

Business as Unusual: Rewriting the Rules of Leadership

PREPARED BY



Anyone who has ever been a leader knows it comes with as many challenges as it does benefits. But few could have imagined the way leaders have been tested as they've navigated the cataclysmic impact of a global pandemic. From an almost overnight move to fully remote teams to the harsh reality of lost customers and furloughed employees, not many events have stretched the leadership limits like COVID-19. The pandemic has simultaneously tested leaders and motivated them to find new ways to connect with their people and to get work done.

But what's required of leaders is shifting. With the immediate chaos and crisis of early pandemic days now just a recent memory, leaders and those they lead are looking to the future while still coping with extreme disruption. In July and August 2020, GP Strategies® surveyed leaders – and individual contributors – from across the globe and asked them what they, and their people, need to thrive in this mask-filled, socially distanced environment. We gauged their concerns, what type of support they needed, and how, together, they could forge a path forward.



Addressing Safety Needs

While safety needs have been at the top of the list of concerns for so many across the globe, these needs were more easily met when countries, and their organizations, were in lock-down mode. As of August, when our results were tallied, leaders and employees were aligned in their confidence around the idea that their organizations were prioritizing safety. In fact, **79% of leaders and 73% of employees believe their organizations are taking the necessary precautions to address physical safety.** Staying home has worked – if not to stop the virus spread, at least to give leaders and their people the reassurance they need that their physical safety is paramount.



With almost half of the organizations we surveyed indicating their companies are starting to return to a physical workplace, a new wave of uncertainty will undoubtedly emerge.

Is a return to a physical environment necessary?

Who needs to return and when?

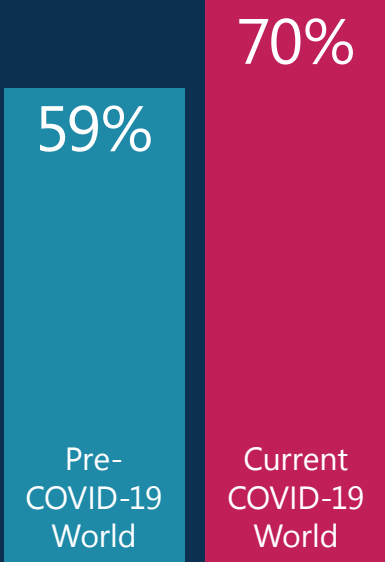
How different will it look, and what measures are being taken to keep employees healthy?

Will employers continue to care about, and prioritize, employee safety and well-being, and what is the impact on the continued remote scenario?

Respecting Employee Well-Being

With some gentle pressure to return to “normal,” we wondered if employee concerns are increasing and, if so, do employees feel comfortable voicing those concerns? What we learned is it appears the lines of communication between leaders and employees are open when it comes to the discussion of a return to the office. Employees indicate they’ve shared concerns about the physical safety upon a return to the office, and based on our data, leaders appear to be listening. Over 32% of employees agree or strongly agree that they’ve expressed concerns about their physical safety upon a return to work, and 31% of leaders have indicated the same. Many organizations are taking a conservative position on a return-to-office policy or a “ready when you are” approach and letting employees determine their level of comfort. This will serve organizations well as they continue to navigate uncharted waters and learn new facts almost daily about virus spread, silent carriers, and potential vaccines.

Trust is an essential element of a strong leader-employee relationship – with trust, employees are willing to go above and beyond for their leaders. But the stakes are higher than they’ve ever been when leaders are being trusted with decisions about employee welfare. Trusting leaders and organizations with pandemic-related decisions means trusting them with livelihoods, if not lives. In a pre-COVID-19 world, 59% of those we surveyed expressed a high degree of trust that their leaders take their well-being seriously. Today, as the pandemic rages on, employees have an even higher level of trust, with over 70% expressing confidence that their well-being is being taken seriously. While the uncertainty of the current environment has undermined so much, it has fortified the confidence employees have that their leaders care about them.



Employee confidence that their leaders take their well-being seriously has increased by 11%.

Meeting a Myriad of Challenges

Although organizations are promoting employee safety and well-being, they are still challenged with developing strategies for various other concerns, such as economic unknowns and work-life balance, that could affect employee productivity and confidence in their leaders.

While workers have been productive from home, they've done so against the backdrop of uncertainty and crisis. While the advice of medical professionals is being shared daily through regular briefings, those we surveyed are not looking to the leaders in their companies to shoulder the concerns they might have over health or medical issues.

Employees are looking for their managers to provide support closer to home – in helping them deal with economic-related unknowns such as job stability, customer retention, and the health of their companies. With uncertainty that economists have described as, “the worst recession since the Great Depression, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis”¹ it is no surprise that 46% of those we surveyed have shared concerns about economic issues with their leaders.

And while this is the area individuals are most concerned with, it is also the area that managers feel least prepared to lead through. Only 26% indicated they feel strongly that they are prepared to lead their teams through economic uncertainty, and 19% expressed a feeling of being totally unprepared.



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But only **26%**
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¹ <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression/>



But it's not economic uncertainty alone that is concerning those we surveyed. Forty-five percent of employees shared their concerns about balancing work and life, and over half of leaders indicated this is an area in which they do feel equipped to support and lead.

Many employees are in almost impossible situations – fighting to hang on to their jobs during a time of economic volatility while simultaneously struggling to do that job, take care of home-bound children and elderly family members, or simply maintain a routine that feels normal. Leaders are in an equally impossible situation – being asked to continue to meet organizational goals but do so, in many cases, with reduced staff and distracted employees.

The silver lining in these numbers is the fact that employees are sharing their concerns, thereby giving space for their leaders to find ways to help support them. While it's unrealistic to believe that leaders can solve all of these challenges for their people, what they can do is stay connected to their people, communicate frequently and transparently about company financials, and remind them of the importance of their contributions to company goals. The question on our minds was whether these distractions would negatively impact employee productivity.

EMPLOYEE CONCERNS

47%

ECONOMIC
UNCERTAINTY

45%

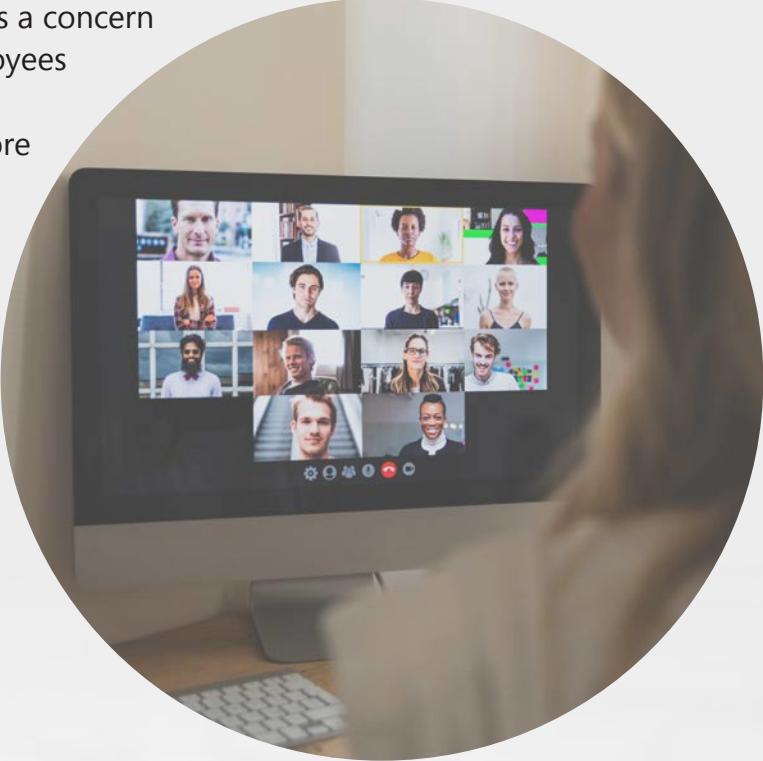
WORK-LIFE
BALANCE

36%

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL
WELL-BEING

Employee Productivity

Despite the almost immediate pivot to work-from-home for so many, both leaders and their people indicate they have been productive in the current environment. During this time, 65% of leaders say their people have been productive and 70% of employees agree. Gone are the lengthy commutes, coffee room chitchat, and daylong off-site events. Organizations are foregoing extensive processes and procedures for a more agile approach to getting things done. But the initial reports of steady productivity may not be a good thing. We have yet to realize the long-term social and emotional toll of isolation, childcare challenges, and blurring of lines between work and home. Work-from-home fatigue is a concern with no one-size-fits-all solution. Yes, employees have proven they can still get it done from home – whether that remote scenario is more beneficial than not for them personally in the long run remains to be seen.



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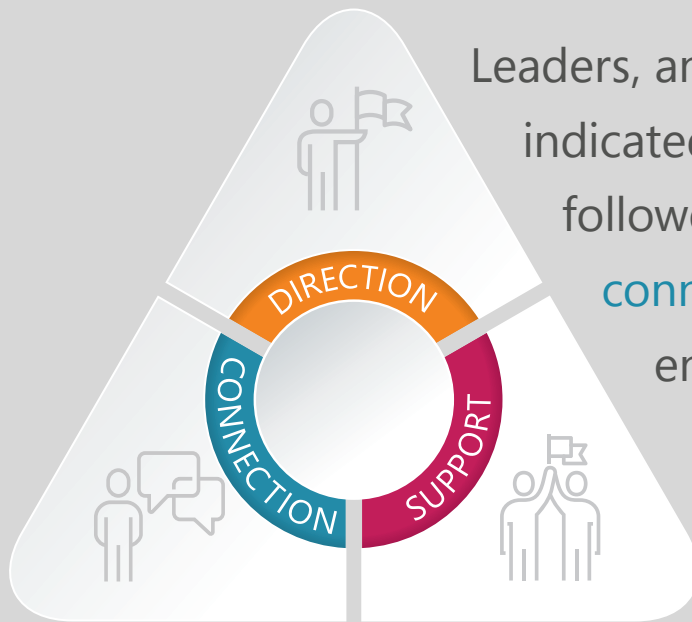
Resilience

Despite the current environment, leaders are confident in their ability to ultimately lead their teams through uncertainty – and their people agree. Forty-seven percent of leaders reported feeling a high level of resilience – a strong indicator of their conviction that they will make it through this crisis. But what does making it through look like? Today’s leader is walking on a tightrope between empathy and support and direction and accountability. They need to balance stopping and taking care of people with the need to simultaneously forge ahead. Leaders want, and need, to be present and connected with their people. But how to be present, while pushing to the future, is the essential struggle.

And while that struggle is real, the employees we surveyed have confidence in their leaders, with 61% indicating they strongly agree that their leader has what they need to get them through this challenging time.

While leaders are confident in their own resiliency, employees expressed even greater confidence in the ability of their leaders to get them through these challenging times.





Leaders, and their people, indicated that **direction**, followed by **support** and **connection** are key engagement levers during this time of uncertainty.

Staying Engaged Through the Path Ahead

In addition to taking on current challenges such as ensuring productivity and employee confidence, leaders need to look to the future.

Fear and anxiety were running high during the early days of the pandemic as COVID-19 began to make its steady and deadly progress across the globe, sending employees and schoolchildren home and putting many nations into lockdown. At that time, what we heard people needed most from their leaders was, above all, empathy.

Now, just a few short months later, leaders are continuing to prioritize empathy while also indicating their teams would be more engaged if leaders provided direction and support. But it's the specific prioritization of direction as the most critical need that indicates a shift. With half of leaders saying direction is what's needed most to engage their teams, leaders have signaled that what they think employees need most of all is greater guidance on where they are headed and what needs to get done: knowing where to go, what to work on, and where to find help in getting there.

This continued call for connection and empathy, so pronounced in the early days of the crisis, is now paralleled with a call for direction and support – helping employees to feel and to be productive in a new environment. This puts leaders in a tricky spot – to be empathetic about potential chaos on the home front while maintaining productivity. Yet, employees reported that that is exactly what they need and want.

In fact, when we asked employees the same question about what they need to be productive, the results revealed general alignment on the prioritization of direction, support, and connection. But while managers emphasized direction as the strongest engagement lever, employee results showed a more balanced emphasis.

Alignment on Priorities, Different Emphasis

What's Needed To Increase Engagement?

	LEADERS	EMPLOYEES	A LITTLE MORE THAN 6 FEET APART
DIRECTION	50%	35%	15%
SUPPORT	36%	32%	4%
CONNECTION	35%	27%	8%
EMPATHY	31%	23%	8%
TRUST	26%	23%	3%
FLEXIBILITY	26%	18%	8%
STABILITY	31%	17%	14%
PRESENCE	20%	15%	5%

These results are perhaps not surprising since engagement is an individualized equation, and people's responses to the crisis are unique to them. What one employee needs to feel safe or motivated is different from their colleague who may be dealing with a personal scenario unlike theirs. While managers may be emphasizing clarity around forward motion, employees need to be met where they are based on their own personal situation. A one-size-fits-all approach can't work, and leaders need to take the time to understand and address what each employee needs to help them cope with today's challenges while continuing to remind them of organizational goals and shared purpose.

Moving Forward With Speed and Intent

Last year, GP Strategies released research on [Leadership Mindsets](#). This year, against a very different backdrop, we revisited with our leaders to rate the importance of the “big four” mindsets, including growth, inclusive, agile, and enterprise. The leaders we surveyed underscored the importance of an agile mindset – a data point that came as no surprise to us. The ability to be flexible; to pivot; and to change direction based on customer needs, workplace logistics, or pandemic-related restrictions is an almost daily requirement of leaders. Likewise, the ability to bounce back from challenges has never been a more pronounced need. In fact, 77% of leaders strongly agree that an agile mindset is very important right now, while 71% recognize the criticality of an inclusive mindset.

These numbers represent a change in how leaders prioritized these mindsets just a year ago when growth was the highest priority and inclusivity was a distant third. The pace of the pandemic’s spread and its impact across the world on our lives and our livelihoods has, not surprisingly, elevated the importance of agility. Likewise, the amplification of conversations around diversity, inclusion, and equity is certainly being reflected in the movement of inclusive mindset into a place of prominence. And while a growth mindset is an element of agile thinking, it can be hard to think about growth when leaders are uncertain of their future and the future of their organization.

Leaders are placing lesser emphasis on the enterprise mindset, with only 30% indicating it is very important. The caution here is that, even amidst disruption, leaders need to anchor to something bigger and keep organizational goals and objectives top of mind. The arrival and rapid spread of the pandemic hit hard earlier in the year, and the mad scramble to adjust required the prioritization of agility. But particularly as employees are craving direction, the enterprise mindset needs to be increasingly center stage. If what people need most is direction, there’s no better way to provide it than to connect to the goals of the organization.



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71% of leaders have indicated an **INCLUSIVE MINDSET** is critical right now.

Coming Full Circle

The truth is that the tightrope walk our leaders and their people started earlier this year is going to continue for some time.



No matter how many different ways we asked the question, **CONNECTION & EMPATHY plus DIRECTION & SUPPORT** were reoccurring themes for leaders and their employees.

The question that remains is whether these elements can continue to coexist as we forge our way through this unusual time.

How do we be present with people, while nudging them forward?

How to return to business as usual during decidedly unusual times?

What Leaders Can Do

While leaders, and their people, expressed confidence in their abilities to navigate such incredible uncertainty, there is a tentativeness in returning to business as usual. What can leaders do right now, and what lessons can they take forward when the next wave of uncertainty hits? Leaders will always need to deal with uncertainty – perhaps not on the current scale, but they will experience uncertainty with economic conditions, organizational dynamics, or competitive threats.

How can leaders connect employees in a way that gives them the confidence they need to move forward while acknowledging they will be far from “full steam ahead” for some time? The way a leader approaches their team right now will make all the difference between confidence and doubt, motivation and disengagement, and surviving and thriving.

To help today’s leaders interact empathetically and effectively with their employees, we have developed a framework to use: recognize, restore, and rewrite.

Recognize

each person and their needs and that these needs are an individualized equation. How employees feel about returning to the office, sending kids back to school, or continuing to manage a remote work-home scenario is going to be different for each person. Their concerns and their needs are unique, and it is incumbent upon leaders to have the conversations that will help provide insight into each employee’s situation.

What this looks like:

EXPRESS EMPATHY – Put yourself in the shoes of your employees as human beings – as parents, as caregivers, as providers. Ask them how they are doing and what they need from you.

LISTEN ACTIVELY – Listen to what they are saying. Be present for them so they feel heard and valued. While that tug to move forward and push for a faster rebound may be there, leaders need to “go slow to go fast.” The time spent listening to your employees is not only what they may need personally, but will also provide insight into what they need from you to stay engaged and productive.

CLEAR HURDLES – Identify the type of support that would be most beneficial to each individual such as a modified work schedule, a shifting of priorities, or access to technology that could help them be more effective. Acknowledge that your employees may need to take a different path to be productive and feel satisfied.

Restore

confidence in the road ahead. Continue to demonstrate that your employees' well-being is a main concern while balancing the need to press forward.

CONTINUE TO ADDRESS PHYSICAL SAFETY – As a leader, the most important thing you can do to restore confidence is to continue to address safety needs. Understand, despite what your policy says, how each individual feels about those expectations and if they feel they will be able to meet them.

COMMUNICATE TRANSPARENTLY – Let your people know as clearly as possible how the organization is doing and how they can help contribute to its success. Help mitigate their concerns about economic uncertainty by providing as much information as possible.

SHOW UP AUTHENTICALLY – It's okay to reveal your own challenges and vulnerabilities. Your people will trust you if they feel they are getting "the real you," and now is a time to let that come through.

Rewrite

the contract between you and your employee with respect to how work gets done. Find the balance between human connection and contribution to the organization; help them achieve work-life balance.

ACKNOWLEDGE THAT VIRTUAL IS PRODUCTIVE – Across many industries and a variety of roles, working from home has been getting it done. Continue to find ways to master virtual communication and leadership. The fatigue element will need to be addressed, but virtual is here to stay.

BE MINDFUL OF WELL-BEING – Beyond physical safety, your role as a leader has broadened to include an awareness of employee well-being. Make sure your employees know what resources are available to support better mental health, and don't wait for them to get to a point of crisis – proactively check in with them and be attuned to noticeable changes in demeanor or behavior.

KEEP CONNECTION AND PRESENCE ALIVE WHILE BALANCING DIRECTION AND SUPPORT – It's not an either-or equation. Both are necessary and the time spent connecting with employees will cement their confidence in leadership and their willingness to exceed contributions.

A leader's ability to recognize where people are, restore their confidence, and thoughtfully rewrite elements of the leader-employee contract will be evidence to employees that their trust in their leaders is not misplaced. As leaders help propel their teams forward, the way they handle return to business as usual will, ultimately, not only determine their success in the short term, but also create a sense of loyalty from their people that will leave an imprint long beyond the pandemic. Leaders will be defined not by the uncertainty they face, but by how they responded to these challenges.

Report Demographics

ABOUT GP STRATEGIES



GP Strategies (NYSE: GPX) is a leading workforce transformation partner – one of the few truly dedicated global providers in the marketplace providing custom solutions. We believe our transformation focus, when paired with deep listening, a customer-centric approach, and innovative expertise, enables our clients to routinely achieve superior business and operational results from our evidence-driven and technology agnostic recommendations.



Founded in 1966, we are at our best when driving innovation – integrating leading technologies, developing new learning paradigms, and instituting fresh business processes and measurement approaches. We are proud to say that clients across 16 industries, 30 countries, and more than 25% of the Fortune 500 are unusually loyal to us and see us as an extension of their own team when it comes to:

- **LEADERSHIP SOLUTIONS**, including leadership development, coaching, career, and employee engagement
- **MANAGED LEARNING SOLUTIONS**, including digital learning strategies, custom content design and development, learning administration and delivery, learning technology administration and support, and vendor management
- **TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS**, including enterprise technology adoption, HCM technology selection, implementation and cloud migration, support and health-check services, process automation, technical training, and technical documentation



Whether your business success requires a change in leadership performance and mindsets, learning technologies, or critical processes, **GP Strategies is the transformation partner you can trust.**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Leah Clark leads Strategy and Planning for GP Strategies' leadership division. She researches, writes, and speaks on the topic of leadership. Her work informs the organization's product development and learner experience efforts. Leah authored the 2019 research report, *Leadership Mindsets* and the 2018 research report, *Tomorrow's Leaders, Today – What Leaders Need Right Now, and in the Future, to Be Successful*. She has written several articles and blogs on steady communication during unsteady times, executive presence, psychological safety, introversion and mindfulness in innovation, and how to keep human connection alive in a digital learning environment. Leah has over 24 years of experience in marketing, strategy, and product development. She holds a Master of Arts degree in Organizational Psychology from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Arts in English and Sociology from Boston College.

Special thanks for contributions to this report:

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ABOUT THIS RESEARCH



GP Strategies conducted the research applying an online data collection methodology between July 1 and August 17, 2020. Overall, 946 responses were received with the majority derived from North America, EMEA, and APAC.

OF THE 946 RESPONSES:

356 are individual contributors
192 are first-level leaders
260 are senior leaders
138 are executive leaders

This combination of experience brings a wealth of understanding in terms of how individual performers and leaders are navigating the uncertainty and changes of today's world.

For more information on our research or
insights on Leadership Development, contact us:

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