

Post-Covid World: Acid Test Of True Leadership

Like

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The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about defining changes in our society and the economy. The challenges it threw up, and the unending saga of how to ensure continuity and solve emerging problems have occupied the minds of most leaders. All, however, agree that this development has once again reinforced the value of continuous learning even at the highest levels – on how to be prepared for the unforeseen and manage it with hands tied. Young leaders who are at the beginning of their management careers would do well by incorporating some of these learnings into the core fabric of their thinking and decision-making process. While the list is long, I would like to touch upon five key takeaways. First, reality as we know and understand can change without any advance notice. If the best of the medical science and knowledge in the first world could not anticipate and be prepared to deal with the deadly virus, it is best to realise that as humans we have limitations. In this context, a leader must always work with back-up plans for everything. As the pandemic unfolded, a key focus for large businesses was on continuity and sustenance of business activity. The ones who could respond with agility and spot emerging opportunities amidst the mayhem found themselves to be more resilient.

Adaptive change

As the world's largest democracy, India had unending screenplays of life incidents, offering rich learnings and experiences for the future. Whether it was the lockdowns or their defiance leading to the migrant labour issue, we had many challenges to deal with. Several agile and smart Indian corporates demonstrated their never-say-die spirit by using the one tool that Indians are famous for — adaptive change and innovation. This was visible from product innovation to innovation in production, distribution, communication, and other processes. Many companies launched new services and products right in the middle of the pandemic knowing well that contextual innovation is one of the most effective business tracks. For others there were numerous internal innovations that offered rich learnings.

Another aspect is the leadership lesson in agility. A look at the diverse rubric such as India's underscores the inevitability of the efficacy of strong leadership. Leaders move firmly and with speed. India has unique socio-cultural, politicoeconomic, and geo-developmental diverse structure which can be a strength rather than a challenge for innovationhungry business leaders. As the pandemic ravaged the nation, political as well as corporate and community leaders got a unique opportunity to demonstrate their mettle. Leaders who acted swiftly, minimised the damage from the crisis. Others paid the cost of intemperate decision making. The future undoubtedly belongs to the more decisive and agile among leaders, and not necessarily just the strong ones.

At Vedanta, we found that with many of our plants and assets in remote locations, we were relatively insulated from the centre of the outbreak but impacted badly by the supply chain disruptions. But we managed to keep our enormous plants running at full capacity, changed the product mix to suit changing customer needs and even captured new markets. We could do this because we could pivot very quickly and respond to changed global dynamics and emerging opportunities with agility.

The modern world draws its modernity and identity from the pervasive use of technology. It was technology which kept life going during distancing norms and restrictions on physical movement of human beings. Leaders who will embrace and adopt new technologies will be able to not just stay ahead but keep going when others can't. For example, at Vedanta Aluminium's Jharsuguda unit, we deployed the country's first digital smelter. It provides remote monitoring, controls potline operation, reduces raw material and arrests wastage of material through digital twin technology and remote advisory system. Along with this, various digital solutions have been applied to connect employees and plant sites for sustaining operations. Today, Vedanta is the most technologically advanced manufacturing organisation in the world, making metals and materials available for space exploration, aerospace, automotive, building and construction, energy security of the country, or even national defence.

Inclusive leaders

Last, but in practice, the foremost is the emotive side of leadership. The future would belong to inclusive leaders. Leaders who care for the environment, sustainability of the planet, country, society, and their businesses and follow the highest standards in governance and people practices would find themselves better covered for new risks. I am a believer that the 4Cs — Calmness, Collaboration, Cooperation, and Communication — offer a great format for managing crises, however large, by staying rooted, sharing the larger vision with empowered teams and keeping communication lines active. It is the team and people that run businesses. Compassion should not be confused with leniency, instead it is about putting more compassion into our roles. It is important that we remain empathetic towards the situation and understand that such crises always have a mental and psychological effect on people at some levels.

Leaders of the future need to be far superior in planning for the unforeseen. Not by falling upon examples of the past, but by mapping possible future scenarios and adequately preparing for them. In the post-Covid world, successful leaders would be the ones who are able to visualize, learn, act and respond at a virus like pace.

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