

Leading from the front (Takeaway 2): Teams

The way corporate teams work together has evolved in recent years, moving from top-down and expertise-driven to an approach built around cocreating and purpose. Whereas in the past, executive teams have traditionally focused on planning and reviewing operations at a detailed level, today the best teams are rebalancing their time to emphasise the development of strategy, culture and talent. To support this shift, our research has found that high-performing teams do four things consistently:

- *trust and empower*
- *share common goals*
- *make decisions in service of the common good; and*
- *foster a sense of belonging.*

When senior leaders rate their teams highly across these four specific traits, their companies are up to six times more likely to lead peers in revenue and profit growth as well as total shareholder return.

Today leaders are rightly focused on the pressing need to continue to serve customers and ensure their people and communities are safe. While Covid-19 is putting this new model of teamwork to a tough test, there is reason to believe its focus on trust, shared goals, the common good, and belonging will only become more important in the months to come.

At the same time as business leaders adapt to a rapidly accelerating pace of disruption, making challenging decisions whose impact is often far reaching, their teams, the building blocks of their organisations, are suddenly and unexpectedly dispersed.

Trust and empower

Faced with so many unknowns, leaders can strengthen their teams by debunking two big myths that can undermine the new model of teamwork:

Myth 1. I need to know the answer in case my team doesn't.

Myth 2. I need to be in control and involved to ensure a specific outcome.

People thrive when given autonomy, and thriving is definitely the objective today as many companies shift their operating model overnight. True autonomy signals that there is trust in a relationship.

It's not uncommon during the early phase of any crisis, and certainly one of the complexity and uncertainty of Covid-19, for companies to proactively start to centrally develop strategies to address it—in this case, for example, for employees to work from home. We've seen the pattern many times: The home office works to create guidance and materials advising people how to best use available tools and technology, only to have the crisis move so fast that by the time the team has developed a set of recommendations, thousands of other team members are already pushing forward productively without it.

Increasingly, executives are moving away from this instinct to develop the right answer toward instead actively identifying bright spots and then amplifying them so that they can be

copied broadly across the organization. Recognising that most of their teams have the motivation and the capability to succeed during this challenging time, they are letting them do so without micromanaging, and those teams are learning from their success and passing it on to others.

Share common goals

With so many demands on every executive's urgent attention, senior teams are nevertheless taking time to develop new mechanisms to help maintain a shared sense of purpose and focus. Their aim: a common set of goals that subsequent decisions reinforce, and everyone describing the future in the same way. This can be the difference between staying focused on what matters and veering off course.

Agile ways of working can be helpful. Across the survey population, leadership teams are using daily five-minute stand-up meetings to review short-term priorities, track progress and triage critical roadblocks. Getting the team together in this way helps us focus on the metrics that matter (insights from clients, feedback from our people, progress on key projects) and helps us know where we should focus our energy. It also gives us a read on how our plans are playing out and what's changing. These meetings are proving even more critical as leaders manage their collective work from a variety of remote locations.

Make decisions for the common good

The flexibility **Agile** brings is well-suited to a time like today, with a pace and volatility that demand a lot of energy. One challenge is to not lose sight of the bigger picture at a time when so many immediate decisions must be made. After any critical situation, teaching hospitals like Johns Hopkins hospital in the US gather medical staff to take a step back and ask a series of questions, including: What are we learning? and What can we apply going forward? Similarly, many business teams balance short-term triage and long-term priorities by conducting weekly, 30-minute sessions highlighting their own forward-looking reflection, asking questions like: What are the few critical things that we can't lose sight of? How are we doing on them? What's the one-month, three-month and six-month trajectory of our results? Executive teams use these sessions to prioritize critical decisions that support the broader common mission, avoid self-interested decisions based on protecting divisional budgets and resources, and build agreement about who's accountable for following through.

Foster a sense of belonging

For teams that have moved to working from home, losing the connection of being together day-to-day can diminish the shared sense of belonging. As the neuroeconomist Paul Zak notes, we have an underlying biology for reciprocation, and this reciprocation is at the heart of our modern society. It turns out that we are biologically driven to respond to one another's gestures toward us. That means, in the early stages of this crisis, that teams need their leaders to model what matters most; to be available, authentic and visionary. The more leaders embody humanity and connection, the more their teams will pass those traits on to their own people.

So, how can a senior leader begin to rally his or her team? The most effective leaders recognise that they are stressed, too, and that they are taking care not only of the people in their organisation, but also of themselves and their loved ones.

In order to foster greater connection and inclusion, we've seen people setting up 15 to 30 minutes each week of one-on-one time with each team member to simply connect over a video platform like Zoom or Webex. Often, they don't need to dive into details on that call, instead asking a few high-level questions and then listening. Questions like: What's on your mind right now, what feels important? Do you have what you need, and how can I help? How are things going for you personally and for your family?

These leaders are curious about what they hear and don't seek to immediately solve issues—they are truly just listening. They are willing to share some of their own concerns. Empathy comes across as a primary goal.

Covid-19 is an unprecedented challenge for organizations and their leadership teams around the world. By embodying trust, establishing a shared view of the future, focusing on the common good and cultivating a sense of belonging, teams are helping one another weather the current storm while setting their organisations up for continued success when this crisis passes.