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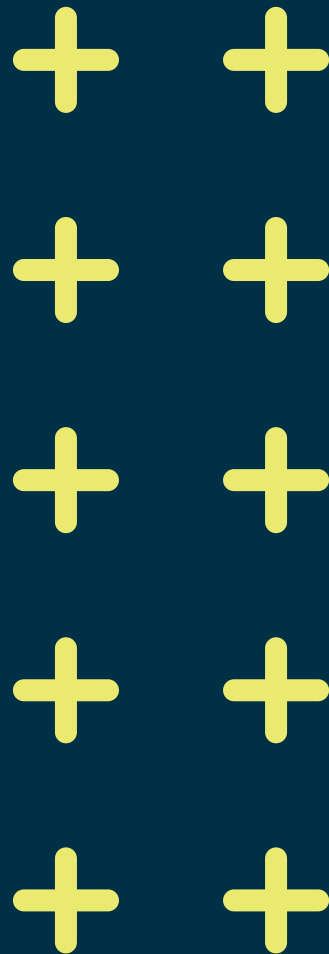
Because People Matter

in conjunction with
Enterprise Ireland

Emerging through Covid-19:

Leadership in a Time of Transition

July 2021



Leadership at a Time of Transition

Effective leadership is vital at any time, but it is particularly important during times of change. We have witnessed how critical it is to have strong leadership during Covid-19 and we expect it will be equally important in a post-pandemic environment when businesses are focused on positioning themselves for consolidation and growth.

Effective leadership in an organisation can be the difference between that business surviving and thriving or experiencing decline. Leaders who can make difficult but informed decisions, guide their people through uncharted times, listen to what their customers are saying and comprehend the indicators in the market are better positioned to navigate turbulent market conditions and find ways to stabilise the business.

Inspiring leaders

The need to inspire, advocate engagement and promote a good working environment has never been more important, particularly when many employees are currently working remotely – and may continue to so. We outline below some simple strategies for your business to consider as you move forward from the Covid-19 crisis:



Provide employees with what they need at the right time

Your employees' needs have changed during Covid-19, so engagement from leadership should reflect and emphasise this. Use a variety of different forms of communication, ranging from formal company communications to informal interaction with groups of employees. Ultimately, leaders should aim to connect their employees with a sense of purpose and emotional attachment to the organisation. Equip your leadership team with the right tools and training so that you can regain stability and consistency, which will help employees move away from feelings of change and insecurity, which can be common during a crisis



Communicate clearly, simply and frequently

At a time of crisis, our ability to absorb and assimilate information is strongly impacted. This is a time for simple, clear and repeated messaging that keeps your employees feeling safe, healthy and personally supported. And when you have communicated messages that deliver this, you need to repeat it again



Choose openness over charisma

Some leaders are naturally charismatic and can bring their teams along with their natural style and strength in communication; however, now is the time for honesty above everything else. Explain to your employees what has happened, where your business is going and how potential changes will impact them as individuals. Don't be afraid to show vulnerability – we have all been impacted by Covid-19. Talk about what has happened and tell your people about how you are changing your vision for your business and employees into the future



Revitalise resilience

We are moving from a global health crisis to a global economic crisis. As a leader, you need to re-set the focus. You should communicate the positives and bring your employees along by restoring their confidence in the business and how together you will weather this storm



Move from a crisis setting to a new setting

All crises end – and the Covid-19 crisis will end too. As a leader, you have the responsibility to help people make sense of all that has happened. Celebrate the contributions of employees, remember the losses, and then move everyone into a vision that will embrace the future and help you emerge stronger

Effective teamwork

Leaders inspire and direct, but without effective teamwork, success will not be achieved. During times of crisis, leaders build teams around them to deal with the unforeseen and the immediate issues arising from a crisis such as Covid-19. As we move forward, strong leaders will continue to establish strong team engagement with a focus on the following areas of importance:

- ✓ **Make informed decisions quickly** – remove any decision blockers
- ✓ **Define your priorities** – identify and communicate the important priorities for your business. Early in the crisis, those might have included employee health and safety, financial liquidity, customer care, and operational continuity. As leaders, you now need to focus on business development, financial strategy and funding, and operational supports to re-shape and re-align the business
- ✓ **Make smart calls** – once you define your priorities, decide which of these are business critical and will have a major impact for employees and customers. Identify what the priorities are now, and what are urgent or critical. Instead of thinking about all possibilities, effective leaders will prioritise and enable clear decision-making processes and either push out or defer lesser priorities
- ✓ **Name the decision makers** – communicate clearly the individuals in your business who have control over decisions
- ✓ **Be supportive** – encourage and support the actions of decision makers. Don't punish mistakes, but instead evaluate them, learn from them, and move forward

Effective communication and consultation

During Covid-19, we have all followed the direction and guidance of the Government, NPHT, and other advisory sources who have provided us with changing messages, information, advice and even the introduction of some new legislation.

As we now begin to exit the major crisis stage, leaders need to take back control of their business, understanding the continuing requirements for health and safety yet driving decisions and being clear about organisational plans. Your decisiveness and command of control will inspire others and the impact of this on your employees cannot be underestimated.

It is reasonable for employees to expect their leaders to provide them with appropriate internal instructions, advice and guidance, and to show empathy and understanding of their situation and circumstances, even though we know this can be challenging no matter the size of your business.

Employees look for strong leadership and clear communication, particularly in times of change and uncertainty. In a survey conducted by Edelman in 10 countries ([Edelman Trust Barometer 2021](#)), employees were asked what they considered the most credible source of information about Covid-19 – 63% said that they would believe information about the virus from their employer while 58% trusted government websites, and 51% trusted traditional media.



Communication tips for leaders

The value of effective communications from leaders has never been more important. Try these tips to improve communications within your business:

Provide clear, simple, short and actionable messages – communicate with your employees frequently and appropriately. Deliver a regular flow of information from both a health and safety and business perspective, so that employees clearly understand the direction of the business

Be positive – even where you need to impart negative messages try to focus on some positives where possible

Repeat, repeat, repeat – don't assume that all employees have absorbed important news. Sometimes they will have been distracted with what is happening around them so repeat key messages frequently

Be open and honest – this builds and creates trust with your employees and will be vital in a post-pandemic work environment

Use different forms of communication – these can include a mix of all-hands meetings, team meetings, email, text, messaging, Zoom, MS Teams and internal social media platforms. Consider what media is appropriate for different messaging. Different types of media will be more effective for different types of communication. This is even more important to consider in a remote or blended working environment

Focus on fact and data – employees expect leaders to provide factual data-driven information to back up decision making

Demonstrate vulnerability – acknowledge how the last year has affected you. This may be personal grief or perhaps a major crisis in the business. Sharing feelings of loss and sadness about the impact of changes will show empathy with what your employees have also had to endure during Covid-19

Be conscious of your personal brand, appearance and presence – it's important to be mindful of the personal situations your employees are experiencing and that their remote offices may not be ideal or even fit for purpose. As many employees are in less-than-ideal home situations be careful of the perception you are giving. Your presence, appearance and workplace set-up should not isolate employees further or separate and divide you. Leaders are scrutinised much more during a crisis, so really think through the messages you are conveying

Shared vision and connection

Establishing a shared vision and connection among your employees is an important enabler to initiate progressive change and ensure there is real engagement and commitment within your team. Pull together as one team and view obstacles encountered as challenges that can be overcome.

The following practical tips will assist you, as a leader, to create an honest and credible relationship and real engagement with your employees:

- ✓ When holding meetings with your direct reports, ask them about their personal aspirations and goals for the future and how they might fit into the broader company strategy. Have their goals changed over the past 18 months? Have their personal circumstances changed or been difficult during Covid-19? Do you have a clear understanding of their situation and how this may impact on their capability and commitment in the future?
- ✓ Show your team how a shared vision can help them achieve their long-term ambitions
- ✓ Regularly check in with employees and speak with them about progress towards your company's vision of the future. Tell the story, describe how you see the future and how your business can get there. Talk about it frequently in order to enthuse your team

Aligned strategy

Collaboration is crucial in ensuring that senior management are working to the same objectives. Check in with your senior team to ensure alignment and that everyone is 'on the same page'. It is vital that all your senior team are totally invested in the vision, goals, and operational policies of the company.

If any member has views that are in disagreement, or if they are just 'going along with you', you need to bring those views into alignment. Reinforce collaboration and aligned strategy by assigning and agreeing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with senior managers. These KPIs can then be cascaded and further defined for each manager's team.

Building a culture of trust and empowerment

As leaders you need to enable empowerment, not just by delegating, but by training and mentoring. This will allow employees to succeed and even fail in a controlled environment. Trust is essential across the leadership team. Your leadership will be trusted more when you are approachable, listen to your employees, discuss your business and your plans, and encourage collaboration.

Good practice to help build a culture of trust:



Take critical decisions quickly and decisively:

You may have had to pivot and radically change your business model and practices due to Covid-19. Your experience of reacting and moving quickly as a business will have provided a valuable learning experience for you and your senior team. Take this learning to promote and consolidate a business model that enables change and agility



Continue to evaluate your business model and embed changes into your future strategies:

- Identify managers who have coped well with the dramatic change Covid-19 brought on your business and ensure you provide support for those who have struggled with the changes
- Keep a focus on the critical needs of the business
- Embed a crisis plan, not just for what has happened during Covid-19 but also for the future
- Embrace actions and don't punish mistakes. Crisis management must have flexibility and a central goal. Failure to act is much more detrimental than acting with occasional errors



Act boldly:

- Decide what not to do; prioritise and focus on the key activities that will grow your business
- Throw out previous rule books. This is a new world so review your management practices thoroughly and consider whether current practices are effective and appropriate
- Focus on the priorities of your employees. Review and reflect on the messages you are hearing. If you are not getting feedback from your employees, ask them directly via surveys or focus groups



Engage for impact:

- Connect with your individual team members with daily ‘pulse’ or stand-up sessions.
- Ask for help. You hopefully have experts around you who can excel in their particular areas of expertise, so avail of their skills
- Collect and amplify success. Proactively celebrate successes and achievements. This is a time for highlighting the success of individuals and teams, recognising and congratulating both large and small accomplishments



Finally, take your own company’s advice:

Ensure you look after yourself. No leader can work effectively unless they are fit, eating healthily and looking after their own physical and mental well-being. Leading by example is more important than ever. All of us have experienced stress and personal impact from Covid-19. Take the time now to ensure that your physical and mental fitness is not going to impact on your ability to transition from crisis to success. Physical and emotional resilience is as essential for leaders as much as it is for their employees.

Summary

Strong leadership is more important than ever – we know that employees look to their leaders more during times of crisis (and post-crisis) than at any other time. Review your own leadership approach and style, consider some of the tips and suggestions outlined and discuss your leadership approach with your management team to ensure that there is a consistent and effective message going to all the organisation.

As a leader ask yourself the following questions:



Am I receiving the right data and information to make informed decisions?



Am I communicating clearly, effectively and often enough to all my employees?



Do employees trust me and my team – have I checked this recently?



Am I empathising as a leader with my employees?
Can they approach me through various media or in person?



Do I recognise employees who are really stepping up during and after Covid-19?



Am I developing and establishing a culture of openness, trust and success?



As a leader, am I giving my people the correct tools and supports to enable them to succeed?



About Enterprise Ireland

Enterprise Ireland is the government organisation responsible for the development and growth of Irish enterprises in world markets. We work in partnership with Irish enterprises to help them start, grow, innovate and win export sales in global markets. In this way, we support sustainable economic growth, regional development and secure employment.

About Voltege

Voltege Management Ltd is a leading Irish HR and Management Consultancy. Voltege's ethos is to effectively partner with and deliver support and advice to clients to meet the needs of their business. Voltege supports scaling start-ups, entrepreneurs, SMEs and undertakes larger organisation design and complex projects with major corporates.

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