

Leading through ‘the great reassessment’ of workplace

Until two years ago, most of us had a passing awareness of the global megatrends that were shaping our world. Phenomena such as changing demographics, digital transformation, extreme weather, and major public health emergencies were having a localised impact.

However, as we emerge from two years of a global pandemic, what was once peripheral or futurist thinking has become essential to navigating our emerging reality.

If late 2021 gave us the “great resignation”, then early 2022 has ushered in the “great reassessment”. Recent events have given us pause to reflect on, and reassess, many aspects of our lives and workplaces.

Could this awakening finally spell the end for the traditional workplace, command and control hierarchies, and the classical heroic leader?

Leading systems

A true systemic approach is rare when it comes to leadership. Siloed thinking, hoarding of resources, and a focus on short-term results are common across many organisations.

We still have work to do before we have embedded collaborative and high performing leadership teams whose members are as adept at collective leadership as they are at driving their own business unit or function.

Strong systems leaders view the organisation as a complex but adaptive system, where all elements are interconnected. They take into account the ripple effect of any change or decision. Organisations are human systems that adapt organically as well as mechanistically to change.

Making a change in one team or function will have implications elsewhere.

It is easy to design a neat structural chart with clear roles and responsibilities. However, systems leaders realise that what happens in the spaces between the boxes of the chart is just as important.

They are aware of and understand the links, relationships, behaviours and culture that enable work to



This could be the end of the command and control hierarchies, and classical heroic leader, writes **Carol Mannion**

IMI business analysis



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flow, and know how to influence these elements to align with strategic goals.

Navigating paradox

One of the first things Barack Obama discovered when he entered the Oval Office was that a decision never landed on his desk if it had a clear answer. The best minds in the country had grappled for years with the issues he faced and if there was a clear answer, one of his staff members would have resolved it before it reached his desk.

Obama discovered that, in a leadership role in the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) context, decisions are inevitably shrouded with paradox. He had to let go of finding the

perfect solution, listen to many differing views and navigate these paradoxes to be truly effective in his role.

Blair Sheppard, global leader of strategy and leadership for the PwC network, highlights six key leadership paradoxes that exist in a world of increasing challenge and complexity.

When you consider the breadth and depth of Sheppard’s six paradoxes (globally-minded localist, high integrity politician, humble hero, strategic executor, tech-savvy humanist, traditional innovator), it is clear that these capabilities cannot all exist within one individual leader.

Organisations will increasingly focus on collective leadership, drawing on

the knowledge and experience of the group, to give a rounded and comprehensive leadership perspective. This diversity will be critical to ensuring that the organisation has a leadership team that can effectively hold the paradoxical tensions of the VUCA world.

The learning leader

Brené Brown’s influential work gives us an alternative lens on our more uncomfortable human responses.

Many of us seek to avoid feelings of fear, failure, and vulnerability. However, courage cannot exist unless preceded by fear. Innovation, creativity and learning, critical capabilities for any organisation, cannot exist without vulnerability and openness to failure.

Learning in itself is a critical leadership skill. We all assume that we can learn, because we went to school, college, and university. However, being a “learning leader” requires more than attending training programmes, completing an MBA, or reading the Harvard Business Review. The real work is in developing your leadership capacity and it requires curiosity, courage, and vulnerability.

The early-career leader will spend a lot of learning time discovering the frameworks, tools and skills to lead effectively. However, there is an important distinction between this development of capability, and the more reflective and challenging work of broadening your capacity to lead, in a world rife with uncertainty and paradox. It usually begins with deep reflection, on the part of the leader, and the guidance of an executive coach.

As we design, build, and lead the society and organisations of the future, we need leadership that is adaptable, comfortable with ambiguity, and vulnerable enough to lead, and learn, in tandem. As we engage in the “great reassessment”, let’s also reassess our idea of what constitutes great leadership.

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