

# The Anatomy of Rebuilding & Recovery

A CEO LOUNGE INITIATIVE

## Follow the Leader

Leadership in a laissez-faire

*In conversation with*



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# Follow the Leader



***The pandemic it seems has changed leadership and how it operates forever. Running an organisation in these times required shifts in leadership behaviours and mindsets never anticipated before. Keeping up with business uncertainty, digitalisation roadmaps, remote and hybrid working, employee engagement, and social/governance responsibilities, has been a tight rope walk. With decision-making criteria panning critical strategic thinking, genuine empathy, and greater trust, leadership appears to be evolving for the better. CEO Lounge brings together thought leaders who contemplate the changing state of leadership and social contracts.***

Words by **Divya Sista**

**C**risis has always been a test of leadership and a time for new leaders to emerge. Considering the pandemic has given leadership its largest test window, the arrival of innovation in expression and execution has disrupted traditional leadership approaches to stay anchored. The converse is also true. With uncertainty looming large, leadership may also indulge in behaviour that tends to downplay crises, adapting a wait-and-watch approach. As each crisis warrants, moulds and sets the tone for irreversible leadership traits, the pandemic bred a crop of heroes who thrived. Stepping up, helping the organisation adapt to abrasive circumstances, and connecting with resources regardless of seniority and experience to enable dynamic problem-solving have been a few emergent trends.

## DEALER OF HOPE — WITH A TRICKY HAND

The last 26 months have been tumultuous — from educational institutions to offices, and media and entertainment to healthcare — we have witnessed a simultaneous multi-dimensional shift. Accelerated digitisation, new virtualisation ventures, and innovation that made everyone question ‘why not online’ have taken form. A large part of this change has been driven by circumstances surrounding the pandemic, a phenomenon that has proven to be perpetual and all pervasive. That said, it is the stakeholders that have facilitated the change, ensuring that the show continues despite hiccups and hurdles.

“Leadership in itself has undergone social change. Leaders today are evaluating the social construct more than ever. There is a fundamental shift in the social contract. It has been brought to the fore by the pandemic but was building up due to advancements in network technology, the rise of the knowledge economy and technology-driven inclusivity. The leader is no longer one who knows the way and shows the way, but is someone who can take everyone along,” points out Unmesh Pawar, global HR executive, investor,

mentor & former CHRO, KPMG India.

These shifts are dynamic, and like the virus itself, both evolutionary and mutant. Common future forecasts and change management models, based on the best predictive analytic techniques, are built for accepted conditions but not black swan events like the pandemic. However, can we play catch up with the circumstances and outrun it to be phoenixes?

“Any recession or downturn is a great opportunity for change. It presents an opportunity to observe and perform actions outside the box. The demographic of workforce in India has been changing over the past decade, ushering in socio-economic reconditioning. The employment contract is no longer restricted to pay compensation. There is a sense of equal partnership. The workforce has no qualms in asking questions like, what can the organisation do for my wellbeing? What are the perquisites I can look forward to apart from a hefty bonus? Will my work-life balance truly be taken into account? (These are) questions once unthinkable and brazen. Employees are more socially aware and participatory. It is a two-way process. We also see younger employees proactively asking if they are delivering up to the mark, if they



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**Animesh Kumar**  
President - HR & Transformation,  
Zee Entertainment

need to acquire other skills, whether they can contribute to the organisational CSR — all step-ups from their end of the social contract,” observes Rajesh Gupta, Director & Country Manager - India (Sales), Micron Technology.

As a species, we have evolved paradoxically. On one hand, we are curious and seek adrenaline, while on the other, we resist change — what is popularly referred to as the ‘fight, flight, or freeze’ approach. Research tells us that this three-channel system helps us cope with change — where new perspectives, collaborative approaches, adaptability, and innovation emerge<sup>1</sup>.

“We have a digital pivot happening in the media industry. We have witnessed digital formats gallop and take charge during the pandemic. What used to be a television in a home is today a personalised, multi device-based content flow. Change has occurred in every generation, but the acceleration is at full throttle now. Back in our days, the general idea was that you slog, suffer and work for a better tomorrow. That was the accepted norm everywhere — in education, at the workplace, and in relationships. But that is being challenged and is changing. People want the best of both worlds — they do not hesitate in saying they want every single

day and each moment of theirs to be thoughtful, meaningful and better than the last one. The need to be connected to something meaningful is getting stronger by the day. The employee refuses to put up with a sub-optimal work experience. The whole relationship between the employee and the employer has changed from something that was transactional in nature to a productive, narrative-driven approach,” explains Animesh Kumar, President - HR & Transformation, Zee Entertainment.

## HITTING THE JACKPOT IN A RUSSIAN ROULETTE

Historically, discussions around the idea of social contracts come to the fore during times of uncertainty and upheaval. At the fundamental level, a social contract is the intangible relationship between an institution and an individual. As changes fuelled by technology and globalisation heighten, we have also observed polarisation in terms of skills, views and incomes alike — drivers that have affected and influenced the social contract.

“This has been a time when a lot of myths have been shattered. You don’t have to travel to get contracts signed, you don’t have to come from a metropolitan city to excel, you don’t have to speak

impeccable English to be revered. This is also the time when we saw the largest number of IPOs floated, and connected in the absence of townhalls and travel. We had fundraising, credit rating upgrades, investments — the academic value of being in office working together has shattered in a way. It all came down to the culture of the space. There was a lot of value-driven activity, which was most of the time even unplanned. This put into focus something important — historically, leadership was all about finding the right person to do the right job, at the right time. Today it is more an interactive, continuous mentoring activity. It is about how well we can pass on the organisation’s culture, make the employee feel a part of the institution and help him contribute,” informs Vivek Wadhera, Group CFO & Head - Lending Business, Orix India.

It is the nature of change to be followed by vulnerability and indecision. But a ‘transformed’ change driven by the pandemic has seen collaboration, agility and resilience in organisations thanks to technology and leadership. As organisations embraced novel structures of workforces driven by shared purposes and distributed knowledge, the idea of looking at the leader as a saviour too

faded. That said, it has been stressful to be in a position of power during these tough times.

“The hinge layer which is essentially the leadership and early managers have experienced maximum stress. They have also adapted the most to embrace this environment. The last two years have taught us more than everything we have learnt so far from record time MVPs (minimum viable products) to new ways of working without compromising on security and productivity. What is interesting is the pandemic will not be the end of this instability. We are entering a world that will be constantly rattled by factors like climate change, geo-politics, social issues and economic crisis — all crucial to an organisation’s smooth functioning. We need to embrace this and build the next crop of business leaders who can be ready for this new world,” says Pawar.

We live in a VUCA world today. It may sound like another fancy managerial acronym, but it cannot be farther from the truth. Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity are, in a way, the side effects of a globalised and hyper-connected world.

“It (VUCA) has a definite implication on established norms of leadership.



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We are an outcome of social and conversational environment. We joined the organisation with a mindset that my job is to struggle, hustle and make it to the top over time. Future leaders are changing. They prefer a partnership approach over conventional leadership approaches. The structures of power are more distributed. Another important aspect is the growing relevance of EQ (emotional quotient). Emotional engagement, though a part of our vocabulary for a long time, was not really put into practice. But in this new partnership model, it plays a vital role since we suddenly have shared goals, ideas and exchanges," points out Gupta.

It is widely accepted that leadership is not a position but a behaviour. Traditional models of leadership have leaned towards imbibing a 'keep moving' approach. From business continuity plans, budget planning, marketing forecasts and broadcast communication, the focus is on sustenance and then growth.

"Interestingly, though the first instinct was that of survival during the pandemic, look at how entire business models have changed. For instance, online and last

mile deliveries have upended the entire distributor network system in FMCG. We have to think exponentially today. The good news is that data helps greatly in envisioning things. We even have a global common today, and not just a narrow view of what the company can do based on these shifts. We are looking at reinventing collaboration and excellence in execution. And most importantly, we are looking at leaders who are not relying exclusively on experience to make decisions; because they know what has happened in the past maybe has little use for what will happen in the future," analyses Kumar.

### **SOLITAIRE TO BRIDGE — PARTNERSHIP TRIUMPHS**

Technology has shaped new business models and workspaces as much as contemporary events have. From actionable data points, to bite-sized knowledge nuggets that can be accessed anytime, anywhere, it has changed how the organisation evaluates actions, takes initiatives, and engages with the employee.

"We are all grappling with many challenges all at once. But it is when we are going through a crisis, it is also the

time when we can build back better,” asserts Wadhwa.

Recalling the sub-prime crisis of 2008, he interprets, “The sub-prime crisis was an event that suddenly turned sales-oriented banking and finance organisations into conservative institutions built on compliance. We have to train our leaders not to just face change, but also be okay with continuous change. The culture needs to be a very transparent, in your face one, because as we increasingly move into hybrid models of work, we must remember that hybrid work is a combination of culture and discipline — and distributed ownership is proven to be better at inculcating discipline.”

A constant theme that dominates conversations when it comes to leadership and management is employee engagement, empowerment, motivating stronger relationships and enabling open dialogue. We assume the leader has hard wired traits to steer the organisation. However, leaders are rallying on their own learning curves as well.

“In hindsight, crises always help us crystallise learnings. You need to step back, re-evaluate, rethink and

rearticulate if you need to acquire new skills. We also need leaders to understand that the world is a large interconnected complex ecosystem. We need to make sense of it without struggle. Consider emerging technology. A leader cannot learn and be the expert, but he/she needs to make sense of it. Multidisciplinary understanding is critical for the future of leaders,” suggests Kumar.

Using a crisis as an opportunity is a great idea to build momentum. But what is more important is to sustain the pace and keep the growth. That requires looking at the crisis as a catalyst of change and not as the primary driver.

“From a senior leadership perspective, the idea is to bring a visible change and build touch points. The toolkit has to be refurbished since the environment is going to be dynamic. The longevity of your experience has very little meaning now. That and the fact that it is ok to be vulnerable as a leader. That, combined with empathy, creates a stronger shared value — it is not a trainable skill but only people who are secure can build, lead and provide answers,” surmises Gupta.



## TAKEAWAYS

- 1 **Reimagine your organisation's place in the world.**
- 2 **Embrace and build a value chain-based ecosystem.**
- 3 **Understand how distributed leadership and ownership will fit into your organisation.**
- 4 **Reinvent the social contract through fluid communication and open dialogue.**



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S209624871930013X#bib28>

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