A photograph of a diverse group of people in a meeting. A man with glasses and a beard, wearing a light pink shirt, is smiling broadly and gesturing with his hands. He is seated at a table with other people, including a woman in a yellow polka-dot shirt and a woman in a blue top. The background is a bright, out-of-focus office space with large windows.

# The six-step guide to transformational leadership

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How to lead through disruptive times – now and in the future

# Introduction


What does it mean to be a leader in 2020? We can probably rip up the rule book – and the trends and predictions – that were touted at the beginning of the year, as this is a year unlike any other. In many ways, we need our leaders to be better than ever because, as [Forbes](#) so succinctly puts it, *“There just isn’t room for the mediocre in cataclysmic circumstances.”* As Covid-19 continues to wreak havoc across the globe and numerous countries stare down the barrel of more disruptive nationwide lockdowns, we’re now at the stage in the pandemic – and the world – where great leadership isn’t just something that we’d like to see in our organisations. It’s a must.

Because here’s the thing: there are still difficult times ahead over the next few months, and we will need our leaders to safely steer us through them. How do we ensure that our leaders shape up? What does effective leadership look like in this coronavirus-ridden world? And how can we ensure that the leaders in our organisations evolve with the current

circumstances, rather than falling back on methodology that was written for another world? In this eBook, we’ll explore the qualities leaders need to be transformational right now – and into the future.

*Six qualities of transformational leaders:*

- *Great communicators*
- *Collaborative*
- *Inclusive*
- *Compassionate*
- *Culture-focused*
- *Agile*

A photograph of a young woman with dark hair, smiling warmly. She is resting her chin on her hand, which has a ring on the ring finger. She is wearing a white blouse with a dark lace collar. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue gradient. A quote is written in white text across the middle of the image.

“Transformational leaders don’t start by denying the world around them. Instead, they describe a future they’d like to create instead.”

– Seth Godin

# 1

## Great communicators

“Great leaders communicate and great communicators lead”

– Simon Sinek

What is the most important leadership quality right now? Well, according to this [report](#), “you simply can’t become a great leader until you are a great communicator.” At a time when we’re all dealing with so much uncertainty, this feels even more pressing. Why? Well, not to be over-dramatic, but in some industries, effective leadership communication can be the literal difference between life and death.

It’s simply not enough to have a great strategic plan that sounds good in the C-suite but – oops – gets a little bit lost in the delivery. With a pandemic on our hands, we need our leaders to distil complex information and communicate it to their teams and customers with crystal-like clarity, without exception.

In short, clarity has taken on more significance than ever. But that’s not to say leaders get it right. According to this LinkedIn Learning survey [report](#), a lack of clarity is a real sticking point with leadership. Out of nearly 3,000 professionals who were asked what was the most frustrating quality they’d experienced in a manager, the runaway winner was this: *a manager whose expectations aren’t clear or frequently change*. So how can leaders be better communicators? The [Harvard Business Review](#) have summed it up nicely: “When leaders communicate with urgency, transparency, and empathy, it helps people adjust to the constantly changing conditions crises bring.”



We'd argue that these are great qualities great leaders should take forward beyond the pandemic. In truth, we've probably all noticed that decisions have been made more quickly in our organisations than they used to be, and that's no bad thing. We may also have seen a lot more transparency around the lay of the land in the company, and not just the glossed over version – the truth.

The final thing is empathy. With Zoom calls peering into our homes, we've all seen more of our employees' lives than we ever have before. We've seen kids, pets, chaos and clutter. But it's jolted us into remembering that everyone has their own life outside of work. When it comes to communication, that matters.



We've seen a near perfect example of collaborative leadership throughout the pandemic in political leaders' reliance on scientific expertise. While this has seen mixed results overall, it's illustrated that for leaders, effective collaboration is crucial. [Harvard Business Review](#) put it, "Effective leaders... understand that their role is to bring out the answers in others. They do this by very clearly and explicitly seeking contributions, challenges, and collaboration from the people who report to them, using their positional power not to dominate but rather to drive the decision-making process."

We have to be clear that we can't expect our leaders to know everything – and nor should we want them to. Whereas in previous times we may have made decisions based only on the nod from one or two leaders, we can't be that reckless now. As [Forbes](#) explain, the days of the all-knowing leader are gone. "The metamorphosis from a know-all leader to one who develops the team's collective intelligence is a humbling experience but also a liberating one, and *it creates a less asymmetrical and more human relationship between leader and team where there's space for creativity, trust and true collaboration.*"

Transformational leaders recognise that collaboration is critical to the success of any organisation, and they go to great lengths to ensure that

# 2

## Collaborative



it is fully operational. They break down silos and encourage connectivity between colleagues, they tap into the expertise of others outside their network instead of relying on an echo chamber, and they empower their teams. They know that their teams have expertise in areas that they don't, and they leverage that as a strength rather than as a threat to their position.

It's by doing this, and by subtly moving away from those *traditional, deferential and hierarchical structures* that leaders can become truly transformational.

“It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit”

– Harry S. Truman

# 3

## Inclusive

“When everyone is included,  
everyone wins”

– Jesse Jackson

There’s been a lot of dialogue about inclusivity this year. The pandemic has really highlighted how, in the big moments, every single person in an organisation has a part to play – not just the top tier of leadership. We’re all in this together, we said at the start. If that’s true, then it means we all have to *feel* like we’re in it together. That’s the tough part.

Because we know that inclusive teams are higher performing, more productive, and all these great things. But as [Harvard Business Review](#) points out, “Simply throwing a mix of people together doesn’t guarantee high performance; *it requires inclusive leadership — leadership that assures that all team members feel they are treated respectfully and fairly, are valued and sense that they belong, and are confident and inspired.*”

The onus is really on leaders. So what can they do to create inclusive culture? Well, it can vary from organisation to organisation, depending on what feels like the right fit. It could involve [democratising recognition](#) so it’s not just a top down process. It could be considering the impact of the language we choose – does it speak to everyone in the organisation, or just a certain demographic? It could also be about reaching out to employees in the organisation at all levels – by popping in to welcome new starts on



on-boarding calls or by checking in with employees across the business to see how they are. Leaders set the tone for how their inclusive culture looks.

*At Insights, we aim to bring an inclusive and respectful language into the conversation* through our learning and

development solutions and, namely, through the language of colour.

Founded in the psychology of Carl Jung, we believe that everyone leads with one of four colour energy preferences: Fiery Red, Sunshine Yellow, Earth Green and Cool Blue, and that each has different strengths.

When we recognise the strengths in our personal communication style, and those unique contributions are acknowledged by our leaders, we can all own who we are a little bit more. We don't have to be all things to all people, we can be us. And that's a big step in making our organisations more inclusive.



# 4

## Compassionate

Was compassion considered to be a deal breaker for leaders pre-pandemic? Possibly in some circles, but in others, probably not. For some, qualities like compassion may be considered lightweight compared to being strategic or decisive or innovative. To give one example, as is noted in this [article](#) on Inc, if you google ‘top factors for start-up success’ what you’ll notice is this: “Leadership, talent, capital, strategy, timing, and ingenuity are frequently in attendance, often repeated several times over... but there’s also something conspicuously absent.” What is absent is what the writer calls TLC, or in other words, workplace compassion. So why do we not care about compassion?

Well, the tide appears to be turning. As the saying goes, if you can’t see it you can’t be it, and we currently have some strong examples of compassionate leadership. The Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, who has been widely praised over her handling of the pandemic, expressed her opinion on the subject, commenting, “One of the criticisms I’ve faced over the years is that I’m not aggressive enough or assertive enough, or maybe somehow, because I’m empathetic, I’m weak. I totally rebel against that. *I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong.*”



Another backer of compassionate leadership is LinkedIn Executive Chairman Jeff Weiner, who tweeted way back in 2017 when he was CEO: “Big misconception about managing compassionately is that it’s a “soft” skill. Most compassionate people I know are typically the strongest.”

The statistics don’t lie either. In this [report](#) it shows that in organisations where workers feel compassion from their employers they’re likely to work harder – with *up to 30% longer spent on difficult tasks*. So what does compassion look like for leaders? It can show up a number of ways – being open to new ideas and ways of working, creating more time and space to connect with your teams, and actively listening to employees.

It’s also about acknowledging the extra pressures that people have had to work under during the past few months, both at home and in the workplace. At its heart, it’s about keeping people centred in any decision making, whether that’s at an individual, team or organisational level .

“Don’t worry about the individual level of prominence you have achieved: worry about the individuals you have helped become better people”

– Clayton Christensen

# 5

## Culture-focused

“A positive workplace culture is built when leaders have full trust in their team, and allow them full autonomy over their work”

– Emma Leeds Guidarelli

Another thing that has occurred during the course of the pandemic is that the culture of organisations has become alarmingly exposed. At one time organisations could tempt employees to join their business with offers of games rooms, free fruit, and pizza on Fridays. The subtext was very much ‘this is our culture: we’re fun AND we do great work’. Now, with high numbers of employees working from home, that culture has been laid bare. How does it translate into a remote world? And does it amount to anything meaningful, or has it been exposed as little more than, well, fluff?

We’re not against these kinds of incentives. They’re great, they’re just not enough in themselves – to create authentic company culture you have to go beyond the superficial and dig a bit deeper. According to this [report](#), *“Using perks to attract and keep employees is a short-term approach... but putting in the effort to encourage a workplace that provides and increases a sense of meaning in team members is the best investment you can make for your company’s culture.”*

In a nutshell, being part of something meaningful pulls rank. As is noted in this [article](#) and the 2019 Glassdoor survey it references, this is also backed by data. “A company’s culture and values are the largest predictor of employee satisfaction,

far outranking compensation and benefits.”

In 2020, leaders are the ones who must ensure their culture has depth. They’re the ones that ensure that organisational values tap into every area that they should do, all the way down to the everyday interactions of their employees.

They’re also savvy enough to realise that it’s not just “someone else’s job”, whether that’s HR, or the people team, or the director for culture. Leaders realise they must all be accountable for creating healthy organisational culture. [In other words](#), “The organisations that come out of this year the strongest are the ones where *leaders have not only taken steps to strengthen their team and overall culture but have also peeled back the layers to focus on the individual – including themselves.*”





Usually when there's change taking place in an organisation there are months of planning. However, this year, companies had to make the biggest organisational shift they'd probably ever had to make when offices around the world closed and everyone pivoted to working from home overnight, and there was no time to plan whatsoever. There was new technology to adapt to. New processes to put in place. And a global pandemic which required an urgent business response. It really was sink or swim.

For some leaders, it hasn't all been plain sailing. In fact, beyond the initial adrenaline rush during the first lockdown, some of our leaders have struggled in the virtual space. In a [survey](#) conducted by the Harvard Business Review, for example, *40% of managers and supervisors expressed low self-confidence in their ability to manage workers remotely.*

For organisations where there's a low degree of [trust](#) around remote working, there hasn't necessarily been a time or space for that to be addressed, or for training to be facilitated. This in turn may have resulted in bad-day behaviours showing up in leaders, such as micromanaging and helicopter leadership.

# 6

## Agile



So how do leaders address these issues? Being agile is key. And agility can show up in different ways. Yes, it's about being able to flex, pivot and be resilient in the face of disruption, but it's also about challenging how we think about the leadership overall. [Forbes](#) argue that, "Being an agile leader is less about process and more about a mindset committed to encouraging teams to self-organise, think, act and make decisions without the boundaries of traditional hierarchical structures."

The onset of remote working has meant we've all had to focus less on presenteeism and more on the actual output of our teams – and if that's not an agile approach then what is?

"Growth and comfort  
do not co-exist"

– Ginni Rometty

# Conclusion

As the fallout of the pandemic continues to be felt around the world, the lens remains firmly on our leaders to be the ones to safely steer us through this crisis. More than ever, we need them to show up for us. However, we also need them to show up right, because this is a time when their impact is truly critical.

With remote working, uncertainty about the future, entire industries being opened up and shut down in jack-in-the-box fashion, and our entire office-based work culture being turned on its head overnight, it's not enough to just simply defer to what worked before.

With a gear shift like this comes a greater emphasis on transformational leadership qualities, such as *inclusivity, collaboration, clarity, compassion, agility and a focus on creating authentic company culture*. With so many of us now operating remotely and missing that close 'water-cooler' connectivity with our colleagues, it's worth

leaning into the human stuff and ensuring we keep that at our core. Because if we can't be all of these things at a time of crisis, then when can we?

# Six qualities of transformational leaders in times of crisis

1	<p>Great communicators</p> <p>Leaders who are great communicators always prioritise clarity. They communicate with their people quickly, transparently, and with a human touch.</p>	2	<p>Collaborative</p> <p>Collaborative leaders actively seek out the expertise of others in their decision-making and recognise that collaboration is critical to success.</p>	3	<p>Inclusive</p> <p>Inclusive leaders create a sense of belonging across numerous touch points in their organisations and actively encourage their people to own their personal communication style.</p>
4	<p>Compassionate</p> <p>Compassionate leaders keep people centred in every decision that they make, and through that they create a team that actually works harder for them.</p>	5	<p>Culture-focused</p> <p>Leaders focused on culture recognise that creating healthy organisational culture is about meaningful work and values – not just incentives.</p>	6	<p>Agile</p> <p>Agile leaders can pivot in the most challenging of circumstances – but it's not just about process. They're also prepared to challenge how we think about leadership overall.</p>

# How Insights can help

## Who we are

We are a people development company that works with companies all over the world to improve the effectiveness of individuals and organisations. The core of our solutions is self-awareness, which is the foundation on which many soft skills are built, including communication, collaboration and relationship-building.

## How we help

With 22 global offices, we support our customers with their most pressing business and people challenges. From team engagement and culture to sales performance and productivity, our people-centred approach helps you shape the workforce you need.

Through a combination of instructor-led sessions, digital content and personalised reports, we'll help each individual understand themselves and how they can make more of an impact in their roles and with customers, ensuring that everyone in your organisation brings their best self, every day.

We partner with customers to find the best way to integrate our learning into their culture in a practical and sustainable way, bringing long-term change.

## Why we're impactful

We've built our content on verified psychology and we've made it so vibrant that people instantly find it easy to use and apply. The language and model are based on four colours, with memorable descriptors that help learners quickly relate. Beyond that, we make learning personal and human, encouraging each individual to make a positive difference through their behaviours and actions. Through this approach, we've already made a difference to more than five million learners.

## Our Customers



Contact us today at  
[breakthroughs@insights.com](mailto:breakthroughs@insights.com)



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