

## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

# In a post-pandemic world, is your personal leadership fit for purpose?

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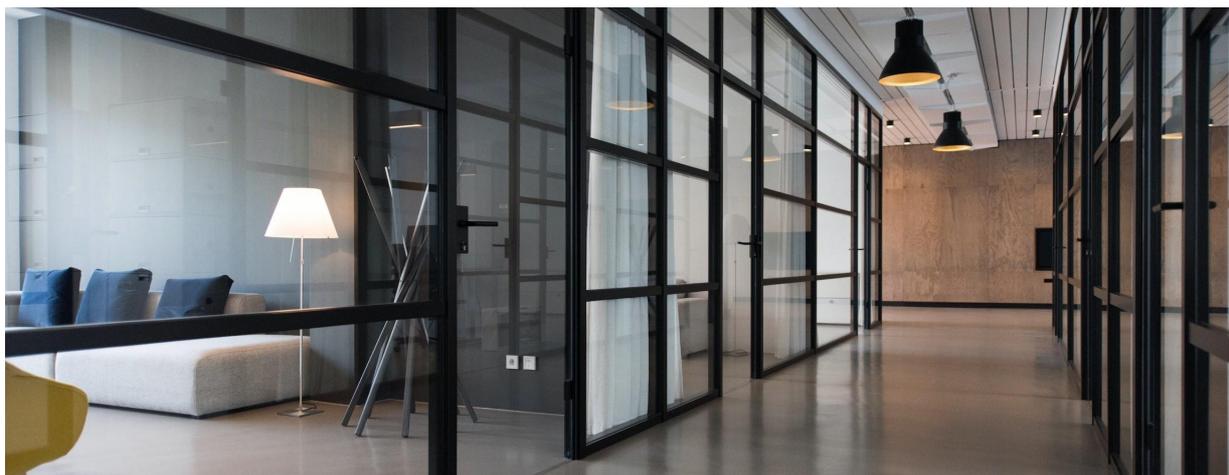


**The Covid-19 global pandemic has fundamentally changed the very fabric of day-to-day life for most people – from the differentiation of work and weekends; to multitasking as teacher and employee; through to love and loss.**

I also believe it has caused a fundamental exposure of some leaders and leadership styles – people have simply failed to develop or adapt their approach, defaulting to type and relying on traits that make the situation much, much worse. Sadly, I believe, many leaders have been found wanting, profoundly out of their depth in a time of challenge and change, just when effective leadership is most important.

Let's be clear, a leader is someone who understands that leadership is not about having all the answers – it is about knowing how to lead and how to find the best people, both individually and collectively. It takes humility and confidence to say, 'Great point – I don't actually know the answer, maybe one of our colleague's does' and especially to say, 'I was wrong'. A true leader understands this and sees the strength in utilising the collective.

The renowned CEO of General Electric Jack Welch said in his autobiography ‘I was never the smartest guy in the room. .... **if you're a leader and you're the smartest guy in the room, you've got real problems.**’ Leadership is about surrounding yourself with the smartest and best, then engaging and leading them to be successful.



An inability to lead – specifically, a reluctance to expose yourself as being short of the mark, to not having the core skills of trust, empathy, humility, an open mind, self-awareness and all the other vital elements – means that individuals and the organisations being represented can’t realise their potential. But things can actually be much worse. Poor leadership does not simply bring an enormous opportunity cost; in unusual, unfamiliar times – for example, during a global pandemic – it also invariably leads to dysfunctional behaviours, notably individual and collective corporate bullying.

In my experience, the words ‘bully’ and ‘bullying’ are highly emotive – for me, the acts and words are triggers to defensive behaviours and actions to protect and support those around me. Bully bosses are masters at ensuring their departments, divisions and organisations feel uncomfortable or uncertain around decisions, actions, strategic partnerships and behaviours. (It should be noted that the use of the word ‘team’ when discussing bully bosses is hardly appropriate, given that a team is a group of people providing mutual support and collaboration for a shared purpose – something the bully boss overrides, undermines and simply doesn't value.) They also change the rules of engagement at a moment’s notice and then deny that they’ve done it. Leadership is not a right – it’s earned through hard work, trust, learning from mistakes, knowing when to push and when to support, and, crucially, knowing when to apologise.

**“The challenge of leadership is to be strong but not rude; be kind, but not weak; be bold, but not a bully; be humble, but not timid; be proud, but not arrogant; have humour, but without folly.”**

*Jim Rohn*

Not every boss is a bully and not every bully boss is a malign, malevolent individual – in fact, relatively few are. And that’s the problem: bullying, controlling and aggressive (including passive-aggressive) behaviours can arise in many people and for many varied reasons. Pressure, external forces, fear and insecurity, for example, conditioned behaviours, or a toxic environment can all help bring out the worst in us from time to time. I’m not saying that we all need to become the Dalai Lama all of the time; I’m saying that we need to know when we are turning into Donald Trump – and do something about it. It has to be self-awareness and those around us who guide us.



Great leaders are constantly evolving and learning – one way to do this is to invite feedback, to create a feedback culture and to continually reinforce it, to reward and nurture it. The basis of a feedback culture is trust, this then becomes mutually reinforcing as success and change creates trust and feedback deepens and grows. These are coachable traits – feedback in context and in the moment are powerful tools, however leaders must set the ground rules and purpose, and everyone must be bought in.

## Ten behaviours every leader can integrate:

- 1. Be humble and self-effacing.** This is a special gift, as is the ability to admit you're wrong. You will empower those around you, inspiring trust and allow ideas to evolve. You will ensure and evolve a learning culture which everyone, organisation included will benefit from.
- 2. Be consistent.** This is an incredibly important leadership trait. Ensure that you always do what you say you will (under-promise and over-deliver), honour your commitments, go beyond what is 'just enough', and never ask someone to do something you can't or won't do yourself. To quote a friend and colleague 'Does it pass the leadership sniff test?'. Consistency is a test and a trial, do not falter.
- 3. Be both coach and mentor (and be coachable and mentored).** As a leader, one must act as coach and mentor to a wide range of colleagues – this includes direct reports, dotted lines, peers and superiors, both informally and formally. These relationships are gifts that must be nurtured and managed. This is how networks are grown and trust is developed, while shaping outcomes and people. Additionally, it is vital to be open to coaching and mentoring, again by as many people as possible. You'll find out more by having coffee or lunch with your team than from any formal feedback appraisal.



- 4. Collaborate widely and praise generously.** No one person is an island or knows everything – collaboration offers the opportunity to build trust, networks and knowledge. It is also a fabulous way to gain insight to someone's capabilities, development areas and provide 'coachable moments'. You will also learn where there are consistent gaps that need addressing. No two people do anything exactly the same or as you would; recognise this, be patient, accept that others won't do it your way and understand that there IS another way!

5. **Remain open-minded**, nurture creativity and embrace new ideas and perspectives. A useful mantra is ‘there’s no such thing as a stupid idea’ and this is something I stick by. Everyone has creativity and it comes from nowhere sometimes; there have been caffeine fuelled collaborative ideas thought up late on a Friday that have been developed into successful ideas the following Monday.

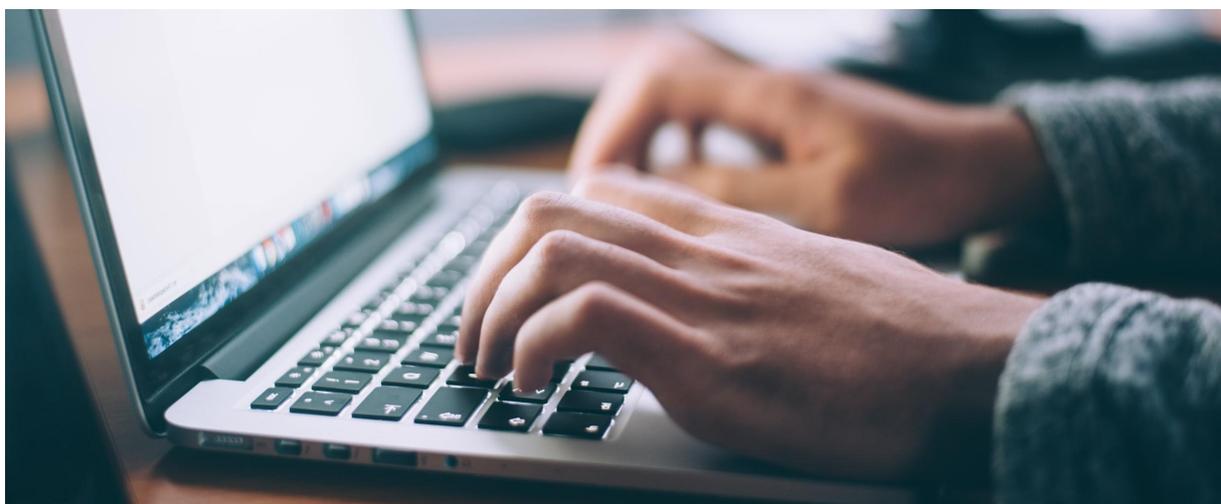
My point is that in addition to being collaborative which enables creativity in itself, be open-minded and encourage others to do the same. An open mind will encourage others and ideas, which can be iterated and innovated. One never knows where ideas come from or where they will lead.



6. **Actively and intentionally develop a feedback culture.** This is one of the toughest and most rewarding things you can do. It is also one which exposes you the most, so trust is at the heart of this. Feedback is an absolute gift, it is something that needs to be nurtured, requested, received with thanks and acted upon. This is also something that has to be led from the front.

If you can create an environment of feedback, given in the moment and with context, then you will learn more about yourself, your organisation, your opportunities and your development areas than anything else. It takes guts and leadership to ask, thank and act – however, there is no point asking for feedback, unless you can demonstrate you’re acting on it and those giving feedback are being heard. When you do this, it becomes like an ever-increasing snowball as people trust the environment and you, contributing more, evolving the culture and learning. This has the potential to be the single biggest element you can introduce, and it takes resilience!

- 7. Be self-aware and constantly curious.** Self-awareness is the ability, the insight, to know and identify thoughts, feelings and impulses. It is the conscious effort to understand ourselves, others and how others perceive us. It is of critical importance to leaders and a key component to emotional intelligence and it is often noted that the most self-aware leaders possess great humility. Self-aware leaders care about others and are constantly curious, asking, probing and caring. Be curious, be humble, grow and learn; don't ever stop or think you know it all.



- 8. Manage your resilience.** This may sound like a strange suggestion, however resilience comes in many forms, and they all need managing. Different people have different mechanisms: working out, yoga, meditation, tai chi, solo walks, reading etc; they're all individual and important. Resilience is defined as the ability to recover quickly and as a leader you need to be able to bounce back quickly and not take things too personally. Sadly, I knew one leader who took everything personally and avoided those who had been offended, which significantly dented credibility and operations. Learn what brings resilience for you, nurture those qualities and make them a sacrosanct part of your daily life.

- 9. Stay positive, with a growth mindset.** Let's face it, although this can be exhausting it is also incredibly important. Teams and colleagues look to leaders as their guide and direction – they need and feed off your emotions and energy. As a leader, you can't change this, so embrace and harness it. I am not suggesting endless false positivity and no honesty, quite the opposite. What I am suggesting is that you harness your energy and positivity, manage your resilience, and find practical ways to stay in control and take two steps forward, even as you take one step back. For example, reframing, questioning, or simply sharing and discussing an issue can all help positivity grow.
- 10. Learn from your mistakes.** Like being humble, admitting when you're wrong is often thought of as a leader's Achilles heel, a vulnerability that can be terminal. The truth is absolutely the opposite. When someone is able to say, 'I'm sorry' and/or 'I was wrong' they gain credibility, respect and collaboration from others. Toughing it out may work in movies, however in real life it reveals inadequacies, self doubt, imposter syndrome, anxiety, arrogance and so much more. Be honest, be humble, be human, admit when you're wrong – it's amazingly refreshing and empowering.

**Whatever your context or experience, I believe that it's never too late to step back, reflect and learn, effect change and become a better leader. So, with this in mind, what are you doing to help ensure your leadership develops and stays fit for purpose?**

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*Jonathan Besser is Managing Consultant at Intrepid Leadership Consulting limited, a leadership development company that partners collaboratively with individuals and organisations to address current and future needs. All views expressed in this article are the author's own. Discussion, comments and feedback are welcome and invited.*