



Time to be Brave, Bold and Vulnerable

The pandemic has forced business leaders to operate in a very different way. **Emma Carroll** examines how they have empowered their people to act with agility and speed

As many countries move closer towards the easing of lockdown measures, business leaders are assessing how the commercial landscape has changed and what this means for their operating models over the next 12 to 18 months.

In a world where an estimated 200 million workers are likely to lose their jobs over the summer of 2020 alone, it's evident that some difficult choices will need to be made. At Criticaleye's recent Virtual Forum, Leading Through the Impact of COVID-19, senior executives from across a range of sectors discussed the decisions they're taking to navigate both the strategic and psychological difficulties they're facing at present.

Paula Dowdy, SVP and General Manager for EMEA at Illumina, which is involved in creating sequencing solutions for the COVID-19 pandemic on top of its usual business, explained that leadership styles have needed to adapt. "You have to let things unfold and then if it's not working you dive in and provide some direction," she said. "It's been a great way to see some natural leadership rise up through the organisation and then support that."

Similarly, **Nicole Knott**, Managing Director and HR Consulting Lead for UK&I at Accenture, commented: "The shift away from command and control is about trust: 'Do I trust my people to do their jobs without me being able to observe them every day?'"

"Organisations that are embracing the new leadership style are setting themselves up for long-term success in collaboration with their employees. It's about building a culture and environment where your employees feel that they belong and where they are empowered."

While video calls are becoming an even more vital communication tool for organisations, there's an acceptance that they have limitations. **Jim Lightfoot**, President and CEO of power generation and development company Intergen, said: "You might join lots of virtual meetings, but in the past you would have been seen and you would have been able to pass on calmness and direction through both your verbal and non-verbal communication – that's less easy now. >



“The way you lead – through the systems you have available – has to be more overt. You must make sure people are seeing and hearing you. You have to make more effort and dial up that visible leadership,” he said.

Jerzy Nagorski, Relationship Manager at Criticleye, said: “Executives of global businesses were inevitably already leading part of their workforce remotely, but COVID-19 has taken this to a whole different level – and at speed.

“Even some businesses and industries that have dismissed home working as too risky in the past have had to act quickly to get the right safeguards in place. Change has been accelerated.”

Nicole agreed: “This is a journey that many businesses have been on for some time, but the pandemic has forced the conversation as there really wasn’t another way of working.”

Hard Road

The next phase of COVID-19 is posing enormous difficulties for CEOs and Boards as they assess their customer and employee base. On the one side, there is an acceptance that a second wave of infections is extremely likely with more lockdown measures being enforced, and then there is the reality of a global recession far worse than the financial crisis of 12 years ago.

At Moto, the UK’s largest motorway service area business, 3,200 of its 5,000 people have been furloughed. The company’s CEO, **Ken McMeiken**, said that keeping these people front of mind has been crucial. As well as central communications – including a weekly furlough newsletter

featuring a message from **Ken** – the leadership team has committed to keeping in contact with their teams.

“It’s important to remember that it’s been tough both financially and emotionally for those furloughed colleagues,” he explained. “We made a commitment to keep them connected, so we tell them what’s going on in the business, but we also try to reinforce that all our plans are being made with the intention of reopening and welcoming them back as soon as we can.”

Moto has a hardship fund in place for staff facing financial challenges. “In our furlough news we recognise how difficult the situation can be and how important our people’s mental health and wellbeing is. We also share the opportunities they have for counselling.

“Right now, there is a need for more emphasis on support rather than challenge. There are times as a leader when you need to be a cheerleader, whose whole focus and energy is on supporting people and instilling the belief that whatever the challenges we can find a way of overcoming them,” **Ken** said.

Some of the changes being made by companies will become permanent. “Emergencies are always the best way to see an organisation work well together – politics and processes that don’t work effectively are put to one side,” said **Jim** of Intergen. “You often come out at the end and think: ‘What do I have to do to make the organisation work in that improved way permanently?’

“You can’t live in a constant state of crisis, but I think it does provide the opportunity to take the shackles off an

organisation. I ask: ‘What did I learn from that? How can I give more freedom and ownership within the control structure?’”

Paula builds on this point about longer lasting, deeper changes. “Why do we consume so many colleagues in our forecasts calls? How can we avoid pulling people away from strategic and customer impacting work? I want to use this crisis as an opportunity to take a fresh look at how we run our business.”

For businesses to come out the other side of this double edged – health and economic – crisis, they will need a mixture of luck, flexibility and sound judgement. As **Nicole** of Accenture puts it: “The organisations that are doing... well are the ones that are embracing the opportunity to change and reinvent themselves, and where it is being driven from the top by leaders who are being brave, bold and vulnerable.” ■

Featuring Commentary From:



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