

# 5 habits to embrace for leading effectively through change

**For months now, as both leaders and individuals, we've had to deal with an unprecedented situation.**

With concerns around the physical health of ourselves, family and employees colliding with the economic health, sustainability and security of our businesses, it's all added up to levels of uncertainty, change and challenge that many of us have not had to face before.

While we are hopeful of being through the worst, but certainly not all of it, the daily conditions in which we will be operating for the next 6 months and beyond, will still be different to life before lockdown. And leaders will need to be able to function effectively while navigating change and uncertainty for some time to come.

So what can we do as leaders to keep ourselves, our teams and our companies on track in the next phase? Here are 5 habits to embrace to help you navigate change and lead your business to future success and growth.

## 1# Identity and focus on what you can control

**In times like this there will be many variables you can't control.**

The advent of a second wave and the speed of the economic recovery to name but two. But focusing too much on the things outside of our control can lead to paralysing uncertainty, and prevent us from moving forward with the things we can control.

Effective leaders have the ability to create order from chaos, and differentiate the 'controllable' from the 'uncontrollable'. To do this we need to cut through the noise of conflicting data, opinions and ambiguity. Then identify the areas we can influence that need most attention, pinpoint the required actions, marshal the necessary resources and ensure delivery of the plan.

Identifying and actioning the things that are within our power to deliver provides not only a much needed sense of purpose and momentum, but also allows you to direct efforts where they will achieve the most productive and necessary results;

- Assessing the current and future strength of your customer base and making any necessary changes in focus or sales activity
- Making sure you have the right measures in place to get your employees back to work safely and productively
- Being on top of cash flow and debtors
- Making sure you are communicating regularly, clearly and effectively with all employees
- Identifying operational efficiencies

And many more are all examples of things you can control. Getting into the habit of focusing on these will pay dividends in the short and longer term.

## 2# To solve big problems, look for small wins

**When faced with unprecedented levels of change and uncertainty it can be difficult to know where to start.**

The fear of making the wrong decision, given the scale and complexity of the challenge, can again have a paralysing effect.

But even the most daunting and complex issues can be broken down into smaller, more manageable constituent parts.

Searching for the 'perfect' or 'overall' solution can create indecision, delay and further uncertainty. And in the current context there is unlikely to be one single 'right answer', or one overall bold or radical strategy we can implement as a silver bullet. An imperfect solution, or a number of small solutions is far better than inaction. So it's important that we identify small building blocks to move us forward and be prepared to make timely decisions on these. We must also be agile and willing to revisit and revise decisions and actions quickly if the information available or circumstances change.

Small wins are also crucial for morale. In times of uncertainty the satisfaction of completing a specific definable task can be immense. It can help people see their efforts are worthwhile and motivate them to want to do more to support larger goals. For example while stronger credit control may not be a panacea for a business that has lost a large proportion of its revenue, implementing a new approach or system that reduces debtor days and bad debts can not only improve cash flow, but also create a significant sense of achievement and purpose in that team.

Harnessing the 'power of marginal gains' is another approach that enables small, individual improvements, made by many people in many different roles, to make a real difference in terms of the combined results achieved. In times of great challenge and change, effective leaders remember that for their teams having something 'manageable' to anchor their efforts to is not just good for the individual, but good for the company. Investing time in helping your teams identify and action these projects and changes is a habit that will pay good dividends.

### 3# Find stability in the disruption

**When the shorter term future is difficult to predict, it can be useful to remember and reconnect with your longer term goals.**

Your vision and values, if they were strong in the first place, will still be key foundations that underpin your business. While the route map to achieve your goals may have changed, and your plans and approaches need adaptation or reinvention, your overall vision and belief in what your business stands for and what you want it to achieve, may well be unchanged in the long term. Reaffirming the long view, for yourself and others in the business, will help provide a sense of greater stability and act as a reminder that while things feel uncertain and possibly even chaotic now, this is just one chapter in the company's history.

Good leadership, timely decision making and regular, open communication will allow your teams to see the next, more stable chapter, and focus not just on the here and now, but also the future. Illustrating what you are aiming for, not just what you are moving away from or getting through, will create more confidence and energy in your teams. Don't simply aim to survive, survival doesn't inspire. It's important to provide the vision of where you want to be in the future - if they can see it, they can help you get there more easily.

### 4# Communicate, communicate, communicate

**I've never yet seen feedback from an employee survey that says "there is too**

**much communication" and I've seen feedback results from employees in a good few hundred companies in my time.**

The need for effective communication is universally accepted at any time, but becomes even more imperative when levels of change and uncertainty are high.

Many companies introduced new channels and methods of communication during lockdown and homeworking, both formal and informal. As we enter the next phase we need to remember that more people being back physically at work doesn't necessarily mean they are back on track. Anxieties about job security, concerns from outside of work, uncertainty about how the business will move forward and how this will affect them, may all linger. So communicating regularly and being confident the right messages are getting through will be more important than ever, especially as changes to working practices, priorities and goals are likely to be more prevalent and rapid than in pre-Covid times.

That said, the level of information people receive is possibly now higher than ever, outside of as well as potentially inside of work, and they may feel that they are being bombarded by, sometimes conflicting, data. It's a good habit to regularly review the communication channels you are using, including the more formal all business and line manager updates, the informal check-ins and the number of social and digital channels being used. While it's unlikely you can ever provide 'too much' communication if done well, there can be a danger of information overload.

Clarity therefore is important, so ensuring there is one overall 'central point of truth' in the business, where people know they

can get the core messages straight from the horse's mouth will help. This could be a regular update from the MD / CEO, distributed to all employees, which will also provide a much needed sense of continuity, visibility and leadership. Or a central shared document or handbook, available to all, that is updated in real time with any new information and guidance, as well as details about any necessary changes or what overall approaches the company is taking.

The content as well as the method of any communication is also important. Good leaders balance the need to give confidence that someone is 'at the tiller', with honesty about the scale of the challenges. Providing simple messages and repeating them often provides clarity and stability. You will not always have all the answers, but sharing what you can and being honest about challenges, changes and why they are necessary will all help to remove some of the uncertainty.

Never forget that communication is one of the key ways people will see evidence of your leadership. Borrowing an example from the airline industry in every pilot manual, ahead of any complex technical, safety or other guidelines, one instruction always features prominently "keep flying the plane". In the same way whatever situation, challenges or complexities you are dealing with 'keep providing leadership' and in a visible way, has to be the top priority.

One final thing to remember in terms of communication is that for it to be truly effective it has to be two way. So ensuring you have the systems in place

to get soundings and feedback from those in different parts of the business, to understand what is really going on at the coal face, is the final, crucial element.

## 5# To lead others, first you must lead yourself

**Many of us may have found our reserves of energy and resilience depleted over the last few months.**

Juggling the needs of the business, our employees and our customers, as well as our own personal commitments and concerns outside of work can take its toll. Especially when, as a leader, you're expected to provide confidence and direction, come up with the answers and support others. There is a well-worn but apt phrase "you can't pour from an empty jug". So ask yourself, who or what is helping you to refill?

If we see the need for support as an admission of failure we are likely to damage ourselves and our business. If our own equilibrium is out of balance, it can be more difficult to make good decisions, manage our own stress and have the right mindset to understand, acknowledge and act on the concerns and anxieties of others.

There is no 'one size fits all' - we are all different. But ensuring we prioritise activities that help us decompress is equally important for all of us, however we do that. Making time to identify what works for you is another habit to embrace. It could be downtime, hobbies or ways to relax and switch off outside of the office, new habits and ways to disconnect from 'the office' if we are working more from home and the commute no longer there in which to switch off, or turning to others for support.

If you are running the business it's not always appropriate or possible to share some concerns or stresses with members of your team, so safe sounding boards outside of, or less intrinsically connected to the business can work well. While friends and family can provide an outlet, they may not understand the business or the imperatives, and we may be reluctant to worry them. Non-Executive Directors, business mentors or peer to peer networks can all work well, and provide not just a 'safe ear' and shared experiences that remind you you're not alone, but also ideas, insights and approaches to help you move forward.

**There are of course also many other ways to successfully navigate and embrace change for the benefit of your business, and balance short term imperatives with longer term priorities.**

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