

Building the VUCA leader

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How can organisations best develop leaders for today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world? Leadership and talent development professionals share their thoughts.

A recent webinar – led by Harmonic's CHRO Richard Kenny and attended by leadership development professionals from diverse sectors across the UK – provided fascinating insights into what the pandemic has taught us about how best to build the VUCA leader.

So how prepared were senior leaders for a crisis like the pandemic?

The event began by looking back to March 2020, when Covid-19 took hold in the UK. Were senior leaders adequately prepared for the onset of a crisis like this?

In a poll:



53% of people development professionals believed their leaders were not prepared



34% felt they were partially prepared



Just **13%** believed their leaders were prepared for the pandemic.

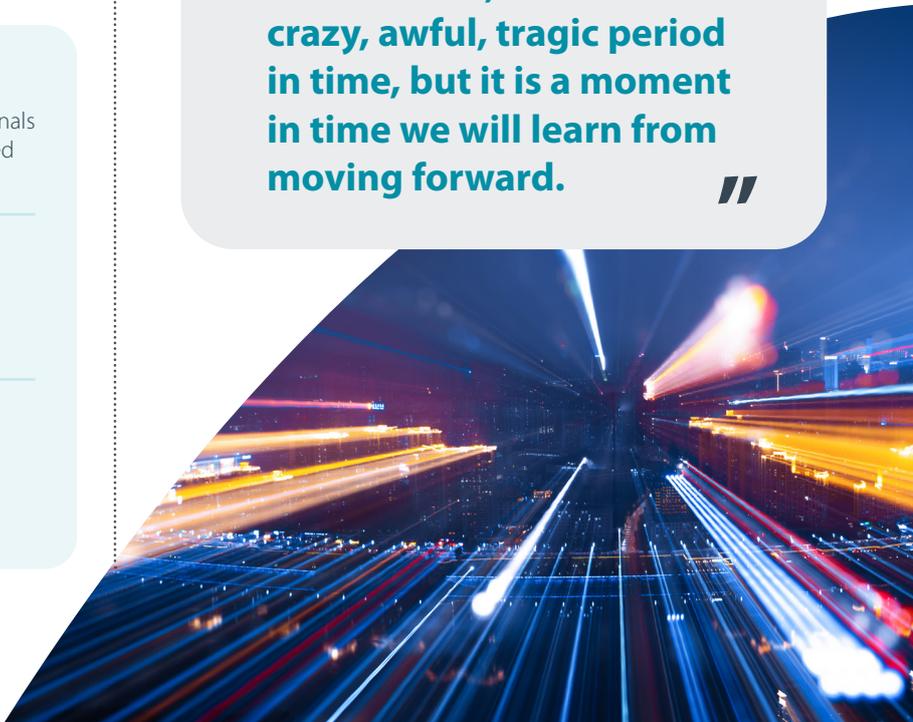
One respondent praised her leader's clear, decisive action in trialling remote working a week before the Government announced lockdown to ensure that people had the technology and processes in place to be effective from home.

All agreed that agility was vital when the pandemic struck, but some felt that decisions had been made too quickly in their organisations. Although a quick response is essential at the onset of a crisis, decisions still have to be carefully thought through. When you're being hit by bow waves, trying to think strategically is not easy.

Delegates discussed the importance of leaders having the confidence to exercise agility and either fail fast and move on, or prove a concept and then implement it at scale. Leaders need to know and demonstrate that it's OK to fail. People across the organisation need to be rewarded for innovation and coached to improve ideas and accept accountability.



In a nutshell, it's been a crazy, awful, tragic period in time, but it is a moment in time we will learn from moving forward.



Building the VUCA leader

What qualities have emerged as most important in the VUCA leader?

So what have we learnt about leadership as a result of steering organisations through the pandemic? What makes a great VUCA leader?

In conversation, delegates agreed that an ability to inspire trust is the key to crisis leadership. People need to believe that their leader is competent, has good values and will do the right thing. Honesty and open communication are vital, in particular when tough action is needed. Leaders must be willing to say they don't know, admit mistakes and show vulnerability if they are to retain people's trust.

In terms of taking action, there was widespread agreement that organisational agility is key. Leaders need to be good critical thinkers, able to break down complexity, analyse clearly and make informed decisions that enable the business to function effectively in adversity. While demonstrating flexibility, the best leaders also remain focused on their organisation's vision and communicate this in a clear, compelling way. Even if the metrics look bleak, they continue to inspire a strong sense of direction and focus on pushing for improvement.

How focused are leadership programmes on developing VUCA leaders?

Delegates were asked to what degree they felt their organisations' leadership programmes prepare leaders for volatility, ambiguity and complexity.

In a poll:



Just **7%** said that a VUCA focus was built into their senior leadership programmes



43% said it was not part of programmes



50% said that it was partially incorporated into programmes.

In particular, respondents agreed that they need to focus on creating programmes that support leaders' critical thinking skills, so that they can make informed, rapid decisions.

The long-term impact

Overall, what did delegates believe has been the long-term impact of the past year on leadership?

There was a general perception that people's expectations of leaders are now different to pre-pandemic. In a crisis, leaders aren't expected to have all the answers, but they are expected to be able to inspire trust, communicate, be honest, be decisive and take people on a journey.

It was recognised that the leaders who flourished in 2020 already had solid building blocks. As Warren Buffett said: "It's only when the tide goes out that you learn who's been swimming naked." Where leaders were weaker, because they didn't have their employees' trust, for example, they were more exposed to the pandemic.

The pandemic has also brought a new awareness of the important role leadership has to play in holding organisations together culturally. Some delegates felt that Covid had created new cultural divisions in their businesses, for example between people working on site and at home, or people being furloughed or busier than ever. "These are things we should be dealing with now and will be priorities as we move into the new hybrid model," said Harmonic CHRO Richard Kenny. "Communicating well with different types of organisational citizen and helping them to understand each other's perspectives will be essential to success."

From a lessons learnt perspective, all agreed that an after-action review is absolutely critical, but is often missed because businesses are too busy moving on to the next crisis. The example was given of financial organisations, where lots of people are trading at the moment and platforms are under pressure. As a result, businesses have been very delivery oriented and reactive, with a focus on rapid decision-making. However, there is now a recognition that there needs to be a shift in leadership mindsets for the longer term, to encourage a more proactive, strategic way of working with time for activities like after-action reviews.

In summary, all believed that crisis is inevitable and that building leaders who can excel in our VUCA world is essential. However, the best leaders will be those who are able to perform effectively during times of both steady state and crisis. There needs to be a balance: while it is important not to lose the stable building blocks, we also need to prepare leaders to handle crises more effectively.

HOW CAN HARMONIC HELP?

At Harmonic, we have extensive experience of helping organisations develop leaders who are agile, resilient, deliver with clarity and are able to execute well in VUCA and steady states.

Get in touch today to find out more – either drop me an **email** or give me a call on **07770 823463**.

RICHARD KENNY

