

The Way Ahead Series: Practical Advice for Leaders, by Leaders

Leaders Report: Our Way Ahead

Insights from leaders in our network on their 'Way Ahead', presented by our CEO Richard Moore



Mercuri Urval

It's All About People™

THANK YOU TO THE LEADERS THAT HELPED

In our 'Way Ahead' series of articles, Mercuri Urval's CEO Richard Moore, offers practical advice on important topics leaders face, through and beyond Covid-19. The series addresses essential questions Boards and CEOs face now; setting the best strategy for new conditions, improving organisational effectiveness through uncertainty and securing leaders that will succeed.

[Read them here.](#)

Each article encourages readers and leaders to contribute their advice. Inundated with their ideas, this additional article consolidates readers feedback so far – from all sectors and around the world, into six dominant themes:

- Customers and Clients
- Leadership
- Communication
- Change Management
- Organisational Set Up
- Culture and Teamwork

Who added their insight?

DAX 30, Fortune 500 and FTSE 100 leaders in Automotive, Pharmaceutical and Digital. HR Directors in International Public Sector. CEOs and MDs in small and mid-sized international firms in production, Energy, Technology, Legal and Distribution. Senior Consultants and Board Directors in Finance and Professional Services. Sales Director and Finance Directors in Construction and Engineering. Heads of Transformation and Change management in diverse Public Health and commercial organisations.

And a range of executives and specialists across multiple sectors in APAC, US and Europe.

All in all more than 40 leaders sent us their advice, over just a few weeks, thank you for helping.

Keep joining in, please

I also invite you to continue to **add to the advice we present, as contributors**. With your active involvement we leaders can share more practical advice that makes for stronger organisations in the future. Please join in and send us your stories and advice, so we may include it in this series.

Richard

marketingsupport.int@mercuriurval.com
#LeadersHelpingLeaders

or directly

richard.moore@mercuriurval.com
#LeadersHelpingLeaders

Leaders Report: Our Way Ahead

On Customers and Clients

“It is certain to say that the economy will be **different** after Corona. However, it is highly uncertain how different it will be.”

Lots of leaders wanted to describe the impact on their customers or stakeholders first, and the uncertainty they faced. Despite the challenges faced by many, hopes for regional or sectorial rebounds were high. At the same time other leaders' organisations are busier than ever. Whether thriving or suffering, leaders **report a clear need to make changes**.

“The market is very slow, but that's to expected. Hopefully the recovery will come through more quickly in Asia, and this is still very much the growth engine for most global organisations. We will come out of this and I'm certainly confident that in **the second half of the year will be very strong indeed, we need to plan for that.**”

“It is difficult, and it will continue to be but also it's an opportunity to take a look inside our business and align with market conditions predicted. We are seeing construction sites mobilising again under restrictions, offsite manufacturers continue to work on pipeline projects in their factories – all good indicators. The biggest unknown is where the investment will remain, drop off and re-appear and in which markets. **We have to be patient, keep our ear to the ground for opportunities and respond accordingly.**”

“I hope to see a partial recovery for the Q3 and Q4 [2020]. I'm investing my time **staying close to potential customers** and discussing with them about scenarios and challenges.”

“When the business ramps-up an immediate run for market share will happen, after the cards are reshuffled and given out. As always, **this run will be won by those that are best prepared and most consequent.**”

“We've had to furlough staff and wind up some of our operation. But despite this, with 20% of our normal sales, the leadership team and I are busy making plans to win the recovery. We're a small firm, third in our niche, I think if we get the right new sales leaders on board, we can become the number one. **We'll invest now in a new sales leader and in digital marketing and IT.**”



*Our supply chain is suffering – we simply can't fulfil the orders. We need to crisis manage supply now and **develop a new and more resilient supply chain** strategy, especially if our volumes continue to surge as I expect."*



*We had been working on a new strategy stripping everything back to roots, looking at our culture and what we stand for etc. before this all kicked off. **We need to urgently look at our people and the way they will or will not fit into our new look organisation.**"*

Reading leaders reflections and advice, in such different contexts, the most obvious learning was that no leader is standing still in this crisis. It's different from some leaders experience in the 2008-9 financial crisis when so many organisations froze and wanted not to act, this time – if the leaders who fed back are representative – **everyone will move, fuelled either by crisis or by opportunity.**

On Leadership



Let's be clear: a leader is not a magician. But they are devoted to their cause and must love their work and everything that is involved in it."

Unsurprisingly the '[Way Ahead](#)' articles created some introspection. Leaders focussed on the high demands on them and their teams, the need for energy and resilience, to be good at decision making, and clear and straightforward in communication. Leaders also felt the need to make time to get advice from others and to grow. Like in our Mercuri Urval 'Reaching Out'* programme, a number of leaders addressed the very high importance of informal contact and presence, even it has to be online for now. Although leaders reported **very different situations** the challenges in staying close with people were common and shared. And leaders were quite tough on themselves, they could readily see that they are failing in some areas. Perhaps that's why **securing new leaders and building new leader capabilities** were key topics that were repeatedly raised.



*I think it is especially important in times like these to make **timely, fact-based and courageous decisions** and to re-evaluate and execute speedily also coming out of the crisis."*

* We in Mercuri Urval are committed to helping people around us in our own small way. Introducing the '[Reaching Out](#)' programme, where all our colleagues set aside some extra time every day, to reach out and support others in our community.

“

Now you have to grow as a leader. My contribution based on practical experience and observations. I will try to summarise it in seven points, so that it is easier to memorise, but it has a common thread: **REALITY**:

1. Opening up and understanding reality
2. Talking to your team members with clear messages
3. Acting on inclusiveness, not just talking about it
4. Building a vision, represented with a coherent narrative
5. Having a Team that is not afraid and wants to win.”

“

We have all adopted a work buddy who is in a similar situation they meet regularly, online for a chat, just to help people through – providing **mutual coaching to help them transition**. I think Virtual Leadership is vital. For leaders to make a great impact in the modern world, they need to be awesome virtually!”

“

Not all leaders are in the same position. Some CEO's are seeing that their markets have disappeared, and their concerns are whether they can in fact make this month's payroll. Other organisations facing unprecedented demands on their resource to cope with high demand.”

“

It has become essential to start to draw up a new timeline from crisis to new normal. Thinking about how those new habits that have formed over a few weeks transition into the new future for an organisation. **The need to bring creative ideas to the fore is high, and so is the need to remove luxuries** and focus on key needs.”

“

1. **Look after your people today** as best you possibly can
2. **Ensure you don't miss opportunities** for great leadership and creativity – you are going to need it
3. **Start planning** and share the plans for a new normality.”

“

What is the key factor that makes us resilient and able to successfully navigate through these special times? To me it is emotional intelligence (EQ). No doubt that this is important in any situation, but it moves quickly into the centre when **handling complex challenges**.”

“

Leaders that are able to build and develop teams that combine the virtues of an ideal team player, being humble, smart and hungry. Leaders that assemble the ideal team members to generate and maintain an environment that is built on a culture that puts collaboration first.”

“Unfortunately, living in a fast world our focus is on the next couple of weeks, month or a quarter, to execute or deal with challenging situations and tasks. We sometimes appear to **forget to take back that step and put some spotlight on our culture**, the ingredients it needs to harvest it, to keep the right talent and promote the right leaders that have the virtues needed.”

“We'll need some new leaders now in this crisis in Supply Chain, and for the next phase we'll need leaders that can **grow revenues and engage** people better.”

Whatever their context, all the leaders who reacted clearly had a lot to do. In [‘The Way Ahead’](#) series third article I wrote about ‘How to Secure Leaders That Will Succeed’.

We said demands have gone up, the leaders who fed back to us seemed to agree. As demand has gone up, and supply has not, Leaders who **know what they are doing and who can take care of their people and achieve results are essential**.

On Communication

“Decisiveness, simple messaging and enabling / persuading people to change for the common good.”

Communication through this crisis is obviously vital and difficult for leaders, with huge challenges about what to say, how to say it and when to say it. To lead change, you have to communicate effectively, they all commented. And on top of the stress, uncertainty and fear, restrictions created by physical distance – the means of communication being new for many – was a problem. And if that was not enough, many leaders report extra challenges with certain important stakeholders:

“The focus has to be on managing the crisis which will still have many stages – business continuity and supporting people in our organisations. **Communications is essential** as in many cases the formal communications channels will be the only way in which people will actually know what is happening as the informal communications network will not be functioning in the way it had before the crisis.”

“How comfortable are people when online rather than at in person meetings? Whilst some are comfortable with technology, **others have felt unsure** as to whether to switch on the video capability of their machines and let people into what has previously felt like their private home world.”

“

*It will never be the same again – the future will indeed be very different. Very shortly the focus should be on **how we get people thinking about a return to a new normal**. When is the time to start talking about it and showing that leaders are thinking and planning for it?”*

“

*We are an LLP [Partnership] and **communicating with our partners is extremely difficult**. We have realised that giving more information also creates some confusion. Aside our Corporate Finance lawyers, even highly experienced Partners don't know what the effect of the figures we show them is – on the company now, in the future or on them personally. In this crisis communication to Partners is extraordinarily difficult.”*

“

*Non-executive directors are understandably anxious and can feel disconnected, I've had to add to my role [CEO] **much more frequent contact with the board**, to explain what we are doing and why, and putting them in position to really help us as an Exec. We all know that Boards need expertise, but now they also need to lean in.”*

“

*Our banks are concerned, on one hand inundated, on other hand unsure of the government support. There is so much uncertainty that **a close conversation with investors and banks is vital**.”*

One thing that all leaders seem to share was a **complete lack of time** – so many important people to communicate with, and such a high expectation on timeliness, quality, details and empathy. Leaders **ability to adapt and prioritise** correctly so they have the biggest possible impact on decisions and influence on followers, seems vital.

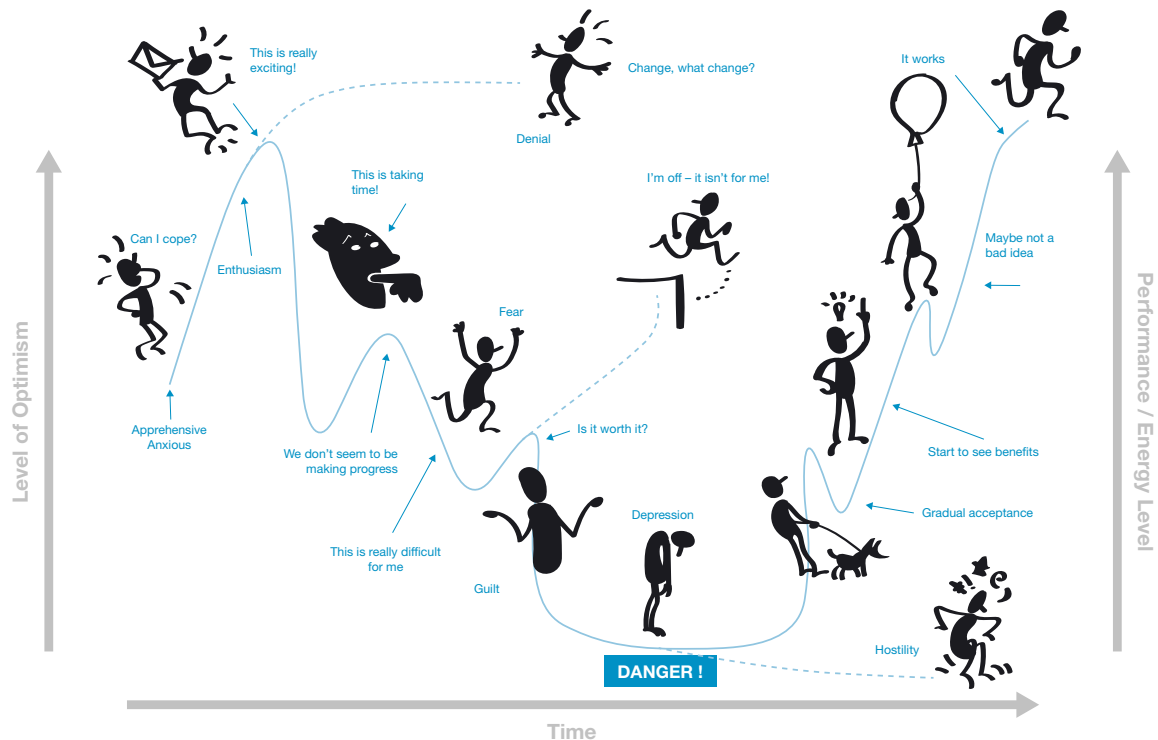
On Change Management

“

*There is a topic that I'm discussing with lot in these days and weeks:
the crisis as change's accelerator.”*

Another topic that typically came up in leaders responses to the [‘Way Ahead’](#) series was about change management. A number of leaders (1 in 5 to be precise) specifically mentioned the ‘change curve’ based on [Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's](#) research – or some version of it. If you are not familiar with her work, the diagram on the next page gives a simplified overview of how it can be applied in understanding change:

The Process of Transition



Dr Kübler-Ross found that all of us in change go through several stages – not always in a linear and predictable progression: 1. Shock and denial. 2. Anger, bargaining and fear. 3. Depression. 4. Acceptance.

Her work, or at least the ideas that have come from it since, was often described as a ‘must read’ for any leader managing change. It also helps anyone going through change to understand themselves and their own reactions. The reactions shown on the curve are normal and **friends, colleagues and leaders can really help people through them** and stop them getting stuck in a stage.

In a major crisis like this, several leaders pointed out that people may travel multiple ‘change curves’ at once and every colleagues experience is different. Two key questions were raised. **If you put yourself on this curve, where would you be? What would help you move along?**

“

*Some employees have been furloughed, maintaining a level of pay without actually having to work. Each of these groups are having a very different experience and may **need varying levels of support both now and in the future** when they return to a new normality – which potentially will be on a phased basis.”*

“

*Some colleagues are showing resentment of how the crisis is impacting them compared to others, feelings of isolation being overwhelmed by the need to work, care for others and home school all at the same time in some cases clear evidence of depression can be seen. This is so difficult for them and can create sadness for others, with **blame turning on leaders or colleagues.**”*



*A major risk is a negative spirit caused by people understandably struggling with change, they **need more help** from family, friends, work managers and colleagues than they get."*



*Change often in this moment means adaptation. In my opinion, one of the challenges for leaders in the next months will be to **consolidate the positive aspects of this change** as people adapt and to make it become part of new culture even when the situation will be back to the normality."*

The leaders were all very concerned for people, and for the potential damaging effect of negative change emotions on individuals and on their team's cohesion. Leaders and teams are experiencing change in all kinds of ways, and **that how to help people through this change to a successful adaptation, weighs heavy on leaders' minds.**

On Organisational Set Up



Staying flexible: Constant reset of the organisational chart, based on the capabilities, market conditions and business situation. In line with the mindset that change is good, not threatening."

In the '[Way Ahead](#)' second article, 'How to Organise for Success', I talked about three stages to work through to reset an organisation to deliver better results after change. We stressed the importance of **flexibility in all things**. One leader described their perspective on each stage I wrote about, and some key questions they put to themselves and their leaders on each:



RETHINK:

Clear focus: Suggest that leaders rethink >> kind of Blue Ocean.

Flexibility: Suggest companies develop agility to adapt and learn as a core strategic competence.

Sustainability: Vision and values are crucial. So is purpose & engagement.

Teams: Need to create a culture of collaboration and collaboration as a core competence.

REDESIGN:

Purpose: Do all employees and stakeholders know the purpose and core mission of the company?

Organisation design: Any clear performance management framework in place?

Conflict management: Is there any conflict in corporate priorities and goals?

Leadership: Leader must engage stakeholders.

REVITALISE:

Strategic insight: Does your Board have the strategic insight it needs now things have changed?

Envisioning ability: How aligned are your leaders aligned to your vision and strategy?

Decision making: Is there a clear delegation of authority and authority matrix?

Implementation skills: How the current question relate to Implementation?"



The ability to work remote with a diverse work force is essential now, it is the new way.”

In reading leaders feedback, a common theme was a new world of work, more digital and less physical. However, the main reflection we had was about agility and adaptability. Leaders expressed it differently, but they are certain that their organisations were **not flexible enough** and showed a strong determination to change that for the future.

On Culture and Teamwork

Very often leaders brought up culture, and especially **teamwork**. Leaders foresaw new ways of working and realised collaboration was very important. How to help leaders lead teams better in practice, was a key area raised:



*We cannot work in hierarchical and authoritarian setups; we need the smart cooperativeness of the modern age. In order to achieve that culture, or even more important to maintain it, requires to have the perfect team players. This perfect team needs a team leader where the emphasis is on ‘team’ as much as on ‘leader’. Why? Well in my mind the **challenges we face require the perfect team** with many different skills including a strong team leader that takes responsibility, doing the right thing with the right means.”*



*Putting a team together that is **humble, smart and hungry**. Keeping together in tough times, fighting every inch together, going the extra mile, celebrate successes and have fun. Smart is combining not only intelligence but also emotional intelligence.”*

It was clear to the leaders that gave their feedback on the [‘Way Ahead’](#), no matter their wildly different organisation (sectors, countries, sizes, structures), **teamwork and developing culture were hot topics** – seen as both vital and difficult to get right.

In Conclusion

The leaders that contacted us about their '[Way Ahead](#)' were characterised by both their differences and their common challenges. The differences were in the changes they faced – their risks and opportunities varied hugely. The similarity was that they each needed and wanted to get and give advice – someone to talk with, especially about change, management and people. Leadership is lonely after all. **Leaders in our network recognised the immense value of their network.**

What struck me most was this desire to connect and share shown by so many, so quickly. Even with demand so high and time at such a premium, leaders are very willing to help other leaders. Their openness – lack of complacency, self-criticism and the concern for others – shone through. **Leaders want to grow and help others do the same.**

Whatever challenges we face with our own organisations '[Way Ahead](#)', if the leaders who added their advice are anything to go by, the future is very bright. No leader thought they were doing everything well enough, all leaders had clear plans to improve and expected change. They all wanted to develop and to help their teams thrive. **Leaders, faced with extreme challenges, were committed to their mission and ready to adapt.**

Thank you once again for all your contributions,

Richard

Mercuri Urval

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For more information

Please contact marketingsupport.int@mercuriurval.com #LeadersHelpingLeaders
Or email Richard directly richard.moore@mercuriurval.com

About Richard

Richard is Mercuri Urval's Chief Executive Officer. Richard leads the Mercuri Urval team worldwide, working closely with colleagues and clients in all sectors across Europe, Asia-Pacific and the Americas. Prior to this he has more than 15 years' experience in advising organisations in Leadership Acquisition and Business Transformation. Richard has a Masters in Psychology and is also a Board Member and Partner at Mercuri Urval.

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