

Leadership and lifelong learning in the new world of work



We began 2020 with the understanding that we were in the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). As we grappled with what that means for us as leaders, what changes we would need to make, and what training our employees would need, we were hit with the global pandemic that COVID-19 brought. Still, through the chaos and disruption, we have managed to press on and have arrived, disheveled but intact, in 2021.

Although it's impossible to say what this year holds for us all, we do know what we have learnt from last year and what our businesses, leadership, and employees will need in order to make the necessary adaptations and pivots for success.

Let's unpack some elements of our "new normal" and shed light on what steps you can take to support your organisation.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)

The realisation of this new era may have sent chills down your spine. The idea of *the rise of the machines* probably brings to mind epic scenes of destruction from an array of science fiction movies. But in reality, we as a society, have been progressing towards this and making many of the necessary changes for years. Some businesses have successfully integrated Artificial Intelligence (AI) into their organisations and employed consultants to assist with implementation and education for their employees. As with most changes in the workplace, the move towards a more machine-centered approach is best handled with care, kindness, education, and communication. Loyal employees need to be educated about

how technology will assist them in their roles, and not replace them.

The idea of having an open and transparent approach with employees brings us to our next point:

A New Style of Leadership

Revolution and pandemic aside, this era also sees us in the midst of a new generation of employees. Millennials. These modern-day activists come with a set of challenges for any old school leaders.., Top-down approaches are not as effective with this younger workforce, and leaders are having to step into new styles of leadership and communication to accommodate their older, as well as newer, employees. Millennials tend to strive for something greater. They want to do work that is meaningful and to engage with management, colleagues, and clients, in a way that develops long-lasting and genuine relationships. Being able to work successfully with millennials means that your leadership style needs to be more flexible. Instead of a top-down approach, think more along the lines of servant leadership. It is a good idea to include employees in decision making, bring them in on challenges and be honest and available for conversations about their performance, your own performance, and the organisations objectives. Knowing how they fit into the organisation enables modern employees to assist with problem-solving and makes them feel like they belong and are working towards a common goal.

The workspace is another element to consider. Even before the pandemic, organisations were beginning to see the value in flexi-time and remote working. Millennial employees in particular feel the need for freedom with their time and resources. That means that you need to manage your employees in such a way that value is placed on outcomes being met instead of monitoring how many hours they sit behind a desk.

Working remotely

Tags like: #remoteworking, #workfromhome, #thenewnormal, and #workonline were trends in 2020. Platforms like Zoom and Google Classroom exploded, and leaders were forced to evolve quickly if they wanted to keep their teams engaged, inspired, productive and on the same page.

Working remotely has a host of benefits, but it comes with its own set of challenges. Issues around productivity, distraction and maintaining the corporate culture are just a few of these challenges. Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses in terms of technology, psychology and leadership will help you identify areas of growth. Once you are aware of where you stand, you will be able to gain the resources, skills and knowledge needed to operate in the 21st century. Becoming a lifelong learner will help you lead your employees on their personal journeys of growth, resulting in the ongoing success of your business.

Yes, this is a time for the history books. One that we will recount to our grandchildren as they roll their eyes at us and sigh at our dramatic tales of how hard we had it back in our day. But, with the right type of input and guidance, this can also be a story of success. Of how we overcame, grew and learnt how to thrive in a new, and maybe even better, way.

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