

The future of great leadership lies in resilience

Part 1

By Anke Weidling and Engin Guven

True leaders stand out in a crisis. And for sure, the corona pandemic is a crisis like no other – and one that’s severely testing leaders. How leaders react to the repercussions, how quickly they recover and the lessons they choose to learn will determine whether legacies are built or lost in the coming months.

So, precisely which competencies will the next generation of leaders need to steer their organization through future storms of similar providence, length and severity? At Egon Zehnder we believe that great leaders need to harness and build resilience. To assess the future of leadership and the respective role of resilience therein, Egon Zehnder surveyed a number of leading chief human resources officers (CHROs)*, asking them which characteristics they consider will be important for leaders to succeed in the next normal. CHROs are accurate seismographs for leadership throughout the corporate world and we examine their answers in the following series of articles.

Leaders call on resilience as sprint turns into marathon

In the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, many managers initially outperformed expectations. Fueled by high levels of adrenaline, they were determined to demonstrate their ability to cope. But as the pandemic roars interminably on and this sprint officially turns into a marathon, endurance levels are dwindling.

Leaders have no time, however, to take a breather. Firstly, we still don’t know how long this current crisis will last. Secondly, leaders need to establish the so-called next normal, while at the same time preparing themselves for a different set of challenges ahead. For the corona crisis isn’t a one-off; leaders need to permanently change their behavior if they want to conquer possibly even worse predicaments. As Kristalina Georgieva, chairwoman and managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), recently remarked to the Brussels think-tank, Friends of Europe, “If you don’t like the pandemic, you’re not going to like the climate crisis.”

Seeking safe passage through uncharted waters

While we've yet to learn the full length or severity of this current crisis, we already know the best way to transition it, or indeed any subsequent crisis: let go of the past, travel through a zone of ambiguity, and adapt to new beginnings.

Understanding transitions, or the three-phase psychological process of adapting to change, is key for leaders and organizations to succeed, writes American author and organizational consultant William Bridges in his book "Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes". "Transition always starts with an ending. To become something else, you have to stop being what you are now; to start doing things a new way, you have to end the way you are doing them now; and to develop a new attitude or outlook, you have to let go of the old" (Bridges).

For example, right now this could refer to abandoning old working routines, such as a daily commute to the office, and adapting to new beginnings, such as largely working from home.

In terms of positive new beginnings, we asked CHROs, "Which positive changes for the business world do you hope to see as a result of this crisis?" In response, they ranked the following in order of significance:

1. Flexible working
2. Digitalization
3. Less travel
4. More sustainability
5. Intensified collaboration

The ranking illustrates the prevailing positive attitude towards home working and accelerated digitalization as this crisis transforms the world of work. Many organizations are seeing past dogmas around flexible or remote methods of working disappear. As workplaces shift from office cubicles to kitchen tables, new operating models are reshaping entire organizations amid accelerating digitalization.

People first, not profits

Which individual capabilities are leaders meant to call upon in this changing corporate landscape? We asked our survey participants, "Imagine the world of the "next normal" – how important do you think the following leadership competencies will be in the next normal?" Respondents ranked the following in order of priority:

- Driving change
- Leading teams
- Building customer value

- Developing talent
- Leading innovation
- Shaping strategy
- Understanding the market
- Delivering results
- Driving commercial outcomes

The order of priority speak volumes. Driving change – or in other words leading transitions – comes first, with commercial success ranked last. This accurately reflects a fundamental shift taking place as leaders focus foremost on people, with business-orientated competencies, such as tending to the bottom line, pushed lower down their list of priorities.

From now on, this is the approach that leaders need to adopt as the world of work changes. Those who fail to change, will be left behind. Those who manage to lead transitions, should hopefully succeed.

** The survey responses are taken from a sample of 47 CHROs in Turkey.*

Bridges, William (2004): Transitions: making sense of life's changes: Strategies for coping the difficult, painful, and confusing times in your life. DaCapo Press

For more information, contact:



Anke Weidling
Berlin
anke.weidling@egonzehnder.com
+49 30 32 79 55 96



Engin Guven
Istanbul
engin.guven@egonzehnder.com
+90 212 381 66 22

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