigna's study found that employees who describe themselves as lonely were less engaged, less productive and had lower retention rates. Now this heightened sense of isolation could easily fracture teams, leading them to become non-functional.

The current situation also requires letting go of previous organizational structures used to engage and communicate with employees and instead thinking in new ways. "As the coronavirus wreaks havoc on many of our bodies and on our collective life, some of the get-togethers being canceled will not survive this situation. And that may, in a strange sense, be a good thing," wrote Priyah Parker, the bestselling author of "The Art of Gathering," in a recent New York Times [opinion column](#). "Others will take on new forms. This spell will force us to focus on what matters — and decide what that is."

Preparing for the "New Normal"

How do leaders prepare to move forward as this "new normal" presents itself? In the aftermath of this black swan event, how can we rethink, reinvent and transform both our own leadership skills as well as the organization that we lead? Can we help our organization accelerate from zero to 120 mph on a dime when the all-clear is given?

Do you think that won't happen? Look at China where the post-coronavirus economic recovery has emerged faster than expected. These businesses offer their global counterparts the sobering lesson that cutting back too far today may mean that organizations will not be positioned to capitalize on the post-crisis recovery.

And as we begin to contemplate the potential for a rapid economic recovery, we also need to be aware of what our workforce has gone through since the beginning of March. Depending on the industry, leaders need to plan for the reality that many employees will be suffering from grief, post-traumatic stress disorder, burn-out, depression, loneliness and anxiety. How can we motivate employees to remain productive members of our organization while also guiding them to find help to deal with the mental and emotional after-effects of the pandemic?

Developing our Leaders in the Pandemic's Wake

Yes, this is what transformational leadership 2.0 will look like. Yet (not surprisingly) in these economically shaky times, many business leaders are thinking about where they can cut costs. One often-mentioned target is leadership development. Some would choose to cut this expense out completely or shift to a less time-consuming online option.

But I'd argue, based on everything that I've suggested in this article, that this decision is not a wise strategic move. Smart leaders would not tell their equipment maintenance workers to forget about working on their plant and equipment for six months. So why should they stop developing their most important asset—their own leadership capacity--for six months during one of the most tumultuous times mankind has ever experienced?

I also believe that face-to-face leadership development will become more important than ever during this time of overwhelming change. While these types of interactions for the short term will need to migrate to platforms such as Zoom and Skype, face-to-face learning will be the most efficient and effective way to learn from each other about what has worked–and what has not—during this pandemic and as we navigate its aftermath.

Face-to-face leadership development also helps leaders become better at interpersonal interactions, which is becoming increasingly important in the current environment. A 2017 *The New York Times* article points to numerous studies that describe social interaction's critical importance to mental and physical health. For example, one nine-year study involving 7,000 individuals found that people who are disconnected from others are more likely to die than participants who had strong social ties. According to a 2010 study, the quantity and quality of an individual's social ties are linked with the development and worsening of a number of health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, repeat heart attacks, high blood pressure, autoimmune disorders, cancer, and slow wound healing. Other researchers point out that individuals with quality social connections have lower levels of anxiety and depression as well as higher self-esteem, greater empathy, and more trusting and cooperative behaviors.

Therefore, face-to-face leadership development offers the opportunity for participants to experience just-in-time learning and create meaningful interactions that lead to networking, valuable relationships and collaboration.

A Tailored Experience

Face-to-face leadership development also offers the opportunity for individualized instruction in the context of the organizations strategic imperatives. Let's put it in context by looking at the results of a McKinsey & Company study:

Finding #1: Overlooking context. Leaders often excel in a specific area of leadership but fail in other areas. One-size-fits-all (online) training teaches the same group of skills or style of leadership the same way to everyone.

- o **Benefits of face-to-face development:** Face-to-face executive development allows learning to be tailored to each individual as well as the group as a whole and encourages participants to learn from and build on each other's experiences, while in the classroom and during group work.

Finding #2: Decoupling reflection from real work. Most online leadership development curriculum is divorced with what happens in the individual's daily job.

- Benefits of face-to-face development: This type of development encourages reflective conversations with others in a learning environment based on the individual's professional responsibilities and organization's strategic imperatives. These types of reflections deepen the learning while also allowing the faculty and peers to coach individuals on how they can leverage their learning to create major breakthroughs when back on the job.

Finding #3: Underestimating mindsets. Some programs shirk exploring "below the surface" motivations that get to the participant's thoughts, feelings, assumptions and beliefs. All of these need to be addressed to create behavioral change.

- Benefits of face-to-face development: Through building an on-going face-to-face relationship, faculty have a better understanding of each participant's strengths and weaknesses. This type of relationship encourages personalized coaching efforts to help each individual stretch in meaningful ways and enhances, embeds and sustains the learning once the participants return to the workplace

Finding #4: Failing to measure results. Many companies fail to track and measure changes in leadership performance over time, which means that improvement initiatives may not be taken seriously.

- Benefits of face-to-face development: This type of development can use personalized assessments to see if each participant is being challenged to grow. Post-program coaching continues to drive behavior change and ROI. These assessments and coaching also allow instructors and coaches to identify tailored ways to support each participant to help behavioral changes take root.

A Major Reset

This pandemic, quite frankly, is creating a huge reset for organizations. We are going to need to develop new organizational models based on the learnings that emerged in the first third of 2020. For example, we're going to have to incorporate many of the lessons that have occurred from having a majority of staff working remotely. We're also going to have to look at organizational culture and expectations.

In truth, there is no better place to begin to develop this model than in a face-to-face learning environment where leaders can explore topics like virtual team leadership, crisis management, digital disruption, virtual presence and leading changes that now are part of our everyday lives. We need to come together to share best practices and lessons learned so we can move our organizations forward.

I do not believe that leaders can postpone this learning. I don't want to downplay the seriousness of the public-health aspects of this crisis; everyone needs to take precautions to stay healthy and reduce the spread of the virus. But I do believe that companies can put some good steps in place today to be positioned for bigger success tomorrow. There are always challenges and crises affecting our businesses. We can adapt and embrace the opportunities and bounce back stronger, even from a major crisis like coronavirus.

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