

New world of work calls for leaders to have soft skills and bounce-ability

By [Norah Sehunoe](#)

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How a leader responds to employee needs, represents the company and its culture, and manages employees will ultimately impact the success of the overall team, and the responsibility should therefore be treated with the importance that it requires.



Source: © 123rf [123rf](#) Norah Sehunoe, executive head, Human Resource at Santam looks at the key skills leaders and managers need in the new 'world of work'

Much has changed in the corporate world and business sector over the past three years, with the biggest trigger for the change being the pandemic.

It altered the workplace dynamic and resulted in the introduction of hybrid work models.

These have impacted the way business leaders engage with their teams - both from a practical perspective and on an emotional level – and led to challenges that many still struggle to overcome.

Research by Gartner, which reveals that most hybrid employees believe their direct manager is their most direct connection to company culture, highlights the key role that leaders and managers play in the new 'world of work'.



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The productivity versus wellbeing dichotomy

A big factor within the hybrid/remote working environment is finding the right balance between keeping productivity levels up and ensuring the well-being of your team.

On the one hand, self-disciplined employees do well with working remotely and can manage their time and workload effectively.

Their productivity often increases because they feel the need to prove they are working and producing results.

However, this constant “always on” pressure can eventually take its toll as they may struggle to find a work-life balance and begin to suffer mentally – at which point productivity declines.

On the other hand, some employees struggle with the flexibility of working from home and may be unable to manage themselves effectively.

These employees generally need more input from teammates and leaders, and managers can typically see a dip in productivity when they are not physically in the office.

According to the Sapient Labs 2022 *Mental Health of the World* report, South Africa is amongst the five countries with the highest proportion of respondents who reported being ‘distressed’ or ‘struggling’.

From an HR perspective, these results are consistent as we see that mental health continues to top the list of issues that employees seek assistance for via company employee wellness programmes.

Balancing the business need for productivity versus the employees’ need for overall well-being has therefore probably been one of the biggest challenges that leaders face in a post-pandemic world.



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Need for soft skills

The need to balance employee well-being with productivity has led to a greater need for soft skills within companies' leadership ranks.

Business leaders can no longer get away with only being technically strong.

A high level of emotional intelligence (EQ) – both in terms of understanding their own emotions and how they impact others, as well as understanding their team members' emotions and their impact on their behaviour – is now a critical requirement for leaders.

Leaders must be compassionate, transparent and visible whilst working remotely through increased communication.

They must have a high level of EQ to manage different personality types and get the best out of them in a virtual environment.

They must help team members navigate the intricacies of work/life balance so that the business, and its people, can move forward in the best possible way.

Leaders should not set out to drive productivity, they should start by creating a space where people want to be. When employees feel they are in a safe space and are valued, they become stronger and give discretionary effort – when you give more than what is expected of you.

Once you create that space and culture, productivity will naturally flow.

Bounce-ability

And finally, leaders must be adaptable.

There's a great term for it: bounce-ability – it means having the ability to bounce back from challenges.

The past three years have taught us that things can change in a heartbeat. Resilience and agility are important traits for leaders who must make quick decisions and adapt to changing market conditions in real-time.

They must be visionaries and have the foresight to accurately scenario plan for what may be coming around the corner, to lead their organisations forward sustainably.

Authenticity has never been more important; leaders must be authentic and vulnerable because it's in one's vulnerability that people see your strength.

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