

The Big Picture

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As we begin to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, how will our world be different? In a look at The Big Picture, faculty from the Huntsman School provide their thoughts on leadership, learning and teaching, finance, and energy.

Leadership in a Post Pandemic World

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“The future is already here—it is just not very evenly distributed.” I love this quote. The workforce of the future is already here. What American speculative fiction author William Gibson is alluding to is the fact that what will constitute “normal” in the lives of those living in the future already exists for some of us today.

If you had asked every Fortune 500 CEO and their staffs even a month before the pandemic whether they could imagine having even 15% of their workforce working remotely every day within the next two to three years, those answering yes would have been in the low single digits. Yet these same companies had 50% to 75% to even 100% of their workforces working remotely for the past year.

Almost overnight companies were forced to break with old paradigms, thinking and assumptions. They had no choice but to quickly adapt to this emerging new normal. They were, in effect, forced to trust their employees. Not just those at the top, but their entire workforce. The old belief systems of leaders were also challenged and eroded almost overnight. Time spent physically at work, for example, with all its attendant biases about performance and potential equaling time at work, faded quickly. Most leaders would never publicly admit that this was a conscious factor in their assessment of employees.

Many leaders had to reflect upon whether or not they were “trustworthy,” as the late Dr. Stephen R. Covey defined it. It was likely uncomfortable for more than a few leaders to trust that their employees would actually carry on working from their bedrooms and kitchens—which they did quite well, in fact, and at even higher levels of productivity. All this occurred without their leader’s physical oversight. And what might this have done to the leader’s ego and leadership style? Change can be hard, even for the boss. Like the consumer world, leaders will need to “personalize” and tailor their leadership to individual employees to successfully lead in a post-pandemic world.



Steve Milovich enjoyed a long career in human resources, culminating in his service as the Senior Vice President, Global Human Resources, Talent and Workforce Diversity for Disney | ABC Television. He also serves on the Huntsman School National Advisory Board.

Here are my Top Five of the many key learnings and implications for leaders as part of their workforce of the future planning and development. Leaders must now:

1

Lead in Multiple Worlds and Dimensions

Become proficient in leading their entire organizations in the virtual, the physical, and the augmented worlds. All three are now mandatory. How you show up, how you behave, all your non-verbal cues and tells are amplified positively and negatively. Be present. Be aware of your potential impact as you engage employees in these dimensions.

2

Leverage Technology to Amplify and Augment Human Capabilities

Amplify and augment individual workforce and team capabilities, creating “workforce superheroes” underpinned by various technology platforms, including artificial intelligence and machine learning. The idea here is to supplement rather than supplant human capability.

3

Impact and Influence a Diverse Workforce at all Levels

Influence and gain the trust of an increasingly diverse workforce. Creating inclusive workplaces, in the broadest sense, will become a differentiator for who ultimately succeeds as a leader and as an organization. A leader must treat employees the way employees want to be treated, not how the leader would want to be treated. This goes somewhat against what your parents and teachers may have told you.

4

Incorporate a Default Strategy of Leading Centered On Empathy and Storytelling

The pandemic put a spotlight on leaders and companies who successfully led with empathy and who engaged their employees with storytelling, not primarily with data and numbers. As humans, we are still moved to action in much the same way as our earliest ancestors: through empathy and storytelling.

5

Recognize and Employ the “And” Strategy

Recognize and employ an “and” approach and strategy to workforce of the future opportunities and challenges. For example, it is not just about remote work vs. onsite work; it is about remote work and onsite work. Leaders need to shift to an optimization model that factors in the competitive advantages of appropriately weighting the voice of employees, and not by default overemphasizing the voice of the CEO or a small cadre of senior leaders. Those who get this right will win. Period.

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