The Future of Leadership

The top three priorities for leaders in a fast paced, increasingly virtual and volatile world

Charlotte Forsblad





We have entered a new era for leadership

The context has shifted, dramatically, for leaders over the last 4 years. Not only do business' operating contexts look markedly different to pre-pandemic, but leaders and businesses are facing a host of new challenges.

Leadership expectations

The expectations of leaders have changed significantly in a very short period of time, and as such a very different style of leadership is needed, and needed now.

Mastering hybrid working, working out how best to use offices and balance flexible working, combating the fatigue and wellbeing issues that have taken root for many, integrating tech advances and AI and an awareness of escalating domestic and geopolitical issues have all added to the very real pressure faced by leaders on a daily basis.

We, at **t-three** and **Kiddy & Partners**, are here to help you understand what that means for your organisation.

We are a team of business psychologists united behind a purpose of helping businesses to assess and accelerate the right leaders needed for their tomorrow. To do so, it is critical that we are in tune with the context in which leaders need to operate both now and in future, and what great leadership looks like in that context. That insight – in the form of skills, attributes, knowledge, and behaviours - forms the backbone of our assessment approach and the direction we accelerate leaders towards.

We have undertaken a comprehensive research study into the Future of Leadership.

We have investigated the current and future challenges facing leaders and, therefore, what behaviours, attributes and values are critical for them to lead effectively now and in the near future.

We used this insight to develop Kiddy's new future-focused Leadership Model to help businesses, and leaders, gain the tools and knowledge to lead successfully as we navigate an advancing pace of change, employee engagement, geopolitical and financial challenges.

Our approach is grounded in science and rigour. As business psychologists, we have deep expertise in leadership. We acted quickly, conducting this research at a pivotal time during the pandemic and, within this eBook, we share some of our key insights with you.

The shifting context

Leadership is a two-way relationship between the leader demonstrating certain behaviours and the follower on the receiving end of that behaviour.

So, when a contextual shift affects either how the behaviour can be performed or how it will be received, we need to investigate and adapt what we know as great leadership. And the context has shifted.

The "future of work"

Global trends have been chipping away slowly at leaders' context for some time.

While pre-pandemic, the commonly cited 'future of work' had long since been hypothesized, many of these themes have broken through into reality in an increasingly complex context. Some of the trends we are referring to are 1.2.3:



Digitisation (technology, AI, the cloud, machine learning) changing the nature of jobs, resulting in impending regulation and increasing the data to which we have access.. There is now a consensus that digitisation is not about replacing people, it's more about revolutionising the way we do things.



Globalisation of people and intellectual property and geopolitical tensions resulting from conflicts, financial pressures and climate change pressures, leading to a need for sensitivity across cultures, more resilient supply chains and strategies that account for evolving tensions and ways of working.



Shifting employee demographics as generations are working together for longer and an increase in gig economy workers and Gen Z employees who are highly politicised, entrepreneurial and purpose driven but don't conflate simply having a career with purpose – they want purposeful work.



A shift from a 'career for life' towards 'career experiences' and employee experience, with organisational culture and learning opportunities becoming more important.



Structural hierarchies being replaced with flatter, matrix structures or team-based working.

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Leadership in 2024 and beyond

The profound events of the past few years have created a tsunami of uncertainty and pressure for leaders. Leaders from all arenas have been scrutinised for their response to these events and their subsequent communication and actions. It has been a hero to zero moment for many. More traditional, transactional leadership – using a command-and-control style – proved ineffective, especially because leaders have not had all of the answers and it is harder to control what they cannot see.

Research shows that working under extreme pressure encourages people to fall back on their biases and intuition⁴, which in turn affects their decisions⁵. They are more likely to reach out to people who think in a similar way to them, closing their circle. Symbolically, an act of defence in a 'fight or flight' situation. In practice, a blocker of innovation or holistic thinking.

As a result, an inclusive leadership style has been called out as successful in supporting engagement, innovation, effective decision-making and employee retention in this difficult context^{6,7}. Many of the leaders who have shone have been credited for balancing vulnerability, curiosity and humility with strength and boldness in making decisions quickly.

Our research examined the determinants of great leadership in light of these contextual shifts.

The key questions we asked:

This changing context created a number of urgent questions for HR and Talent professionals, the answers to which are critical to ensuring that organisations select and develop the right leaders for their tomorrow. **Specifically**:

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What values, behaviours or attributes are required of leaders to thrive today? 44

What contextual trends or challenges are influencing leadership effectiveness now and will influence leadership effectiveness in the future? 44

What values, behaviours or attributes will be important for leaders in the future and therefore what shifts do they need to make?

How we found answers:

- We trawled the latest academic and 'popular' literature to find evidence of how future of work trends impact leadership, updates to leadership theory and the future of leadership.
- We interviewed leaders and leadership experts across 7 sectors and 8 geographies about their current and anticipated leadership challenges and effective leadership behaviours.
- We created a draft model, using these interview and literature themes, and conducted a survey to test it with hundreds of respondents across different industries, geographies, leadership levels, and organisation functions.

What did we find?

The future is now...

The last few years have accelerated challenges previously considered to be 'future challenges' into the current day, particularly in relation to remote working and digitisation. Necessity for change overcame resistance. How 'great' leaders are approaching this is different to pre-2020 and will continue to evolve as the pace of change is expected to increase. It is essential that HR and Talent professionals not only select, develop and, with inflation only expected to rise and geopolitical tensions unrelenting, appoint leaders against the leadership qualities that are critical today, but also for the changing demands of tomorrow.

What are the main challenges driving the need for leaders to adapt their approach?



Employee needs and motivations are changing the way leaders are perceived

Employees now seek different working environments and traits from their leaders than before; and tensions between global and local needs need careful management. Employers are struggling to retain the best talent in the wave of the great resignation, and are being more demanding of clarity and strategy from leaders, and more purposeful businesses.



The pace of change is necessitating different ways of working

The increasing pace of change, triggered by the aforementioned challenges, digitisation and shifts in social norms, demands more agile and team-based ways of working; consideration of how to maintain the benefits of human contact in an increasingly virtual world and build an office of the future; and future skills gaps and shortages to be addressed, with leaders leading people who have more expertise in some areas than them.



The need to be externally savvy to position the organisation for the future

The need to still be driving business growth in a global recession following the pandemic - to remain economically and geopolitically savvy and to remain competitive.



The need for purpose

Leaders are facing demands for a purpose driven towards betterment of society (e.g. sustainability and climate change, wellbeing or diversity and inclusion) and are increasingly being asked to voice their opinions on these topics and are held up to scrutiny for any mis-steps.

Three critical priorities for the future of leadership

We have distilled our insights into three critical priorities challenges for leadership behaviour. Each challenge is critical because it requires a significant shift from more traditional views of leadership. For each, we provide quotes from our interviews to bring the themes to life.

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The purpose imperative

The challenge:

Leaders are facing increasing demands, from multiple sources, to create and drive forward a purpose-driven organisation and purposeful work for their employees.

What do we mean by purpose?

We mean uniting the organisation behind a higher order meaning of how the organisation can contribute towards the 'Greater Good'. Purpose is a drive towards betterment and making the organisation, or the world, a better place.

Our research showed that different businesses are driving purpose through different lenses.

As shown by the examples below, generally, organisations are targeting at least one of three key issues within their purpose:



Whether it be asset managers moving towards responsible investing and developing an **Environmental**, **Social and Governance (ESG)** strategy to create carbon neutral portfolios, or retailers ensuring their products are sourced sustainably with a low carbon footprint, corporate Purpose is high on the agenda.

Businesses must be careful, however, that they do not fall into the trap of 'purpose washing' – or an inauthentic attempt to look socially conscious. This is particularly the case for businesses that were founded without a meaningful purpose and so now need to find one. It needs to be a true direction, underpinned by a strategy of how to get there.

Examples of well-known organisations' purpose statements:

- BP: Our purpose is reimagining energy for people and our planet. We want to help the world reach net zero and improve people's lives.
- Coca Cola: Our vision is to craft the brands and choice of drinks that people love, to refresh them in body & spirit. And done in ways that create a more sustainable business and better shared future that makes a difference in people's lives, communities and our planet.
- Vodafone: At Vodafone, our purpose is to connect for a better future. Our aim is to build a sustainable digital society that is inclusive for all, where technology and connectivity are enhancing the future and improving people's lives.
- Sainsbury's: Our purpose is to help our customers live well for less.
- HSBC: We're bringing together the people, ideas and capital that nurture progress and growth, helping to create a better world for our customers, our people, our investors, our communities and the planet we all share.
- Reckitt Benckiser: We exist to protect, heal and nurture in the relentless pursuit of a cleaner and healthier world. We fearlessly innovate in this pursuit across our Hygiene, Health and Nutrition businesses.

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The purpose imperative Who is demanding it?

It is not only employees seeking purpose from their leaders, but as illustrated by these quotes from leaders in our research, customers, clients, suppliers and consumers are demanding it too.

Recent research⁸ has recently found that **91%** consumers would switch to a new product from a purpose driven company; Gen Z are **84%** more likely to buy a product from a brand who is socially responsible, and **53%** employees want their organisations to take actions on issues they care about.





We are not just asked by regulators to have a clear purpose, we are challenged by the clients, investors, stakeholders, younger generation and our employees.

The younger generation are those who say it loudly and clearly, they want to know what you stand for, what your values are.

What is the good we do for the world?

It goes beyond sustainability.

How do we act as a global citizen?

How do we use the weight of our brand to push issues that we care about?

Why is this?



A lack of public trust in corporations globally, exacerbated by the financial crises and increasing perceptions that the distribution of wealth and opportunity is unequal and unfair.

The position of climate change on the societal agenda.

Rising social inequality globally, with 1% of the global population now controlling more than 50% of its wealth.

The growing influence of social media, triggering brands to lose their control of their brand expression and increasing pressure to make a positive impression.

Increasing integration between work and life, driven by the rise in technology and ease of contact – and the resulting hours people now spend working in evenings, weekends and on holiday – have increased the importance that personal identities align with the work and values of the digitisation.

There is a business case for purpose, with businesses who have a compelling purpose generating more success and retaining more customers than those who do not 11,12. For example, businesses who prioritise purpose are more likely to be growing at a rate of 10%+ than businesses without a clearly articulated purpose 13.

Purpose agenda

While many argue that younger generations are pushing the purpose agenda more forcefully, academic research is in conflict as to whether different generations are motivated or engaged by different agendas or whether societal level motivators for all are changing in line with the context¹⁴.

Yet, it is clear, given this rationale, how recent events highlighted earlier have triggered a greater need for purpose. Indeed, employees are joining the workforce with significant negativity and noise in the world. There is threat: for people from minority groups, for the future of the world, of financial crises, of further health pandemics, of political instability. And, in the meantime, our schooling systems have changed, teaching younger generations much more about these key issues¹⁵, with recent calls for the curriculum to be updated again^{16,17} and social media contributing to raising people's awareness.

Given how this alignment of values and purpose has become increasingly important for employees and there is an even greater future skills shortage on the horizon fuelled by the uptake of digitisation and AI, it is going to be important for organisations to create a compelling purpose to attract the best talent, while of course still paying them well and offering them job security.

Our research also highlighted that governments are acting too slowly to tackle some of these key issues and rather than waiting for regulations to come into play, businesses have a moral responsibility due to their position and power in society to take initiative and change the way things are done to make a difference.

In summary, recent challenges seems to have intensified a desire to want to be part of something bigger and greater. People want to make a difference and we need organisations to make a difference.



It can't be a situation where it's like 'ok the government rules say this, therefore we're going by the government rules', that's not going to help because the governments are too slow.



The purpose imperative

So, what do leaders need to do?

Great leaders need to create this purpose and communicate it in a clear and compelling way.

They need to identify the most appropriate avenue through which their digitisation can operate in an altruistic way for greater good. The purpose needs to be clear and sing to the digitisation's strengths for people to believe in it.

In order to create it, they likely need to be internally and externally aware of the trends and issues that are important to employees, clients and customers now, and will become important in the future. This requires continuous curiosity to build and sustain this awareness. And they need to decide which areas to focus on, which necessitates holistic, strategic and conceptual thinking.

Once created and communicated, people now expect leaders to walk the walk. Leaders need to drive forward that purpose and show it has meaning for them.

They need to be interventionist by taking ownership and action to progress the purpose, rather than delegating it out to a working group, and by providing clarity for others on the milestones and the actions that are being taken to move the purpose from the intangible to the tangible.

With the growing presence of social media in a more virtual world and the "loudness" of some of these issues, leaders may also be increasingly expected to express their views, not only on the purpose, but also on the broader social and political climate, and where the organisation sits in relation to them, in a respectful and appropriate way – knowing the impact their messaging will have.



There's something about responsiveness to what's going on in the environment, acknowledging it again and listening to people and using that to create strategy for 'what are we going to do about it?'

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Why is this new or different?

Previously much of leaders' focus has been on creating a compelling vision. Whilst this is similar to purpose, more often than not, a corporate vision has focused primarily on how the business can generate more returns for shareholders.

Now we recognise that the importance of corporate entities delivering profit will not have gone away, especially as we enter a challenging financial era (not least so that it can be reinvested into worthy causes), but if leaders choose the right purpose, they are likely to drive increased engagement and commitment from employees, attract the best talent, and anticipate customer needs before they know it. Lead with purpose and profit will follow.



Moving from expertise to awareness

The challenge:

Covid-19 has triggered a leap in the sheer pace of change and uptake of digitisation and AI. This means that knowledge and practices are quickly becoming outdated.

The working context has become significantly more complex and volatile. In 2024, leaders need to navigate geopolitical challenges – sanctions, recessions, tensions on supply chains and many other factors.



Political elections will affect 54% of the global population this year, which could impact the way the world does business and therefore there is significant pressure to de-risk supply chains and build geopolitical considerations into strategies.



Technology and AI are also advancing, with 96%18 UK executives agreeing that leveraging AI agent ecosystems will be a significant opportunity for their organisations in the next 3 years. This means new talent, shifts in ways of working and jobs, and navigating new regulations

Real life examples of critical business changes shared from interviewees in our research also included:

- In the retail industry, marketing departments changing the way they market their products and relinquishing control over brand expression; with a product review from a social media influencer having greater customer impact than an advertising campaign.
- The rise of ecommerce and the decline of the high street threatening the future for luxury brands, who rely on people wanting to come to stores to touch, feel and interact with their products. So, they are having to find new ways – quickly – of connecting positively with customers.
- Banks and other financial institutions likening themselves to tech companies, with customer interaction increasingly undertaken through apps and aggressive competition from nimbler, tech-enabled startups.
- Changes in regulation dramatically altering how customers or prospects can be contacted and forcing organisations to shift the way they store and maintain the data they hold.



Leaders are leading groups of people who probably grasp technology an awful lot more than they do, which can be quite scary for people who are used to being deeply in control and thrive on that control.

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Moving from expertise to awareness

This pace and scope of change means that:

Decisions need to be made significantly more quickly and with much less certainty.

Leaders are no longer 'pinnacles' of knowledge and power in an organisation. In fact, employees at lower levels have greater skills and knowledge than leaders in some areas (e.g. technology). They also need to address a skills gap on the horizon due to the changing nature of jobs and rise of digitisation.

Leaders generally need to lead broader functions and flatter structures which means they may be leading areas of which they have had little prior exposure or knowledge.

There is a need, more than ever, to drive innovation to ensure business growth and maintain pace with startups who are more nimble and able to try and fail fast.

There is a lack of management frameworks or role models for leaders providing an example of how to lead in this volatile, pressured environment. The role models and predecessors from whom they have learnt operated in a relative period of stability or growth (financial crises aside); traditional leadership theories – such as that of transactional leadership – sought to maintain stability^{19,20}. Leaders are therefore operating in an unfamiliar territory with few tools to equip them to lead effectively.

It is unsurprising that in 2023, BCG found a 40% increase in stock price for change resilient organisations²¹.

As complicated as the world was 10+ years ago, it's vastly more complicated and the demands of what they have to do in their day jobs, none of their predecessors had to do this.

Moving from expertise to awareness

So, what do leaders need to do?

Moving forward, great leaders need to become increasingly comfortable with not being the expert. And with this, comes several implications. **Leaders need to**:

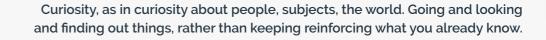
- Be comfortable operating in ambiguity and outside of their comfort zone, managing a level of stress and pressure that comes with this and keeping a clear head for decision-making, while knowing what level of information they need to operate.
- Be aware of the limitations of their own knowledge. Believing they know everything or that the world isn't changing around them is a risk for leaders moving forward. As a result, they need to.
- Be more curious, continually asking questions and looking more widely for new information, to build awareness of what they don't know and of who has different perspectives, views or knowledge so they know who to bring into decisions.
- Maintain that awareness, by continually scanning and seeking for those different perspectives.
- Proactively enable others, pushing responsibility further down the organisation to where the knowledge and skills are and gain more realtime frontline experience themselves.

Leaders need to step into new spaces and take on things they may have not encountered before, moving out of their comfort zone and being able to cope in those situations. At the same time as being humble, curious, and enabling, leaders also need to be able to make strong decisions and quickly. Decisions still need to be highly strategic and commercial, balancing the long and short-term to successfully navigate through the pace of change.

How many leaders will regret the decisions they've made during the pandemic? To be able to make decisions, or better, know who the best person is to make them, leaders will need to very cognitively capable to be able to make connections between constructs they do not fully understand, to critically identify which data they need to pay attention to and to anticipate implications of their decisions.



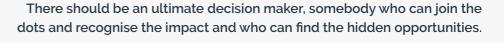
If you become older and older and you behave and radiate like you know it all, I think... it's then time to go to your pension. [As a leader] You need to be young at heart, open to changes.







[A leader needs to be] able to look at connections because we are becoming much more co-dependent to get things done and understanding the systemic nature of the organisation and understanding how everything fits together.







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Creating followership, engagement and loyalty in an increasingly virtual world

The challenge:

Some interviewees within our research likened the extent of remote working achieved in the pandemic to their predictions for 2035.



It goes without saying that businesses weren't prepared for this sudden shift.

Simply adapting to this new way of working – overcoming scepticism that 'if I can't see you, you're not working', moving to managing and delegating remotely, communicating and managing meetings remotely - has been a steep learning curve for many leaders over the last 4 years.

Businesses are continuing to battle with where their employees should work – should they continue to encourage greater office presence? What role should offices play, now and in the future? With 98% people wanting some form of hybrid working²², it's likely that mandating a full return to the office will mean businesses will lose top talent. More traditional working habits have been broken and it is an opportunity to move onwards and upwards; not withstanding that people simply enjoy some level of flexibility.

Creating followership, engagement and loyalty in an increasingly virtual world

Key challenges

Several key challenges can be identified for leaders leading through this more virtual and also more agile world:

There are fewer 'formal' connections when working in a more agile space, placing more emphasis on using own initiative to create and maintain relationships.

There is less opportunity, when working virtually, to create trust and deeper working relationships with people – we have lost the softer interactions as we walk to and from meeting rooms, the lunches, the after-work drinks. We are currently operating on 'trust currency' that has been built up over time, but as more new faces join organisations, it will be hard to create the trust and depth comparable to existing relationships and also sustain a feeling of culture.

What's more, it is harder for more junior employees to learn and develop through 'osmosis' when they are sitting in their own homes, be observed and be given feedback. Natural gossip and informal communication are also tempered.

Building on the above point, a more virtual world can create more silos. People no longer have 'visual cues' of other teams as they walk past them in the office; they no longer bump into someone they've been meaning to talk to. There's less organic innovation and collaboration from accidental conversations in the cafeteria. The network within which they interact may become smaller and their focus narrower – potentially great for individual productivity, dangerous for corporate-level productivity. Leaders will need to consider thoughtfully how they attract people back into an office in the future (if they have an office).

It is harder to pick up on visual indications of employees' wellbeing and engagement, so leaders need to be more active in identifying and resolving anxiety, or engagement and wellbeing issues resulting from feelings of isolation, anxiety and dissatisfaction with decisions leaders have made. It is not surprising that a recent Gallup study²³ found that wellbeing and engagement issues have led to **59**% respondents in their survey reporting to be quietly quitting.

Employees' desire for strong access to and transparency from leaders, whilst also retaining enhanced flexibility and autonomy, has been heightened due to the break from the 'old guard' ways of working and the newer generations entering the workforce.

People expect to be led in a very 'human', empathic and authentic way, yet as the global economic situation becomes increasingly challenging, this cannot be at the expense of high performance and productivity.





It's not as motivating to work in this environment [remote working] as we're not as creative as we used to be. Bringing on new people... not knowing how to integrate in the organisation. You don't have established relationships with customers and it's difficult to try and establish virtually.

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Creating followership, engagement and loyalty in an increasingly virtual world

So, what do leaders need to do?

It is essential for leaders to consider and reflect on their interpersonal style and to give employees access to them as individuals. They will need to:

Be self-aware of how they are perceived by others and the impact they have, maintaining curiosity and asking for feedback to build that awareness.

Be empathetic and considerate in their interactions with people, showing care to build trust and pick up on how others are feeling. As there are fewer visual cues to build that awareness, it may involve being more explicit and actively asking people how they are, more often.

Show vulnerability, lifting the lid on what they are finding difficult, to engender honesty and authenticity back from others and help build that sense of trust.

Increase their level of communication, and find other ways to communicate, to make up for less informal communication.

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That vulnerability plus following up plus care plus empathy.

Those are the teams working better, more effectively,

and I think are more engaged than before.

Think more disruptively and creatively about processes for the future, rather than amending existing processes – for example communication processes and employee development processes - to reimagine them in a more virtual and agile world.

Striking the right balance with these behaviours is not easy – some employees may be comfortable building more personal relationships with leaders, sharing details about their families, their pets, their hobbies, others may not. Some employees will be most motivated by responsibility or pay, others by work-life balance and fun at work.

Leaders will need to tune in to the needs of each employee, and then be flexible in meeting those needs, where possible. Yet, they also need to be consistent and true to their values to build the deepest level of trust and commitment from their followers.

While many of these themes are not new, they are no longer optional for leaders and the behaviours being displayed are more explicit and more sophisticated than before. These themes are key differentiators for the leaders thriving in this environment and driving engagement and commitment from their teams.

So, what does this mean?

It is difficult to be a great leader

Leaders have been propelled into unfamiliar territory. Not only have many future of work challenges now been realised, but the pandemic and recent geopolitical events have created a new level of uncertainty and pressure.

Leaders need to drive business success and growth moving forward while also considering how they maintain the benefits of human contact in a more virtual world; creating a purpose that unites and motivates others; and keeping up with the pace of change and innovation.

In terms of what it means to be a great leader, very few behaviours or attributes, if any, are becoming less important over time. Leaders are being asked to do more and sometimes with a different emphasis on which behaviours are most important and when.

Great leadership is context-dependent

The tie of the current context to what makes a great leader is evident: The need for purpose is exacerbated by the state of the world and the slow progress to mitigate key social, political, environmental issues.

The need for empathy and care is exacerbated by the virtual, isolated world we find ourselves in where employees' physical and mental health is being tried and tested. The need to become comfortable operating amidst change and ambiguity is triggered by post-pandemic uncertainty, geopolitical tensions and rapid digitiation demanding change in modes of operation quickly. Therefore, it is critical that leadership is re-examined every few years or in light of key contextual events.

Given this, we will be keeping a close eye on the context and, through further research, examining whether certain themes need to be dialled up or down in different industries or cultures, and whether they hold up in the years to come, which will be heavily dependent on the extent to which organisations return to the 'old normal' or forge a 'new normal'.

The way we assess, select, develop, support leaders needs to change

As the definition of great leadership evolves, then so should the criteria against which we select our leaders, the basis of leadership development programmes, the content of leadership training and workshops, and the toolkit for leaders. Organisations need to step back and reflect on whether they are currently selecting and supporting leaders to ensure they have the right leaders for their today as well as their tomorrow.

We help organisations get to where they want to go, one behaviour at a time

In a world that is changing so rapidly, businesses continuingly need to adapt and change faster than the world around them.

However regardless of communicating new strategies, or implementing new processes, it is ultimately employees who decide whether they will adapt and behave in new ways.

We get our clients to where they need to be through accelerated behaviour change.

Forward Thinking

Identifying the behaviours clients need to support their desired change, and then embedding those in:



Leaders

Who genuinely start showing the behaviours which will get their organisation to where it needs to be.



Teams

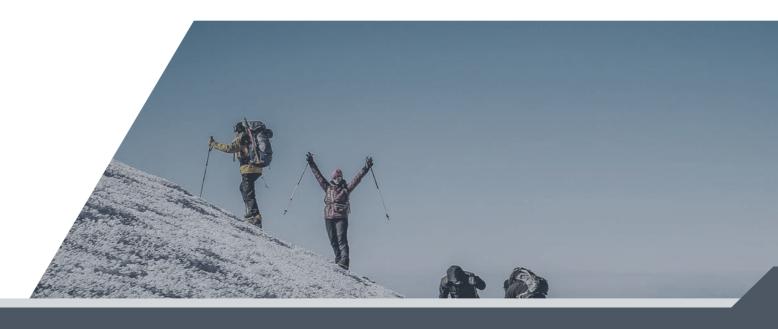
Translating direction into the vital team behaviours and plans which drive teams to deliver.



Employees

Targeted sustainable behaviours which turn employees into people on a mission.

Delivering the transformation you need



Helpful links

Below are some extra resources available to view online.



eBook
Where next for the work revolution?



Blog
Why leaders must learn to move
forwards without all the answers



Blog Leaders of the future are experts in not knowing



Blog Revising your leadership framework for the new normal

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