

Momentum

Identifying high potentials & keeping everyone engaged

2020

Marjio Bos is a facilitator and designer of custom positive leadership learning experiences with organizations and individual leaders. Her purpose is to inspire leaders to care more and find comfort with the uncomfortable. Explore the global programs at www.bosadvisors.com.

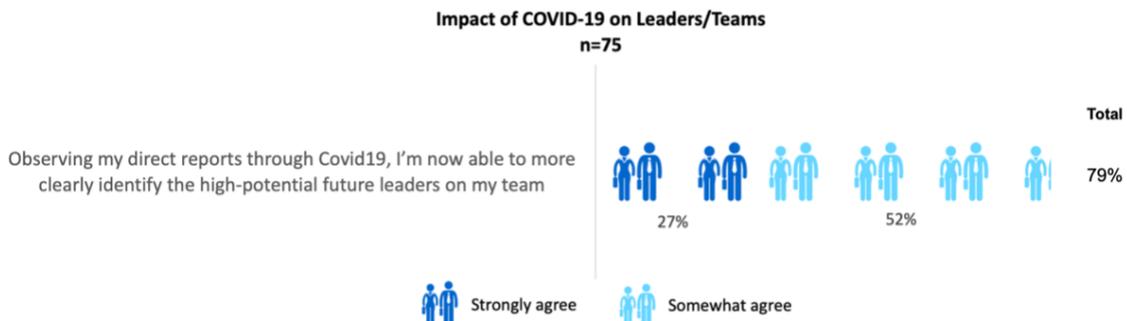
In the midst of a world gone “VUCA”—volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, team leaders had the ideal stage to observe and assess how their people performed. The first half of 2020 has been a “stretch assignment” like no other.

And yet we ask you to pause....and reflect on decisions made during the chaos. Were the leaders assigned or those who raised their hands to be part of pandemic survival committees, the most suited to the tasks? If you had to do it all over again, how might things be managed differently? We ask you to consider if you had an *expectations bias* that further confirmed the attention or assignments you gave to your “in group,” versus those in your “out group”.

We continue to share our findings in collaboration with Dreyfus Advisors, LLC, a market research & strategy consultancy based in metro-New York City, serving firms experiencing digital disruption across categories and industries. Under the direction of their founder, Rachel Dreyfus, they surveyed more than 75 senior executives in a wide range of industries and functions across North America, Europe and Asia. The insights are also based on open comments from director to C-suite leaders, as well as commentary gained through dozens of client conversations with Bos Advisors.

Identifying High Performers – Pause to assess biases

In our survey of more than 75 senior executives, eight out of ten agreed with this statement: “Observing my direct reports through COVID-19, I’m now able to identify the high-potential future leaders on my team.”



Strengths and weaknesses were amplified in the first half of 2020 as leaders focused on protecting their businesses in parallel to the added complexity of protecting themselves, their teams and families. Yes, learning and development programs often leverage complex simulated decision-making experiences that allow high potentials to shine. The COVID-19 working environment coupled with the recent Black Lives Matter movement however, have high anxiety, fear and uncertainty across personal and professional lives built in real time.

Looking at your leaders through a new set of lenses and a new world backdrop, which members of your organization can most confidently and assuredly grow into the future?

IN LEADERS' OWN WORDS ...

“ It has made it much easier to identify team members who have "big picture" and long-term focus, versus those who have difficulty seeing past the day-today.

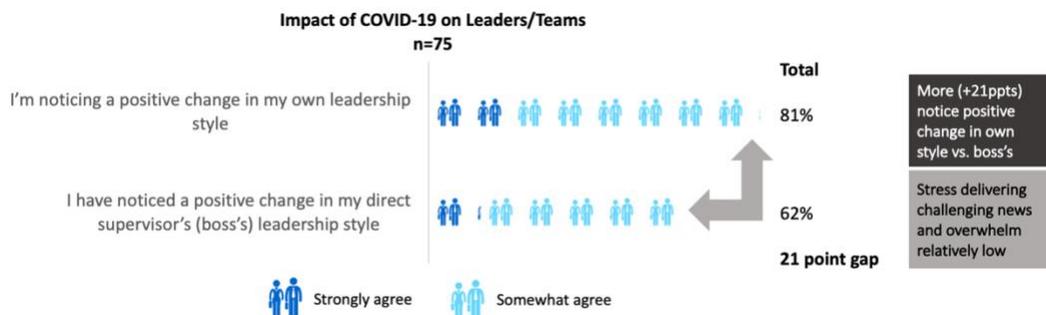
“ Looking also at Managers around me, it is possible to separate into 2 categories: the one who put faith and trust in their team members, and the one still sticking to regular monitoring of members activities.

“ I have noted leadership capabilities in individuals that I would previously have stereotyped as "junior," and will be investing in developing them further.

One US based president shared that when his UK Leader was out with a critical case of COVID-19, his direct reports stepped in to lead the UK business. As a result, the US president gained a somewhat surprising perspective on the potential of the next-level-down and who was ready to step up to more senior roles permanently if need be.

While this pandemic continues to rage in many countries, medical experts say that it's likely to be the first of many health-related challenges to impact business operations. That being the case, having immediate access to the most qualified leaders who can step in temporarily or longer terms isn't a good to have, but a **must have** across every level.

An interesting observation from the survey shows that while most leaders said they personally altered their styles as a result of the pandemic, the majority did not see as pronounced a style shift among their superiors. Naturally this raises the question around the clarity of shifts as we go down the levels of the organization. It's a reminder to initiate reflective dialogue on how leaders want to develop and what leadership shifts team members want to see ongoing in their superiors.



Many companies seized the opportunity to observe mid- to upper-level leaders as they made decisions with incomplete information and a whole new definition of human-centric communication. This could be viewed as a dress rehearsal for the immediate opportunity to embed and enable bias-busting systemic norms across every movement of an organization. The human-centric behavior, *insightful empathy*, is now a superpower. We're all in this together, yet we all are experiencing the pandemic, altered work and life environments very differently. Other human-centric behaviors include a sense of fairness, caring and curiosity on the power of differences, and a high level of comfort with uncomfortable conversations.

The newly evolving world order requires us to rethink the order of mandatory high potential leadership skills, behaviors and attitudes.

Team Member Engagement and Returning from Furlough

Our survey showed that many executives believe **employee engagement** improved over the past months among those who worked through the pandemic. The higher levels of energy noted by team leaders may be linked to the novel experience of working completely outside the box. As one executive said, “the sides of the box have come down, creating a wide-open dance floor. Team members can now remotely choreograph their own dance while getting things done.”

Is the upward spiral of positive energy related to an amplified sense of urgency, more inclusive and caring conversations, leaders being intentionally optimistic, independence or something else? This is worth further exploration since Gallup reported in 2019 that only 15% of employees worldwide are engaged in their jobs. American workers are twice as likely to be engaged, but even so, that leaves **70% of employees who are disengaged at work.**

The burning question from our clients is, how can we foster this engagement and build on positive protocols around inclusion while maintaining new efficiencies and higher productivity after the “novel normal” fades.

To add to the complexity, the cultural shift is a disruption for every team member—those who were furloughed and those who worked through the crisis. Many organizations now have a blend of both groups. Leaders will want to pay close attention to how the reunion adopts and nurtures gains made during the pandemic, and if there is any measure of regression.

One furloughed leader told us, “Returning after furlough is like re-entering a marriage after a trial separation. It is not only possible, but probable that, although everyone will understand why the furlough was necessary, they will carry with them some measure of injury upon their return. It is never, ever easy to have loyalty rewarded with the realization that one was not essential.”

This elevates the importance of positive and caring communication as team members rejoin their colleagues. They need to reconnect with an organization that has continued without them and help the organization regain ground lost during the pandemic.

Now What? Activate the Learning

- a) In addition to a more formal engagement survey, ask teams to complete the GRPI in order to better understand alignment across the team. What gets noticed and measured gets attention.



- b) Create cross-business teams to contribute to a plan on how to effectively and compassionately welcome earlier furloughed colleagues back to the working organization. How can those returning connect with what they missed while stepping into the future?

- c) As part of the AI (appreciative inquiry) dialogue, define key words around inclusion, racism and anti-racism so there's an agreed to, common definition that is understood from all perspectives. Only with shared vocabulary and definitions, can people initiate new system wide policies.

The whole organization can build on the momentum

The work, home, local and global environments over the first half of 2020 have altered how leaders view their impact on individuals and on the world. Citizens across many different countries expressed disappointment in the lack of strong national leadership messaging in the midst of the momentary chaos. As a result, people are looking to their company leaders to step up on a unifying message. We suspect that now, more than ever, clear and compassionate communications from C-Level leaders can fill the void.

The crucial issues linked to the global pandemic across our personal and professional lives is now accompanied by an urgency to embed anti-racist protocols in all we do. The topic may have shifted but we suspect the expectations around inclusive communication have only accelerated. Leaders adapted their communications styles to match the circumstances and respondents clearly appreciated an increase in empathy as [fear and exhilaration collided](#) during the early phase of COVID-19.

Now What? Activate the Learning

- a) Add caring or compassion as a key performance target (KPT) for individual and team leaders. Embed it into your daily culture by opening virtual or physical meetings with each person sharing a one-minute story of professional caring or compassion they experienced over the past months, and the impact it had. If there are more than 7 in the virtual meeting, go into triad breakouts to share. Do a similar exercise on short stories at the opening of every weekly meetings on specific and simple actions each person has taken to ensure an anti-racist and fully inclusive equal playing field at work. Continue this until it's embedded into the culture.
- b) Create clear practices for leaders to intentionally and safely share head and heart communications hand in hand. Create a performance metric that reviews written and verbal presentations on smart analysis around decision making *and* successfully incorporating human-centric messaging.

Carpe diem! It takes intention, attention and practice. There's no time like the present. Let's get to work.

If this topic interests you, take a look at the other articles in this series.

1. [Strengthening Your Leadership as Fear and Exhilaration Collide](#)
2. [Now What? 8 team exercises to move forward](#)
3. [Inclusive Dialogue Wins the Race – Vital practices for busting biases across organizations](#)

If you are interested in more information on any of the activate the learning exercises, you can reach us at info@bosadvisors.com

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