

WHAT HAS STAR TREK GOT TO DO WITH LEADERSHIP IN 2021?

OUR LATEST RESEARCH



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The phrase 'To boldly go where no man has gone before' certainly rings true given the year we have just experienced.

Think back to raising a glass at midnight on 31st Dec 2019...if I had told you then what you would face as a leader, as an organisation and as a human being in 2020 you would definitely have thought I should have been on the Starship Enterprise on my way to another planet and yet here we are looking back over a year that has seen challenges and achievements beyond anything we could have comprehended. So where does that leave leadership as we head into 2021?

I recently asked 40 senior leaders from CEO's to Heads of functions, from a range of industries and organisations the same question, what they told us was both inspiring and insightful.

The first and clearest message is if we want to make things happen, we can, most notably reorganise hundreds, in some cases thousands of people to work differently in a matter of days, more subtly that the demonstration of empathy and humility is essential and not just in a crisis. Empathy and humility are words which have been banded around in connection with leadership in more recent years but in many cases not taken from words on the page of the latest leadership book and turned into leadership behaviour, 2020 has spotlighted the need, the power and the necessity of empathy and humility as core leadership behaviours.

The second shared message from our research is that working differently, whether remotely or hybrid can work. The essential ingredients are trust and connection, lack of these in the past has prevented leaders and organisations believing that without presenteeism productivity would fall off a cliff, 80% of our respondents highlighted how their attitude to this had changed. This forges a pathway forward which is unlikely to revert back to pre- pandemic working patterns, so leaders need to understand and appreciate the critical role trust plays in their relationships with co-workers and how much human contact plays a role in relationships. This year, leaders have needed to be the glue, they have needed to be more visible and more connected when being at significant and physical distance, a polarity which has challenged many.

Finally, the third message has centred around visible authenticity and how vulnerability can cast a 'positive and motivating shadow'. Resilience has been needed in abundance both as a human and a leader and somehow the pandemic has broken through the separation of the human at home and the leader at work to give permission to show vulnerabilities, to release leaders from the unspoken pressure to have the answer and to see how allowing others in is not exposing but enhancing.

So, what does all this mean for leaders in 2021? Our research highlighted some consistent themes.

Reframe Resilience into Resourcefulness

Leaders have been faced with unprecedented levels of ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty this year and the word 'resilience' pushing against the tide, ploughing forward when all around is preventing you to do so came through loud and clear. Uncertainty and complexity have always been leadership challenges and that is not going to change, however as one of our respondents said 2021 will require leaders 'to lean into complexity, surfacing stories of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity' resisting the temptation of 'decreasing the amount of perceived risk, instead increasing their tolerance for uncertainty'.

"Lean into complexity... increase their tolerance for uncertainty"

Given that shift in perspective comes an opportunity to reframe resilience into resourcefulness.

Resilience by its definition is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties, a toughness to withstand the constant buffeting of external challenges, whereas resourcefulness implies a positively intended, forward thinking ability to find quick and clever ways to overcome difficulties and think creatively to solve problems. Encouraging leaders to be resourceful, means supporting them to identify the beliefs, behaviours and skills they have within them that when tapped into will enable them to meet the challenges of 2021 with a creative and problem-solving mindset.

When we start with ourselves, we create a path for others to follow, leaders who demonstrate resourcefulness will indirectly give permission for others to do the same.

Culture without Walls

The leaders who responded to our research identified how the culture of their organisations had been impacted by the pandemic. They noted how it had become difficult to maintain the culture and motivation when everyone was working separately. Without physical connection and a 'container' for culture like a building, it appears that it can at best dilute and at worst evaporate.

Culture is not
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behaving

Controversially I am not convinced that the culture many leaders and organisations believed they had really existed to that extent, and the pandemic and subsequent changes in working practices have simply highlighted this gap.

Culture is not a 'thing' it's a way of behaving and is driven by the demonstrable behaviours of those in powerful positions which are replicated by others within an organisation. Those businesses that have 'cracked' culture are the ones where the espoused cultural indicators match the behaviours of the employees. A change in one part of a system is naturally going to affect the other parts of the same system so it is understandable how the effects of the multiple changes in 2020, most notably the physical distance between employees have put pressure on culture.

2021 needs to be a year of repositioning and reconnecting with the patterns of behaviour that create culture. Creating a connection to the organisation that is felt within each and every employee whether they are sat in an office or not. Whether you lead a whole business or a team within a business it's time to go back to the basics.

Work together to reaffirm your purpose, why do you exist, what is the unique contribution you make?

Review your values, how are they demonstrated within this new way of working? How can you spotlight and encourage the behaviours that bring the values to life?

One of the single greatest contributors to organisation culture is the visibility and behaviour of those that lead it. How visible are your leaders and what messages do they send consciously and unconsciously? What is their level of cultural intelligence and how confident and equipped are they to be able to create micro cultures aligned to the wider culture?

Remote working reduces the number of role models' employees are exposed to, making it even more important that every leader is able to be a role model, to do that their connection to the organisation purpose and values needs to be stronger than ever and their skills and understanding highly developed.

Emotional Intelligence at a distance

One of the ironies of 2020 has been that emotional intelligence has been needed more than ever and also harder than ever to achieve. Never more so has the well-known statistic that more than 50% of human communication comes from body language and facial expression been highlighted.

Our leaders were almost unanimous to recognise that technology has been a life saver, an inhibitor and a challenge all at the same time.

As the informal interaction from an office setting largely disappeared and the main medium to see others is through became a screen the amount of non-verbal information absorbed dramatically reduced, the subtleties of body language and being in a room with someone are simply not there.

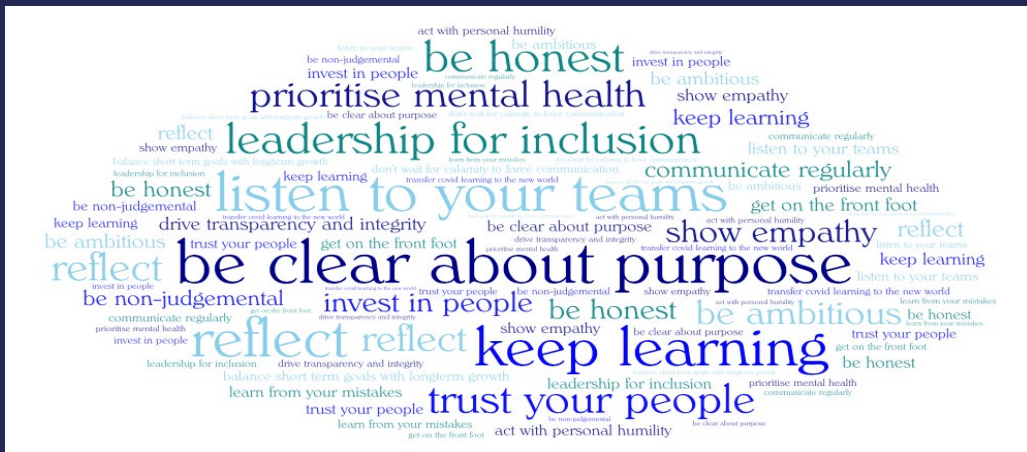
Working together has taken on new meaning, no longer is it about proximity and in 2021 and beyond virtual and hybrid working look set to stay and with it a new context for Emotional Intelligence.

Utilising the EI framework of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management leaders can identify how their demonstration of EQ as well as their style and approach to communication needs to develop in the virtual and hybrid context.

Collaborating and co creating the way forward will be essential. As leaders have to navigate virtual and hybrid working practices, they must use their teams to build the psychological safety needed to enable the agility that will be required to meet the challenges of business whilst reinforcing the relationships that will make it happen.

2020 has highlighted just how much human beings are social creatures who need connection to thrive, 2021 offers leaders the chance to transfer the learnings from COVID to the New World.

In summary, we asked one final question "if you were to make a request of all leaders in 2021 what would it be?" the answers were so compelling that they speak for themselves...



As the new year begins, I leave you with the wisdom of two intrepid explorers...

"One man cannot summon the future" -Spock
"But one man can change the present!" - Kirk