

How to lead through the chaos of today and create a better future

We are living now through a time of major transition, one that puts us directly in the path from what was, to what is yet to become. Our leadership challenge is to deal with the contradictions and paradoxes that confront us and to reconcile them in a way that takes us to a better, yet different future. It's not a challenge for someone, it is a challenge for everyone. We are all in this together and waiting for someone else to act is not leadership.

The contradictions abound in all parts of our lives – in the way we work, in the way we learn and in the way we live together – and what was once considered paradoxical or “either or” must now be reframed to find the truth that lies between. It's not a matter of going back to the past or embracing the future, it's more to find our common future without losing the essence of who we are and what we stand for. But it's also recognizing that our identity must now be expressed and enacted in a way that is contemporary and future focused.

Leadership during transition is a time to review, re-imagine and renew and to do all three through a process of deep and collective reflection.

1. Review

In the place between the certainty of the past and the uncertainty of the future is the zone of creative expression. It's a place to reflect on who we are and what we do, what we believe and what we stand for. It's a great opportunity to think deeply about our purpose and why we exist and the distinctive value we bring to the people and communities we serve. It's a time to review our values and to test their continued relevance through the crisis and to appreciate that the test of values is the extent to which they guide our decision-making during good times as well as bad.

2. Re-imagine

If all bets are off and if the future is ill defined, then the scope for imagination is boundless. Very little can be rejected out of hand. Already what was once considered impossible is now taking place and what was considered improbable is now happening. Coming out of the crisis, let's not just hope to polish up what went before, let's not seek to re-establish business as usual. The momentum now is to think big and to think from the future back, not the past forward. Imagine if we were truly to embed our purpose, live our values and fundamentally change the way we work together, what that would mean for the way we interact with others and the way we each take ownership of the totality of lives we lead.

3. Renew

Now is the time to look at the systems and processes that we have inherited, many of them from a distant past, and judge if they have relevance in the future we intend to create. In challenging the status quo, we have the chance to bring to light the systemic forces that keep old ways of doing things in place and have all too often sabotaged even minor change attempts. Trust is built when what we say and what we do are aligned, not when we promise change and our systems and processes then undermine it. The truth is that it will be counter-productive and generate greater cynicism, if what we promise is not what people experience. This might be our best chance to finally bring to light the systemic forces that for too long have silently killed so many well intentioned, if naively hopeful, projects for transformational change.

Renewal is not only a time for organizational and team change, but also personal and professional change. The period between the past and the future is always a time of transition – where the certainties of the past are gone and certainties of the future are still being born. It is our best time for creativity, for innovation and for finding the courage to challenge ourselves and the status quo. We now have a compelling reason to change – we have the burning platform we often dreamed of. This is not a moment to be wasted. We can review who we are, re-imagine what we might be and renew our commitment to bring our best selves to the work we do. We may never have a better time, to take the time, to consider what's important and to truly transform ourselves, and together bring about the changes we yearn for in how we live, work, learn and play.