



LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

The employee perspective



RESEARCH INSIGHT



Leading through the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a profoundly challenging experience for everyone, as countries, organizations, and individuals have had to respond to an uncertain, complex, and fast-moving crisis. While everyone has been trying to sail through the storm of the pandemic, people have been on different boats, with varied impact and experiences on their work and personal circumstances.

For employees, the experience of Covid-19 was very varied – frontline workers stayed in the workplace and faced the very real threat of Covid-19, while other workers had to adapt rapidly to home working. We all had different personal situations and challenges to manage, all at a time when things were very unclear, endlessly changing and simply confusing. In these challenging times, employees looked to their leaders to provide hope, support, and direction; yet no-one had all the answers. It required leaders and managers to learn on the fly, navigate through stormy waters, and adjust course through the ebbs and flows of the crisis. In many ways, amongst all the pain, sadness, and anxiety that the pandemic has brought, Covid-19 has provided a very powerful experiential leadership development opportunity.

RESEARCH INSIGHT by



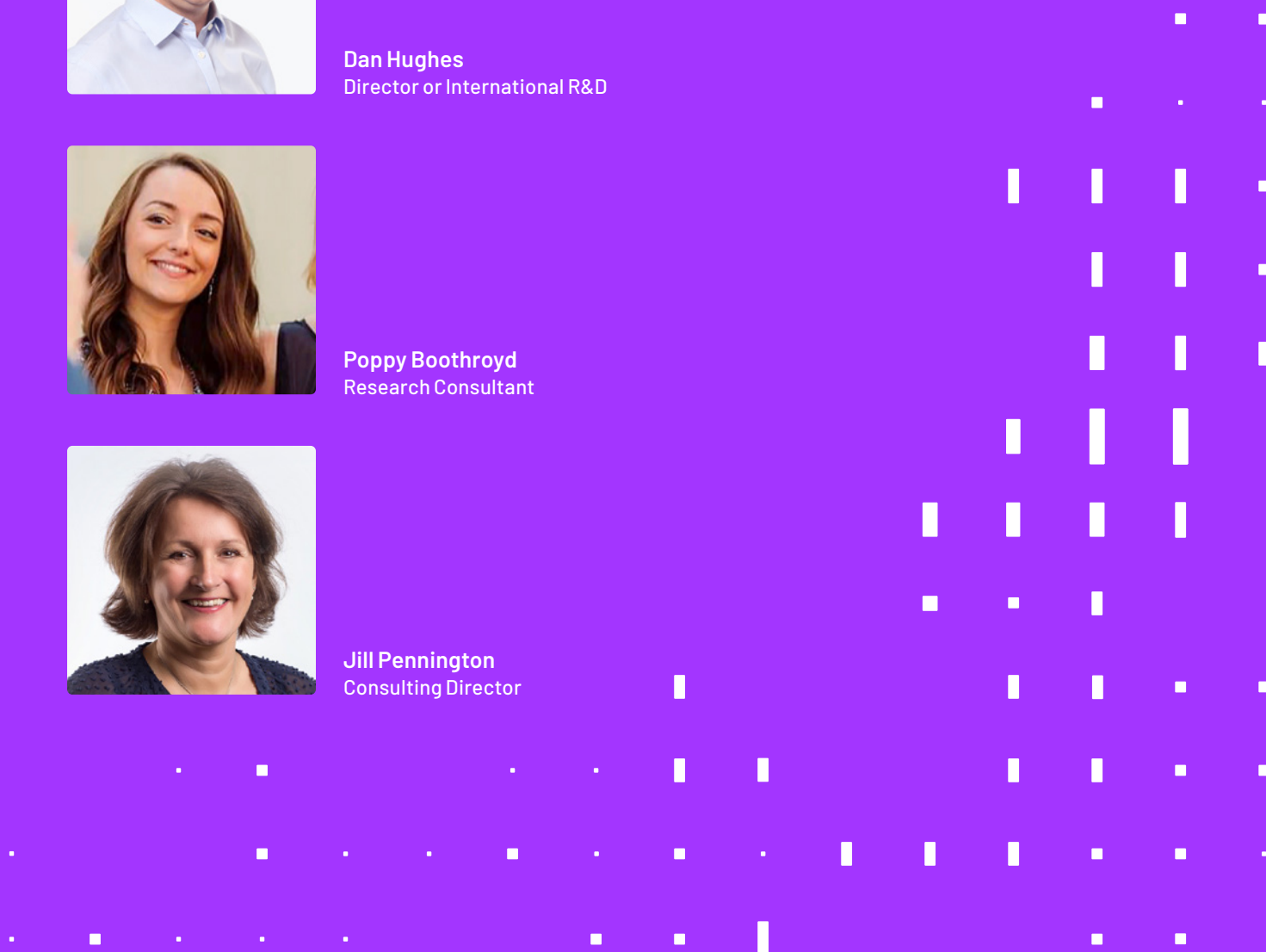
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Exploring the **employee perspective**

We wanted to understand what the employee perspective was on leadership in the pandemic, and what lessons could be learned. Recently, we conducted an international research project to explore views about leadership now and in the future. As part of this we surveyed a diverse sample of 1077 employees, drawn from 21 different countries and a wide range of organization sectors and sizes. Among other questions, we asked employees three questions about their experiences of leadership in the pandemic:

1 **How effective was your manager in dealing with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic?**

2 **What is one thing your manager did best when responding to the pandemic?**

3 **What is one thing your manager could have improved on when responding to the pandemic?**

These responses help us understand the employee experience of leadership in the pandemic and provide valuable insight into potential lessons that can be learned. What are the employee observations and feedback from the biggest global real-time leadership challenge for generations?

1077
Employees

21
Countries



1 How did employees feel their leaders performed?

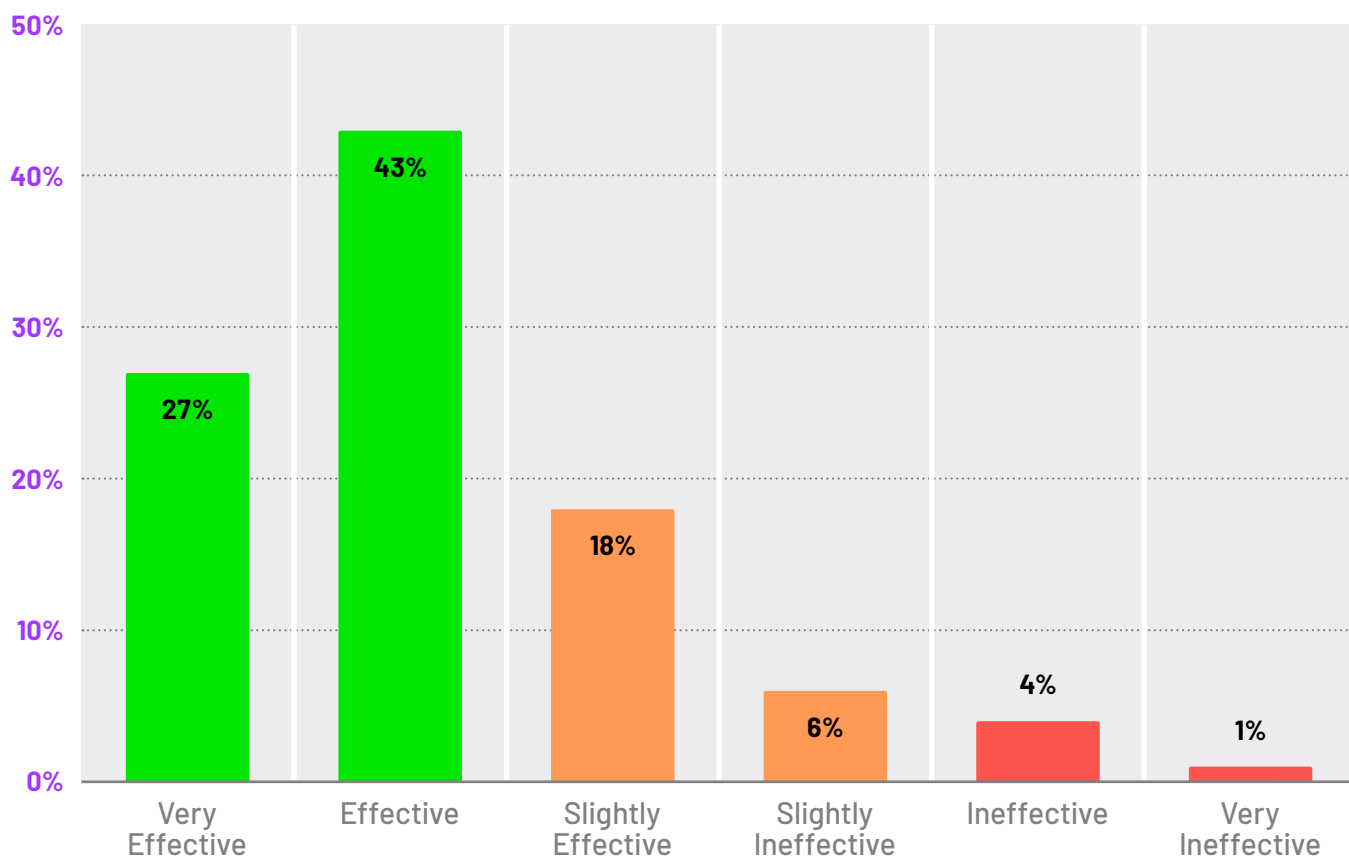


FIGURE 1:
How effective was your manager in dealing with the pandemic?

It is very positive to note that 70% of employees felt that their manager had led effectively or very effectively in the pandemic. Given the extraordinary situation, the ambiguity and the pressure leaders were under, these results show that many managers rose to the challenge. It is also likely that these perceptions reflect that employees largely recognized the extreme and uncertain circumstances that their managers were dealing with.

Of those remaining, 18% were rated as slightly effective, suggesting some room for improvement, and 11% were rated by employees as being ineffective to some extent, indicating a clear need for development.

So, what are the specific strengths that leaders can recognize and build on, and what did they need to do better? We asked employees to indicate in their own words the one thing their manager did best and in addition the biggest thing they could have improved. Using this data, we conducted a thematic analysis to code their responses and identify the most frequently cited strengths and areas for development.

2 What did leaders do best when responding to the pandemic?

Top three strengths demonstrated by leaders (in rank order):

1. Prioritizing employee health and safety

■
"Prioritized everyone's health and safety first."

■
"My manager instantly implemented Covid-19-safe measures to protect both employees and customers."

■
"Immediately pushed for PPE from the company, and went out and personally bought a thermometer to check all colleagues and customers' temperature on entering the building."

■
"Made sure the staff felt safe."

■
"Made it clear that we don't need to report to work or put ourselves at risk early on."

2. Embracing remote/hybrid working

■
"We were immediately transferred to remote work only and personally made sure everyone had a workable space and adjusted needs for everyone."

■
"Was flexible with remote work and the challenges that came along with that."

■
"Supported everyone who was working from home."

■
"Allowed workers to work from home and gave them complete flexibility in order to get their jobs done."

■
"Organized work from home arrangements within the space of one week despite being essential workers and therefore legally allowed to go to work."

3. Showing empathy and compassion

■
"Demonstrated empathy for the challenges the pandemic presented me both personally and professionally."

■
"Showed compassion to the difficulties of the situation."

■
"Allowed us to be humans with feelings who needed to adjust to new normal."

■
"Caring about all team members' individual circumstances."

■
"She was very empathetic with all of us. She even made once a week a call just to know how we were doing, our families and friends of work."

Better leaders in the pandemic stood out because they put their employees first ahead of other concerns and showed they genuinely cared about their team. They worked hard to ensure employees felt they could work safely in the circumstances and put the measures in place to do so.

Effective leaders also embraced remote working quickly – organizing what was necessary to set this up and allowing the flexibility employees needed to achieve their goals according to their individual circumstances (e.g., balancing work with home-schooling). Finally, they provided employees with the emotional support that they needed, recognizing how people might be feeling and showing care and compassion towards each individual team member.

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I have to be honest and say that this is one area that my boss has done everything perfectly. He has followed all government advice regarding social-distancing measures and other pandemic-related, workplace-health guidelines 100% perfectly, by making sure our work environment is as safe and hygienic as possible to work in for those employees who have chosen to stay working in the office. And, for those of us who have chosen to work from home, he has given us complete flexibility to perform our jobs. So, this has actually been actually one area where my boss has over-performed and excelled in his leadership role. He was as concerned about the pandemic as everyone else, but he kicked into gear really quickly - he was decisive and proactive in responding to the pandemic.

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3 What could leaders have improved on when responding to the pandemic?

Top three development areas for leaders (in rank order):

1. Better communication

■
"We needed more communication."

■
"Better communication with the team regarding the overall business plan of action re: Covid-19 and the expectations for employees."

■
"Give more frequent updates vs. employees needing to ask."

■
"My manager struggled to communicate to all team members and could've improved on updating all of us effectively."

■
"Communication sharply fell off after the first month of the pandemic, and I didn't hear anything for the next three months about returning."

2. Caring more for employee health and safety

■
"Too slow putting safety practices into action."

■
"Caring a little more for people's personal safety and their expectations."

■
"Not taking into account employees' safety in some situations."

■
"We weren't expected to wear masks and/or hold our distance and only me and two other colleagues followed the rules as best as we could."

■
"Our delivery personnel had high risk contacts with patients. They were scared at the start of the pandemic, but no further actions were taken to lighten the risk they had."

3. Staying more connected with employees

■
"There could have been more check ins, could be quite lonely."

■
"Could have checked up on me more and put more interest in my work."

■
"Made greater effort to keep me and the team connected with the larger organization."

■
"Being more active in building relationships and team spirit when working remotely."

■
"Checking in with employees, taking the time to ask how people are doing, if everything feels okay at work, and if they need anything else."

When looking at what leaders could have done better, communication stood out as the biggest issue for employees by far. Employees generally wanted more regular communication with their managers and better clarity about what was happening in terms of their organization's response to Covid-19. This is an unsurprising and natural reaction from employees in an uncertain and rapidly changing situation – our natural need for certainty goes into overdrive when we are anxious and concerned, so the need for leaders to communicate and share information was key.

In contrast to those managers who led their teams well, less effective managers showed insufficient care for their employees' health and safety. They did not make this a priority or appreciate employees' concerns, and, in some cases, they just left employees trying to apply rules as best they could without adequate managerial support. Furthermore, some employees reported that their manager did not check in often enough or work proactively to keep individuals and teams connected to what was happening in the wider organization.

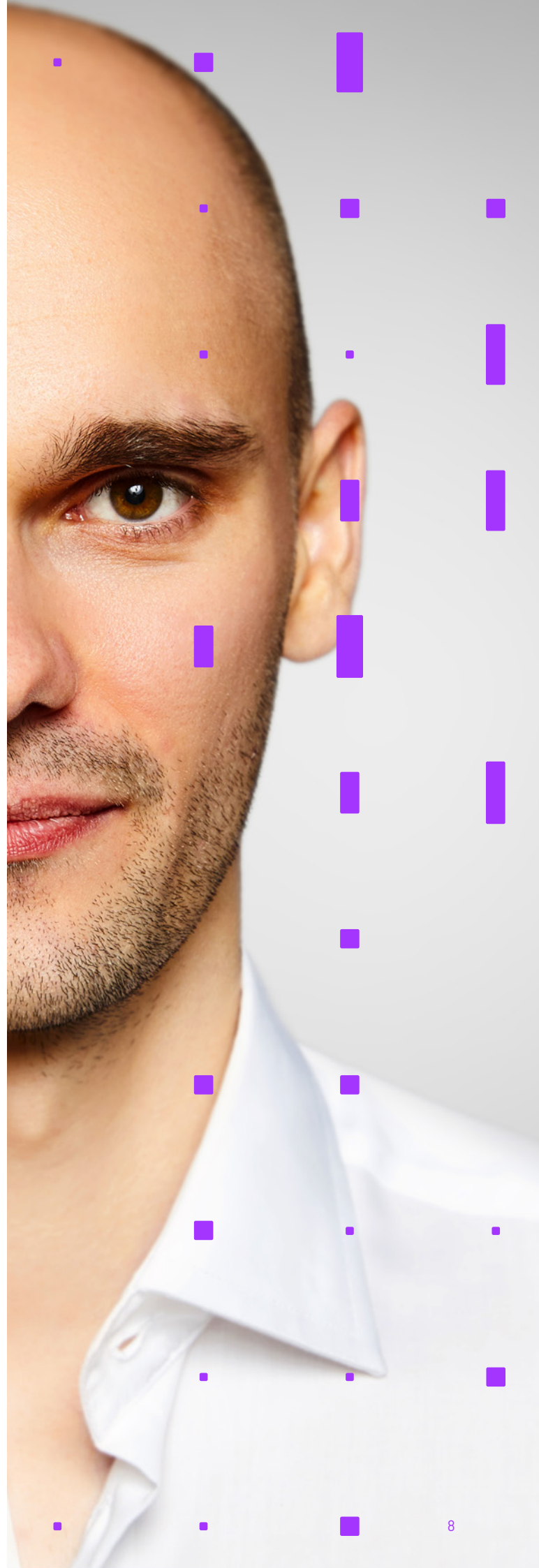
Time to reflect

Leadership came firmly under the microscope in the pandemic. Our research has highlighted some of the most prominent, broad themes about how employees experienced their leaders during this time. As we start to emerge from the crisis, there is now a chance for leaders to take stock and reflect on lessons learned. This is an opportunity which should not be missed.

All leaders, regardless of how effective they thought they were, should endeavour to take some learnings from the experience, consider what they did well, and identify what they could have improved. Asking team members for open and honest feedback will also be valuable. Drawing on the key themes from our research, we recommend leaders consider these questions:

- 1 Did I demonstrate to my team that their health and safety was my top priority?
- 2 Did I truly embrace the idea of remote/hybrid working (if it was relevant for your area of work) and trust my team members to manage their time flexibly?
- 3 Did I show my team that I cared about them as individuals and understand their concerns, feelings, and personal situations?
- 4 Did I communicate with team-members often enough and share updates promptly to alleviate ambiguity and uncertainty where I could?
- 5 Did I check in often enough with individual team members and proactively ensure people stayed connected to what was happening in the wider organization?

After reflecting on these questions, leaders should identify the key areas they would like to improve and commit to specific actions that they will take to address them. It takes time and repeated practice to build new positive habits, so it is often best to concentrate on one action at a time and focus on doing this daily over several weeks, until it becomes automatic.



Changing perspectives on leadership

As we analyze the wider research data we have gathered, the emerging picture is a changing perspective on leadership – one that emphasizes the importance of employees' perspective and expectations much more than before. During the pandemic, leaders needed to show more empathy and connect with their teams on a more personal level, and employees want to see this continue beyond the crisis. This is in line with our other research which shows that the emotional intelligence of leaders is associated with a more positive work climate and higher levels of employee job satisfaction.

Look out for our full Research Report, which focuses on leadership for now and the future, with detailed insights into:

- Leaders' own views on their performance in the pandemic
- The impact of leadership on organizational performance
- How leaders influence the employee experience
- Leadership challenges for the next 5 years
- Key leadership attributes for now and the future

