

15 LESSONS COVID TAUGHT LEADERS

By David Stewart
What the Past Two Years Has Taught Leaders



The Need for Agility – Adaptability & Alignment have never been made more apparent as a critical tool kit for survival than during the COVID-19 Pandemic

15 LESSONS FOR LEADERS OF ANY TEAM

1 CO-OPERATION AND COLLABORATION ARE CORE QUALITIES FOR SUCCESS

The pandemic highlighted how the levels of Government co-operated and collaborated with each other. After a promising start it soon became self-evident that many of our elected leaders used the pandemic for brinkmanship to further their own political agendas and popularity. The consequence for leaders and their teams was it required an urgent need to co-operate and collaborate with one other in order to successfully navigate the myriad of lockdowns, restrictions, new mandates, policy changes, and confused messaging. Siloed thinking has had huge ramifications and consequences with the COVID variants, greatly impacting supply chains globally. COVID has highlighted that it will be vital to ingrain a sense of co-operation and collaboration as a key team value for employers, employees, suppliers, buyers, and Government Agencies to successfully navigate an uncertain future.

LESSON

COLLABORATION AND CO-OPERATION are both core team qualities (culture) and brand values (the lived experience of consumers). It is a leader's responsibility to enshrine this into the DNA of any team (mindsets & behaviours)

2 REGULAR TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION IS KEY TO BUILDING TRUST

The pandemic required leaders to provide crisp, clear, timely, regular, and CONSISTENT communication. Given the speed of the COVID waves, Leaders were required to:

- **Be clear on the WHY** they are communicating an announcement and direction
- **Highlight what this means** to the people they are communicating to – no room for ambiguity
- **Be specific on what needs to be done**, by who, by when
- **Be factual**, transparent, and accurate

There was no room for weasel words, double speak, or politically correct waffle. Communication had to be clear, accurate and often.

LESSON

“One Message Many Voices” can only be assured if the Leader is clear, consistent, and regular with their Communication. It is a leader’s responsibility to predict how any message will be filtered and interpreted by the receivers. Just because it was said – does not mean it was understood. A Leader must OWN how a person interprets any communication

3 DECISIVE LEADERSHIP MUST BE CASCADED DOWN

Time was of the essence. As COVID Waves approached, Leaders were required to read the play and make proactive decisions, not wait for someone else to decide. This had to occur at all levels of Leadership, especially when team leaders had to interpret Government announcements with Company Policies and Community Needs. Decision making had to be deferred down the line with clear parameters, so front-line workers could make quick, informed, and aligned decisions. Issues had to be acted on as and when they arose, rather than reported and deferred to a higher authority.

LESSON

Setting clear expectations on what middle and front-line leaders are expected to make decisions on cannot be left to chance. Managing the myriad of daily issues are just moments of truth that reflect the culture of any organisation. As issues emerge, do staff see them and proactively act on them, or are they merely reported, or worse, ignored? Informed and Aligned Decision Making is the job of all staff, but requires leaders to ENDORSE AND ENFORCE

4 PEOPLE CAN ADAPT AND CHANGE QUICKLY

There was no time to discuss people being “reluctant to change,” “change ready,” or “change resistant.” The past two years have demonstrated how adaptable and agile people can be. If provided with a compelling reason for WHY, people can process this and change their mindsets and circumstances accordingly. There was no need for “change readiness training” or a requirement to employ a vast army of “change management consultants.” People can and will change if provided with the right rationale, clear and compelling guidelines, and ongoing support.

LESSON

Do not underestimate the ability and willingness for people to change and adapt quickly. There are a few key ingredients for this to happen – clear rationale for why – an ability to read the play – and an inclusive co-design approach on what and how change needs to occur

5 LEADERS MUST LOOK TO SEE – LISTEN TO HEAR

Leaders must be close to, in contact with, and visible to the people they lead to build TRUST. This can only be done by engaging, empathising, and connecting with staff on a meaningful basis. COVID affected everyone. Leaders needed to listen first and ask questions to fully understand and appreciate how people were coping with COVID. Long winded sermons, or email bombardment did not cut through, nor did endless Teams or Zoom calls. To meaningfully connect with staff, small intimate sessions is what works. Familiarity with a person's facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, body language, and narrative forms over time. Hence a leader must be able to hear and see a person to fully understand and empathise with a particular circumstance. Key is knowing the individual's needs, current circumstances, and personal priorities.

LESSON

Lived Experiences are everything. It is impossible to empathise with someone if not fully understanding their needs. Checking in with people regularly (both planned and ad hoc) is a key leadership requirement, and plays a large part on how a leader connects with, or makes someone feel

6 EVERYONE HAS A FRONT YARD AND BACK YARD

COVID affected everyone. Whether a person was working remotely or at their workplace, a Leader should not assume that just because their “Game Face” looked OK that everything is OK. **COVID has taught Leaders that it is OK not to be OK.** Indeed, how people were made to feel during COVID is a key factor motivating people on whether to stay or resign from their current place of employment. Whilst a person’s Front Yard (meaningful career – Job) is important, personal needs and priorities (Back Yard) have highlighted that a fulfilled life requires a balanced and connected approach between work and home.

LESSON

People value time. COVID has highlighted the importance of having a healthy balance between Work and Personal Life. A key benefit to attract and retain staff in the future will be how an organisation promotes and enforces a balanced work-life balance. This cannot be a one size fits all approach. Leaders will need to oversee a tailored approach to allow teams to “flex forward” using a set of guiding principles, rather than fixed polices.

7 PEOPLE CAN INNOVATE AND PROBLEM SOLVE WHEN REQUIRED

The do more with less phenomena required staff to innovate, and problem solve. As the old saying goes... Necessity is the mother of all inventions. When there is a requirement, people can be resourceful, innovative, and creative. COVID saw employers needing to quickly adapt and use technology to conduct meetings and transact business. Suddenly slow-moving supply chains had to ramp up and produce more output and deliveries to meet an urgent uptick in demand. Adhering to, or complying with, a set of rules and procedures squashes innovation and problem solving (look how slow it was for Health Departments to endorse and adapt Rapid Antigen Testing). By focusing on a desired outcome and asking people to work out the best way to get there always helps fuel “can do” thinking. When this approach is embraced, staff will find a solution to a problem.

LESSON

Leaders must instil problem solving, innovation and can-do thinking as a core requirement in all teams. This should form the epicentre of continuous improvement and Front-Line Leadership Development

8 LEADERS MUST SHOW THEY CARE: It is not enough to say you Care

WORDS REVEAL WHAT A LEADER THINKS. ACTIONS REVEAL WHAT A LEADER BELIEVES. It is one thing saying we need to be empathetic and compassionate to staff. It is another to show this. Symbolism is everything. What a leader does and does not do will speak volumes to the character of a Leader. **Symbolism includes behaviours, rituals, communicated messages, what is ignored, and role modelling:**

Behaviours:

How a leader thought and acted in a particular circumstance, and how they supported staff during difficult times was key. Consistency and fairness in approach, and how a leader's behaviours aligned with any stated team values-built trust but also revealed a leader's integrity

Rituals:

Team meetings, agenda items, regularity of follow ups, and team get togethers were an important team ritual during COVID to keep team dynamics and chemistry intact.

Communications:

Meaningful Communication with regular feedback loops were key at both a macro and micro level. Macro to all the team, and micro being 1:1. "How are you going check ins" are powerful communication techniques a leader can use to check in with staff meaningfully

Role Modelling:

All leaders are observed. How they act and behave sends a clear signal on what is expected and deemed acceptable. How many political leaders did we see being forced to resign because they breached a COVID rule? Role modelling and leadership integrity go hand in hand

LESSON

Leaders are judged by their actions and behaviours. The Lived Experience is everything. No amount of spin can save a leader who has lost the trust and respect of their people.

9 EVERYONE HAS A STRESS LIMIT - Everyone hurts going up the Mountain!

No matter who you are, everyone at some point during COVID had feelings of uncertainty, being unsure of what to do next, or just feeling overwhelmed. This is a natural emotional response. No amount of logic can change how a person is feeling. Important for leaders to recognise this and look for early warning signs in how people are feeling and dealing with their set of circumstances. Humans are both emotional and social, so individualised support is required to ensure help is effective and constructive, rather than just send a “care pack” to everyone! **A Leader should not assume everyone is OK.** Stress has many levels and many triggers. It is individualised, so what stresses one person, may not be an issue for another. But what is clear, everyone has their limits, and everyone will have their moments.

LESSON

Mental health is a key issue to keep front of mind when leading people. It should not be ignored. Important for a leader to be familiar with their team members and pick up on any early warning signs. Check in regularly and proactively with people, not just when there is a personal obvious crisis – there are always early warning signs.

A leader must take the time to listen and look!

10 RESILIENCE AND OPTIMISM ARE KEY LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

The ongoing waves of COVID challenged the resilience and optimism of us all. Building resilience and optimism are qualities for Leaders to instil into teams. This does not happen by chance, and requires a sustained, and systematic approach. Important not to “spin” bad news as something good. Be factual, clear, and informative on any prevailing issues affecting the team

RESILIENCE IS FUELLED BY:

- **Being persistent** in difficult circumstances
- **Proactively responding** to the changing circumstances
- **Being evenly tempered** and self-aware in the most difficult and trying of circumstances
- **Taking active steps** to check-in and support team members and colleagues regularly – remember they will never forget how you made them feel in times of difficulty

OPTIMISM IS FUELLED BY:

- **An ability to express gratitude** and thank team members for their efforts and volunteerism
- **Having a future-focused** predisposition
- **Role modelling** positive thinking and a solution-focused approach to problem-solving
- **Smile, encourage** and catch people doing things right

LESSON

Important for Leaders to both understand and promote that everything is temporary – but what is done today will help shape a positive tomorrow. Look for and celebrate small wins. A major goal can only ever be achieved by having small wins along the way

11 ENTHUSIASM IS INFECTIOUS: A leader's energy always precedes them

One characteristic that often goes hand in hand with optimism is enthusiasm. Keeping people up, positive and committed to things requires a leader's energy and enthusiasm. Having a positive "can-do" attitude is an important Leadership quality, along with an ability to smile in difficult circumstances. Showing gratitude and thanking people meaningfully for their efforts will help engender a sense of enthusiasm in any setting or circumstance.

LESSON

Rather than lecture, it is better to praise, reward and recognise the desired behaviours and mindsets. This demonstrates clearly what is valued by any leader. Small regular rituals with the team to check in and celebrate the small wins and achievements will help fuel a positive energy into the team

12 THE 3 A's ARE PARAMOUNT TO TEAM SURVIVAL Agility – Alignment – Adaptability

Agility: Starts by the team having a predisposition to focus outwardly on the World around them, rather than inwardly. The team dynamic must be focused on a sustained and persistent pursuit of opportunities, emerging risks, and performance improvement. It requires all team members to be involved, with an agile mindset driven by the Leader

Alignment: No Silos. The front end of the business must be aligned, connected, and engaged with the back end. This starts by having a familiar team who have a clear and united set of performance metrics (dashboard) that measures the performance delivery of any set of upfront promises and commitments.

Adaptability: Being able to respond and react to a changing uncertain World will be mission critical to a teams' survival post COVID. The World is at an Inflection Point – Indeed the World has been built by inflection points – which always brings about inevitable rapid change as well as unseen new and emerging trends, opportunities, and risks.

LESSON

The World is at an inflection point. And as such, the next few years are going to be fuelled by uncertainty and unpredictability. Like sailing in stormy seas, the 3A's will be vital attributes for any team to successfully survive and navigate the next few years

Alignment – Adaptability – Agility

13 YOU ARE ONLY AS STRONG AS YOUR CONTINGENCY PLAN

Nothing is black or white or certain. COVID has proven that. The World is grey. Whatever predications our experts gave us whether it be health or economic were wrong. No-one accurately predicted the waves of COVID or the changing economic ripple effects it would have. Which meant the organisations that best coped during COVID had an ability to quickly formulate robust contingency plans. Key is for leaders to have contingency scenario plans based on

- **Foreseeability**
- **Preparation + Conditioning**
- **Probability + Scenario Planning**
- **Actioning + Application**
- **Preventability**

LESSON

Scenario Planning is a skill for future success. Thinking through and planning for potential scenario's is not only good risk management, but it also provides the platform to pivot quickly to avert risks and pursue opportunities.

LUCK IS WHERE PREPARATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY

14 TEAM CULTURE REVEALS ITSELF IN DIFFICULT TIMES

When things get a little bumpy, the true team culture will be revealed. Any team can act and behave when things go well. It is in difficult times when a team will default to their normalised behaviours and mindsets. Organisational culture and the authenticity of brand promises will be revealed in how staff act and behave in challenging times. It is interesting to reflect on how some Brands used COVID to look after their staff and serve the public good well, whilst others used it to maximise profit, price gouge, or adopt a preferred position to the detriment of others. **COVID was an opportunity for an organisation to demonstrate what it stands for and bring any stated values to life.**

LESSON

As the old saying goes, cream rises to the top when things get difficult. In difficult times a team will either unite to deal with the crisis, or “jump for the lifeboats.” Leaders’ must prepare their teams for, and then plan and rehearse for difficult times, not just smooth seas.

15 AWARENESS IS A KEY LEADERSHIP QUALITY Aware of Others / Aware of Self

Often it is the third question you ask of someone before the truth on how they are feeling will be revealed. Taking the time to stop and check in with people was key. Managing By Checking Around and getting a sense of how staff, customers, or suppliers are travelling is a key awareness trait of a leader. **Intuition is an important self-awareness attribute.** Leaders did not need to survey their customers or staff to get a sense of how frustrated or overwhelmed people were feeling with COVID Restrictions. It was obvious and palpable. Being aware of others is an important leadership quality. There are always early warning signs that a leader must be able to read and pick up on.

Likewise, being self-aware is an equally important leadership quality. Understanding how a Leader's presence, personal actions, behaviours, and decisions impact people and team dynamics are key. Equally, a leader must understand what they choose to ignore or be absent from will always send a clear message.

LESSON

A leader who is not self-aware of how their actions, mindset, or behaviour affects others will always have a toxic effect on a team

AWARENESS WITHOUT ACTION – IS USELESS!!

Facta Non Verba – Deeds not Words!



FACTA NON VERBA, DEEDS NOT WORDS

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