

4 principles to embrace to become an adaptive leader

 By [Anja van Beek](#)

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2020 has shown us so many real qualities about leadership. The one that will be most prominent in 2021 and beyond will be the role of the 'adaptive leader'.



I am certain that most of us will agree with Abraham Lincoln's quote:

“ *The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time.* ”

In the past year, we have experienced the importance of being authentic and courageous in the virtual way of working. Empathy and really getting what your team is facing was a necessity to get people to perform in this “connected, yet disconnected world”.

We've transformed one way or another over the past few months and most of us have learned about being adaptive and resilient. We need to continue with these human strengths in a disruptive world.

People (HR) teams have especially been stretched as they had to support leaders to find virtual ways of working almost overnight. The luxury of having a team together disappeared, the topic of trust surfaced and many conversations about measuring performance were topical. The best leaders continue to put their teams' wellbeing in the centre focus and use technology to connect, communicate and support teams.

So, what is critical to consider as leaders embark on 2021? The following four principles will enhance your adaptive leader qualities:

1. Bias. Bias. bias.

Are you aware of your mental models and how this impacts your leadership style? Mental models refer to the deeply ingrained assumptions, beliefs, and stories we hold about ourselves and the world. Humans develop an automatic tool to navigate a complex world. A bias is such a mental shortcut. When there is an overload of information, our brains

take a shortcut to act fast. Without realising it, our biases can steer us to act and behave in ways that can be seriously flawed.

An easy way to sidestep your biases is to consider what is really going on in this moment. For example, if you are in a brainstorming session and you tend to like or dislike a suggestion from one of the team members, ask yourself: "If this suggestion was made by someone else, would I also like or dislike the idea as much as I do?"

2. Self-leadership - a critical shift from survival to thriving mode

Self-leadership goes hand-in-hand with being aware and understanding that there should be a balance between stress (energy expenditure) and recovery (energy renewal). Being in survival mode is a red flag for any individual and chronic stress will lead to burn-out. Think of an athlete who has a rest and recovery time during "off season". We need to create positive habits and boundaries to sustain recovery periods throughout the year.

By now, leaders recognise that building resilience and maintaining high performance have shared behavioural drivers. They further appreciate that each team member is unique and therefore requires something different and specific to remain resilient and high performing. Research done by Neurozone found that "negative thought patterns" and "destructive habit avoidance" are two behaviours impacting your capacity to build and maintain resilience the most.

Adaptive leaders exhibit and teach new habit creation to support the shift from survival to thriving mode.

Self-leadership further encourages a continuous learning attitude and becoming a lifelong learner. Be curious in all situations. Consider introducing rituals where team members share learning on a regular basis as well as what they appreciate and are grateful for in that week.

You can maximize the potential of your team by modelling self-leadership. Adaptive leaders understand the importance to lead by example as your team is more likely to follow.

3. Now is the time for the invisible leader

The term 'invisible leadership' refers to the common purpose that inspires leaders and employees to act. Adaptive leaders recognise it is not only about having a common purpose, it is about what the common purpose does. It is about motivating employees to use their strengths and talents willingly. It cultivates a strong shared bond amongst the team and enables individuals to adopt "leadership and follower" roles interchangeably to work towards the same goal.

In 2021, be intentional about using 'cues' during each stage of the employee experience to reinforce the common purpose message by increasing their sense of belonging.

A reminder: People crave connection; the neuroscientist provides insight into this. For the brain to survive, we need

each other. Our sense of belonging, identity and meaningfulness is impacted by our interactions with others. Leaders need to be deliberate about creating an environment where social and psychological safety is noticeable.

Social safety refers to the sense of belonging to a group. This feeling that you belong at work and your work has a meaningful contribution is an essential part of brain performance. Psychological safety is about creating the environment where people feel seen, heard, respected and safe to candidly share their opinions, observations, and contributions. Healthy relationships help to develop the “trust hormone” oxytocin.

Utilize the common purpose as a foundation for a new way of connecting with yourself, teams and with the organisation.

4. Boundary spanning to enhance collaboration and accelerate innovation

This new world of work requires us to do more experimentation to see what is working best and find the suitable solutions. It's also about consciously creating a plan, try it out, observe, learn, modify the plan and repeat the process.

Boundary spanning can impact this cycle constructively as it is about connecting with people (outside your immediate network) to collaborate. It encourages co-creation, accelerates innovation and breeds new ideas and solutions by connecting the dots not done before.

This refers to cross-functional collaboration within organisations, but also collaboration across other boundaries. For example, across geographies or regions, across cultures, generations or even industries. Often leaders feel tempted to come up with solutions and they are blind to the option of co-creating and involving others to innovate and find solutions.

Be intentional and consider where “boundary spanning” can benefit you in 2021. Be the person to first share information openly and responsibly. Offer reliable support and take steps to build partnerships. You will be surprised by the perspectives you might have overlooked. Encourage your team to do the same, particularly, with challenges that they have been experiencing for some time. Spanning boundaries ensures a diverse set of opinions and feedback.

If there is one big thing that 2020 has taught us, is that we are busy writing the manual for 2021 and beyond. No one has a magic ball to see the curve balls we will face in 2021.

What we do know is that the world is getting more complex and leaders can only lead and transform teams to the extent they are willing to be a role model and transform themselves.

Therefore, your call to action is to take a moment to reflect on what has sustained your business over the past year. What courageous steps have you taken? Answer these questions from a business and personal perspective. Take that insight, combine it with one or more of the above-mentioned principles. This will lead you to become the adaptive leader who creates an environment where your team can perform, grow and become adaptive to succeed in an ever-changing, disruptive and complex world.

ABOUT ANJA VAN BEEK

Anja van Beek is an independent leadership consultant, talent strategist and coach.

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