

# Leadership in times of change

What modern leadership requires

By Joyce Gesing, Elke Hofmann and Dirk Mundorf

A captain steering a ship through shallow and sometimes stormy waters, reprimanding crew members and issuing orders – that’s roughly how one might describe the traditional view of the senior manager’s role. But what happens when the swell surges and waves crash over the bow, or natural forces undergo sudden, drastic change? Modern times need a different kind of leader.

## **Doers are done**

As management is traditionally understood, leadership describes a fixed set of abilities – a compact toolbox. A person who owns and can carry this toolbox can “do leadership”. A leader is able to develop strategies, train teams and organizations, and implement decisions. According to this view, “leaders are doers” – and yet this attitude is well past its sell-by date, and not just since the pandemic. Leaders are much more than this. Today, alongside traditional leadership skills, they also need to be curious, empathic, perceptive, decisive and able to inspire – all of which are social skills. So where traditional definitions of leadership focus on the leader’s own performance, current management approaches go much further, by describing

development pathways. What kinds of abilities are needed to tackle complexity and new challenges, identify trends and draw the right conclusions? Over and above anything else: human abilities.

### **Leaders are human**

So the key difference between this and the way leadership was viewed in the past is less obviously reflected by a leader's abilities than by their humanity. To be successful, today's leaders need to inject their whole self, their whole personality, into their work. This requires courage, resilience and authenticity. In particular, leading others remotely calls for human rather than functional qualities, to more easily steer the workforce through the hard times, too. One CHRO commented as follows: "In the long term, an open dialog with employees is more effective than micro-management and top-down decrees". But this (human) approach also conveys the clear understanding that no leader is perfect, and no process happens without setbacks or unfulfilled expectations. Leaders who are truly prepared for the future face their failures in a reflective, self-critical spirit. Of course dealing openly with strengths, weakness and mistakes in this way calls for courage. But it also sends a strong signal to the workforce – because only someone who accepts mistakes can facilitate a culture of innovation and agility at the organizational level.

### **Leaders are team players**

The perception that leadership is a solo endeavor is also antiquated. After all, no single individual combines all the key abilities and qualities required. One CHRO noted that as far as leadership qualities are concerned, companies are already paying much more attention to the overall composition of the management team than to individual leaders. When recruiting senior managers for the team, identifying specific talents and competencies at an early stage is being given an increasingly high priority. Several HR professionals told us that how individuals fit with and complement the management team is just as important as their professional and personal qualifications. With respect to virtual or at least hybrid working environments, HR specialists regard leaders' ability to develop effective communication with their teams as the critical factor.

Successful, modern leadership is about building balanced, mutually supportive teams with complementary personalities and characters who are more than just "doers".

Bernhard Just, Executive Vice President Human Resources at KION Group, on the digitalization of previously analog-only dialog formats:

*“For many managers, providing feedback virtually is a whole new challenge. The same applies to annual employee appraisals and performance reviews. We need to develop our skills here by very consciously practicing staff development conversations in an online context. The challenges for recruiting are similar.”*

Reinhard Nißl, HR Talent & Development Director Germany at Microsoft, on core competencies and willingness to learn:

*“It’s more important than ever to focus on managers’ core competencies and develop them by encouraging a willingness to learn, because we’re less able to rely on what used to work in the past.”*

Dr. Hays Steilberg, Executive Vice President Corporate Human Resources, Executives & Talent at Bertelsmann, on the role of decentralized decision-making:

*“Leaders must realize that they don’t have an answer for everything, that trust and empathy are extremely important, and that in the long run, an open dialog with employees is more effective than micro-management and centralized directives.”*

This article is part of our “What next, now that everything’s changed? HR and New Work” series, which reports core insights from our regular Zoom calls with HR leaders.

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