

Leadership during Covid-19 and beyond



By [Faeza Khan](#)

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Popularised by the US Army as a result of the extreme conditions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the acronym VUCA - volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity - was widely used to refer to our pre-Covid world. Change was happening faster than ever before in human history and leaders needed to take heed of this multifaceted world.



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Then the pandemic hit and we were catapulted into what *Wired* magazine refers to as a BANI world - brittleness, anxiety, nonlinearity and incomprehensibility are now adjectives that aptly describe our current landscape. The pace of change has accelerated and the status quo has been upended. In the wake of these unpredictable and unparalleled times, pioneering leaders have made bold decisions in response to this new world and the societal issues that have come to the fore.

We look at some of the leadership trends on the Flux radar...

Inclusive leadership

The death of George Floyd in the US triggered worldwide protest and brought systemic racism and the Black Lives Matter movement to the global stage. Many organisations came forward in support of this cause through monetary donations and commitments to support more black-owned businesses.

BlackRock Inc., the world's largest asset manager, committed to 30% more black employees by 2024 and will donate \$5m to organisations focused on improving racial equality, and create a \$5m fund to support Black and Latinx social entrepreneurs. The recent 2020 D&I index report by Refinitiv ranked the company as number one out of 9,000 publicly-listed companies in the world in terms of diversity and inclusiveness. CEO Larry Fink said:

“ We need to do better. We must use our voice and work with others to advocate for change within our industry and across society more broadly. ”

Inclusive leaders acknowledge that inclusivity encompasses more than race and gender. In response to ageist comments made by WPP's global CEO, Mark Read, Australian creative agency Thinkerbell has just launched an eight-week, fully-paid internship open only to people over the age of 55. In his Twitter apology, he said, “I was recently asked if our teams have the right balance of skills between TV and digital. I believe they do but was wrong to use age to try to make a point. People over 40 can do great digital marketing, just as people under 30 can make great TV ads.”

Climate change

2020 is the worst year to date in terms of climate change characterised by extreme weather events, record wildfires, increasing global temperatures and the melting of glaciers. What has already been a difficult year for the world has been more challenging for those who have been direct victims of climate disasters. Societal and governmental pressure on big business has resulted in an increasing number of leaders committing to or taking immediate action against climate change. There is growing consensus that it is no longer solely the responsibility of governments but that the private sector has a significant role to play.

Gucci's CEO, Marco Bizzarri launched a programme in November 2019 called the CEO Carbon Neutral Challenge, in which he invited other executives to officially join the fight against climate change. At the World Economic Forum's meeting in Davos early 2020, world-leading innovation and technology company SAP joined the challenge.

Sapient leadership

In an article in October the *Harvard Business Review* defined a new era of change, what they refer to as 3D change, which is perpetual, pervasive and exponential. Effective leaders need to embrace a new vision of leadership, what they call 'sapient' leadership. “A sapient leader is characterised by being wise, sagacious and discerning in navigating change while also being humane in the face of change that can often feel alien.” Humanising business is now considered an essential business activity. Empathy is being ranked as one of the key characteristics of today's leader.

During these turbulent times, mental health has been laid bare and businesses are looking to help in a way that was unthinkable a generation ago.

Several leaders are prioritising mental health and boosting wellness benefits to support their employees at a time when anxiety, depression and grief are rife. Starbucks is giving employees and their families 20 free counselling sessions a year; they will have access to a mental health therapist or coach at no cost. The benefit will impact more than 220,000 workers and their family members.

Continuous learning

In the midst of this 3D era of change and the BANI landscape, it has never been more crucial for leaders to be constantly learning and to foster this culture of continual learning in their organisations. The rapid acceleration of digital transformation has exposed the skills gap in data science, artificial intelligence, machine learning, cloud and other technologies and leaders are looking to augment these skills in their workforces. "The lifetime of digital skills is getting shorter and shorter. By adopting new skilling approaches we can support our workforce needs, while evolving to embrace new opportunities ahead," says Daniel Jeavons, general manager of the data science programme at Shell.

The BMW Group has partnered with MOOC (massive open online courses) platform Udacity to create nanodegree programmes in self-driving cars data science. The course features robotics, computer vision and reinforcement learning, among other AI disciplines. The aim is to augment the expertise of their mechanical engineers and move towards a more data-centric approach.

A Covid world

One of the most challenging aspects of this Covid-19 world that leaders have had to navigate is their workforce's shift away from offices to homes. How does one lead effectively when teams are dispersed and largely reliant on virtual means of communication? Many employees are experiencing Zoom fatigue and morale is difficult to maintain with physical separation.

A handful of large, multinational companies have announced a shift to a 100% remote working strategy for the immediate future. But significant progress is being made in vaccine development and a number of organisations are beginning to adopt a more hybrid approach to where workers are situated, and along with this, looking for innovative ways to support their teams.

One such approach is rethinking the perks that employees enjoyed whilst working in offices. Software company Teampay's CEO Andrew Hoag says he wanted to do what he could to continue offering a similar work experience at home. "For example, instead of us bringing a catered lunch into the office, we used our product to give every employee a \$20-a-week delivery stipend so they could order lunch." They also gave their staff a \$500 stipend to set up their home offices.

After experiencing a year of upheaval, the future still appears hazy. These innovative leaders offer a glimpse of the effective leadership tools we need as we head into a new and uncharted year.

ABOUT FAEENZA KHAN

She researches and writes weekly trend observations which delve into the key business and consumer trends that are on their radar. Faeenza combines her background in Actuarial Science and Fashion Design to keep track of a broad spectrum of trends and issues that impact business and society. She is a perpetual learner and has an avid fascination with and optimism about the future.

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