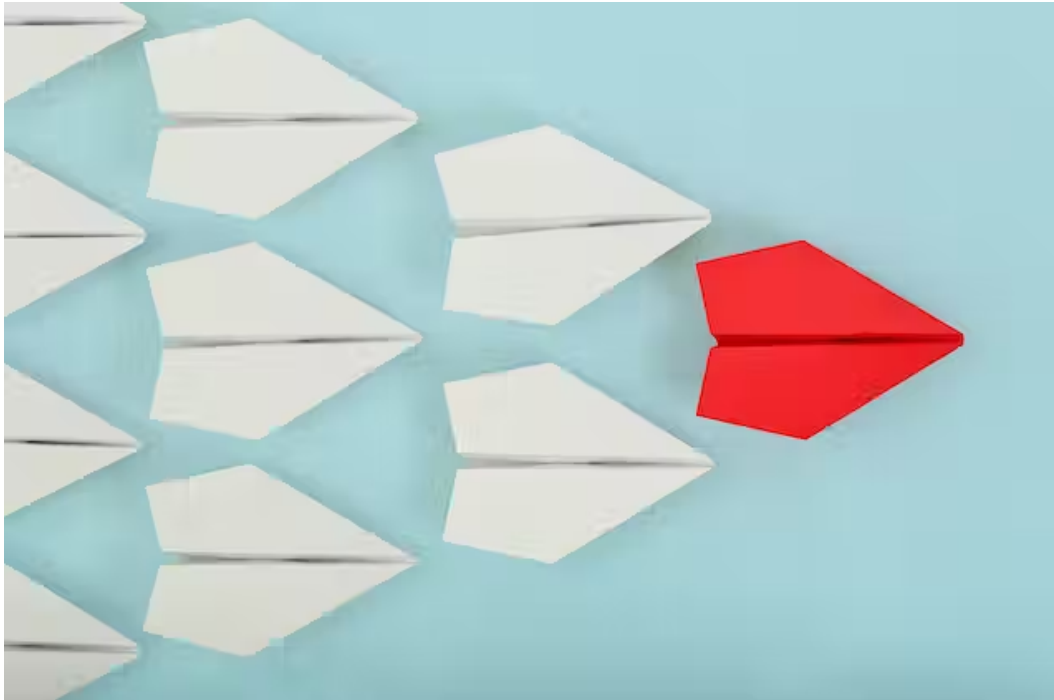


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Four key rules for successful leadership

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The disruption and devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world. Not only has it taken the lives of more than 5 million people around the world, it has also seriously wounded the global economy.

Thousands of businesses have gone bust and employees are demotivated, with almost four in 10 feeling less galvanised at work since the pandemic. There has been a decline in productivity for most businesses, with those sectors involving the most social contact bearing the brunt.

I recently wrote about the skills that effective leaders need to possess. These have never been more relevant, especially now that we need strong leadership to guide us to recovery after the pandemic. Here are four key skills crucial to help make that happen.

1. Be empathetic

Effective leaders need to understand the feelings, motivations and emotions of others, especially the people who work for them. Empathy with employees is crucial now that many people are facing diverse challenges such as anxiety, stress and adjusting to new work conditions and income decline. Leaders need to show that they are human.

A good example is Arne Sorenson, CEO of Marriott, the largest hotel chain in the world with a workforce of around 121,000 people. Marriott's revenues experienced a drastic decline at the start of the pandemic. Sorenson recorded a video message, which has since gone viral, expressing compassion for employees and their families, reassuring them that things would get better. At the time he was being treated for pancreatic cancer and undergoing chemotherapy, but this did not prevent him from showing empathy – or leadership. This act of compassionate leadership is what differentiates good from great leaders during crisis.



2. Be decisive

The pandemic made it imperative for business leaders to act swiftly. Situations can change quickly, and successful businesses are the ones able to respond quickly and adapt to change. Good leaders need to be decisive and not averse to taking risks. They should be able to identify, evaluate and assess the risks while making difficult decisions. Resources during the pandemic were limited, so it was important that leaders adopted a logical, analytical approach to ensure that decisions were made not just quickly, but thoughtfully.

Amazon emerged from the pandemic stronger compared to other companies because of the decisions Jeff Bezos made at the start. As people found themselves confined to their homes due to restrictions in movement, Bezos recruited 175,000 extra employees and increased pay by £2 an hour, knowing that the pandemic was going to have a drastic impact on the supply chain and jobs. This was instrumental in helping to increase Amazon's profits during the pandemic. Which leads on to the next rule.

3. Recognise and exploit opportunities

The pandemic was also a period that saw a huge leap in new and existing opportunities. The ability to recognise them in a crisis is vital. Leaders must be aggressive catalysts and identify opportunities where others see chaos, confusion and problems. Such opportunities vary from expansion into emerging markets, to selling new products and adapting existing services, such as restaurants becoming takeaways.

Eric Yuan, CEO of Zoom, is a classic example of a leader who was able to recognise and exploit opportunities that arose as a result of COVID. The pandemic led to an abrupt shift to remote working for many businesses around the world. This transformed Zoom into a global brand during the pandemic. Profits in 2020 soared to \$186m, while customer growth rose by 458% compared to 2019.

Yuan identified that success would depend on the company's capacity to attract big-spending corporations to Zoom in addition to people just using it for free. Zoom's CEO is acutely aware that the future has changed and, regardless of how the post-pandemic world unfolds, remote working will be a fixture of it. Great leaders know the importance of this skill and are usually prepared to exploit opportunities when they emerge.

4. Build effective teams

Leadership is about influencing and motivating people. Leaders need to promote teamwork and foster team spirit to ensure their staff cooperate and collaborate to work together effectively. To do this, employees need to trust those in charge. Leaders must be role models who lead by example; employees learn a lot from good leaders, especially in difficult times.

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Carsten Spohr, CEO of Lufthansa, was faced with an extremely difficult and tragic situation in March 2015 when a suicidal pilot deliberately crashed his plane, killing 150 passengers. During this crisis, Spohr displayed honesty and took responsibility. This inspired and impressed his employees and helped build a culture of trust within the organisation after such a shattering event.

To develop these skills, mentoring and personal growth activities are important. Leadership is a personal journey and business leaders need to commit to developing their own skills. No one is perfect or has all the answers, but good leaders should not be afraid to fail. They should show that life continues and can improve after failing – if lessons are learned, however painful. Like anything, strong effective leadership takes practice.