



Reflections on the Pandemic

The pandemic irreversibly changed how organisations operate. Business leaders tell **Dylan Totton** how they have led their teams through this uncertainty and what they have learned as a result



The last year has tested even the most seasoned of leaders, and those that weathered the storm now have valuable lessons to share. The way we work, plan and lead have all changed more than anyone could have predicted, and smart businesses will be asking what will stick and what needs to go.

As top teams begin to reflect on how well they have navigated the past 18 months, Criticaleye Community Members set out their thoughts.

This is what they said:



Matthew Blagg

Matthew Blagg, CEO of Criticaleye, cautions that leaders will need to be more visible but mustn't obstruct decision-making:

As physical working gradually returns, leaders will need to become more visible. The tools and techniques from virtual working will still be important, but you cannot lead from an ivory tower. It will be about combining the best of the two approaches.

Executives must make sure they are leading, rather than 'dropping into' the organisation. With virtual, you can be in more places at once and there is the risk of tinkering or getting in the way of decision-making. Leaders need to rise above this and empower their people.

A strong organisational culture is important and that won't thrive in the virtual world, so leaders must get their people together to build connections and spark creativity.

“Leaders must get their people together to build connections and spark creativity”

CEOs also need to recognise the pressure that is being put on management lower down the business. These people are crucial, because it's no use leaders talking about purpose and strategy if those messages aren't getting through and being acted upon.



Bert Pijls

Bert Pijls, Chair of Calisen, says that regular stress testing of your business model could be crucial to survival:

Companies that took risk management seriously did better during the pandemic than those that didn't. At Calisen, we ran scenarios and tested our back-up and remote-working capabilities way in advance. As a result, when the crisis happened, we were relatively prepared.

A lot of companies look at risk management as a disaster-recovery exercise. However, it also applies to your own business model.

How many people take a cricket bat to their business model and ask: How long can we actually sustain ourself? What does our revenue look like? How can we manage costs?

I think that having too much debt is almost always the reason why companies collapse. Companies that had higher levels of debt in the crisis fared far worse than those with more reasonable amounts. This requires a big rethink, including about what the right level of debt is for a certain business and for a particular business model. That should be part of your risk management approach.



Sandy Stash

Sandy Stash, Independent Non-executive Director at EVRAZ and a Board Mentor at Criticaleye, states that virtual working can free up time for mentoring:

[Boards] still miss the ability to get out on site. I was in Colorado last week visiting a steel mill and had dinner with the CEO. I probably learned most about the business in that social time.

Boards are [also] missing that 'unstructured' space that allows them to get to know each other better. However, I can certainly foresee them switching to a hybrid schedule where, rather than travelling to London eight times a year, they do that two-to-four times annually and then everything else is done virtually. >



One positive outcome [of working virtually] is that there is probably more opportunity for one-on-one mentoring. That's partly because there are always distractions at the office. Now I tend to do that really early in the morning, before other events take over.

The biggest takeaway will be more flexible working. I believe it is here to stay, but I do think it will be variable. Companies are going to have to watch this space, because it could become a competitive advantage or a disadvantage.



Reece Donovan

Reece Donovan, CEO of iomart, highlights the importance of collaborating with people both inside and outside your organisation:

One of the positives to have come out of the pandemic is the way in which people, communities and businesses pulled together to support one another. Nobody has the answers to all the new challenges we are now facing but, if we build networks and collaborate with others, we can work on improvements together. This has never been more important.

I have had to question my views of 'business norms' and embrace the challenges and opportunities we now face. I recognise the need to support increased employee engagement and demonstrate greater levels of vulnerability – we don't always have the answers, but we will work together to find suitable solutions.

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I have consciously sought to be open to new ideas, have the courage to change things when needed and empower people to do the right thing.



Siobhan Boylan

Siobhan Boylan, CFO of Brewin Dolphin, says that adopting a more personal and empathetic approach will help motivate your people:

The last 18 months have shown that we can work with our clients and keep in contact with them remotely. While face-to-face time will still be important, I think we have accelerated how we will interact with them in the future.

This period reminded me that being kind and aware of people's different emotions and responses is paramount to keeping them together and maintaining momentum. It is amazing how, when faced with a crisis, teams and people stick together and will pull through.

Being open about the impact on our daily lives has encouraged people to understand that we are in this together. It can be exhausting, and it is important to emphasise that people must take a break. You should lead by example [with this] so that people listen.

I think some of the changes [we have all seen] may have happened in the future [anyway], so COVID has accelerated this by about five-to-ten years. ■

As a result of the past 18 months, leaders continue to feel isolated in their roles. Therefore, it has become even more necessary for senior leaders to come together and benchmark ideas as they prepare for a more positive future.

Click [here](#) for more information on all Criticaleye's upcoming events in 2022.

Featuring Commentary From:



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