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How Leaders Can Move Forward with Greater Insight Post-Pandemic

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We've talked about this moment since the very beginning—the “other side” of the pandemic—as if it would be a line in the sand, a definitive day and time that we could declare the end of COVID-19. An idealistic notion perhaps, but we're entering lighter days, nonetheless. The impact will surely be long-lasting—and has changed some industries forever—but we're moving forward with new wisdom and confidence in a bright future. Below, we highlight some of the key insights that have come into sharper focus for executive leaders.

Crisis Management and Business Continuity

The pandemic introduced a crisis on a scale which no business leader could have ever predicted. As such, it exposed significant flaws in many organizations' preparedness and business continuity plans. From employee safety and communication to infrastructure and supply chain, chinks in the armor quickly led to panic and reactive measures.

We may hope not to see a similar pandemic at our doorsteps any time soon, but we can be sure there will be other unforeseeable pressures that test how we respond to crises. As such, the business lessons from the COVID-19 response were valuable, particularly in the realm of crisis management and business continuity.

The most resilient of companies were those that were proactive and formed cross-functional teams that could address the unique concerns of stakeholders, employees, and customers alike. This required an agile, flexible, and comprehensive response, tuning into the worries of each group and strategically delivering essential services, products, and insights.

Using this approach as the foundation, business leaders should build a comprehensive business continuity plan that is appropriately stress-tested in advance. Furthermore, leaders should be self-aware of their own strengths in leading through crisis. A [recent PwC publication](#) shares the most important leadership qualities in challenging times, which include: empathy, clarity, purpose, and learning from mistakes and missed opportunities.

At its core, any crisis management strategy is built on trust. Companies must have buy-in from everyone at every level in order to move forward. Only then can they successfully set up their workforce and infrastructure to not only *cope* with a potential crisis, but also to transition to a state of *thriving* as quickly as possible.

Digital Capabilities and Transformation

From online shopping to online working, the world was forced to go digital at a rate no one could have predicted. Technology that once would have taken years to adopt and implement—especially at scale—was exponentially accelerated into mainstream usage within just weeks and months of the onset of the pandemic.

This adoption set the stage for digital transformation for many companies that had been holding on to legacy technologies and processes. But such rapid implementation is cause for concern. Leaders must carefully audit their existing infrastructures and strategically plan their way forward. Some of the biggest investment priorities include data protection, cybersecurity, cloud technology, and remote infrastructures. Implementing these initiatives will require careful planning around the employee and customer experience, industry regulations and compliance, and streamlined efforts that avoid organizational silos.

Company Culture and Work Environments

The subject of remote work environments has been covered extensively, and the insights have been valuable. Study after study seemed to show that employee productivity improved in a remote environment, yet [a recent McKinsey report](#) reveals that worker anxiety simultaneously increased. Consequently, new norms that were established throughout the pandemic may not be sustainable long-term. Leaders will need to find a delicate balance in alignment with their unique workforce and business model.

Regardless of what working model employers choose going forward, the consensus is that communication and employee engagement are key facets of any work environment. The same McKinsey publication showcased data that revealed a positive correlation between high levels of communications and increased feelings of support, inclusivity, and productivity. On the flip side, less communication was associated with higher levels of employee anxiety and burnout.

Finally, each company employs a unique workforce, and leaders will need to tune into their unique preferences and strengths. While 52% of employees surveyed by McKinsey say they'd prefer a more flexible post-pandemic working model, in reality this looks different for every business. An engaged leadership team that surveys and listens to their workers will be critical for success.

Community Involvement and Corporate Social Responsibility

There were many positive stories, from early in the pandemic, of companies and industries stepping up to support both their customers and their communities. We were particularly inspired by the [grocery sector giving back](#) to community groups and nonprofits despite the challenges they experienced with supply and demand. They weren't the only ones.

Manufacturing organizations jumped on board, retrofitting their facilities to focus their efforts on making PPE and other medical supplies, regardless of their core business products.

The way companies responded to the pandemic outside of their own profits and business interests helped cement a growing trend in the importance of corporate social responsibility. Consumers are increasingly likely to choose brands that can prove their value to society and prioritize ethical and sustainable efforts in their business, while potential employees are often looking for the same in a new employer. Additionally, because the pandemic coincided with the social unrest of 2020, this trend came into even sharper focus.

As such, it's going to be important for leaders to view their business in a new light, tuning in to the sensitivities and expectations of their customers and employees in alignment with business goals and objectives in this area. Leaders must understand and work towards company values that play out in everyday business and aren't just words written on the wall. Community partnerships, employee resource groups, philanthropy programs, and more are increasing in popularity in the wake of the pandemic and events of 2020. Ultimately, empathy will be critical. Business leaders everywhere will need to ensure that their employees have a voice.

The right business leaders will be acutely aware of these trends, leading their workforce with vision, strategy, and empathy.

How is your organization adapting to these shifts in the business landscape?