

## Leading with empathy through facilitated conversations

Leadership is all about taking people from here to there. If you are not taking people on a journey, then by definition you are not leading them. You don't have to be certain about the destination, but you do need a vision about a better future, that then needs to be shared with, and further shaped, by the people being led. All of this requires high involvement of people and an inclusive process where facilitated conversations can deepen understanding of people and the lives they lead.

1. **Building psychological safety:** conversations are facilitated by the leader to ensure inclusion, and not only build the psychological safety necessary to give people confidence to share their hopes and fears about the future, but also provide a framework for more challenging conversations to come. The prime focus initially is not reaching agreement, but rather deepening understanding.
2. **Leaders as trusted sense-makers:** leaders have an important role in guiding people and teams and steering them through the challenges and uncertainties they face. They have an important sense-making role and are often the most trusted source for guidance and reassurance. Facilitated conversations can identify issues of concern to individuals and provide a litmus test about the mood of the team and in the spirit of servant leadership identify follow up support that individuals might need.
3. **Recreating serendipity:** with people working remotely and virtually, there is a need to recreate something of the serendipity of the workplace and so be reminded of aspects of the workplace culture that we don't want to lose and which helped us to work effectively together. These conversations can be an important forum for compassion and inclusion and provide some remedy for feelings of isolation and disconnection that often occur if people truly feel alone.
4. **Appreciating widespread feelings:** these are truly challenging times, so it's important to talk about what is happening in our lives, and to our lives, and in this way better understand the anxiety and fear that is widespread within our communities as well as remember and appreciate, the humanity and hope and ultimately the resilience that resides at some level in everyone.
5. **Shared experience:** this can deepen insight, accelerate learning and increase the confidence of a team. No one is absolutely certain about what is to come, but we all can have a role in shaping it. Simply talking and sharing challenges can diminish feelings of being alone, and bring greater confidence, that not only can these challenges be faced, but they can be done so better together.
6. **Making significant strategic decisions:** this is a systemic shock to our public and personal lives and will stimulate debate about our desired future, free of the limitations of past certainties and with greater acceptance of new possibilities in the way we live, work, learn and play. What we consign to the past and what we take forward will be strategic decisions we will have to make as we reshape our workplace.
7. **Nurturing a growth mindset:** our mindsets are filters through which we make sense of the world and when they become habitual, they can morph into groupthink. Our biggest limiting factor in reimagining the future may be the way we think, rather than the circumstances we find ourselves in. A shift from habitual to strategic thinking may open up a whole new world of discovery.
8. **Skills of facilitation:** conversations are not intended for leaders to solve problems, but to create the conditions for authentic and inclusive discussions. Asking questions for clarification, inviting contributions, listening with respect, summarizing what has been said (to check for understanding) and ensuring "airtime" is shared are all important facilitation skills. This can also be a vehicle for leadership development for everyone when the facilitator role is rotated.

Leaders will not lead these conversations as subject matter experts. No one has all of the answers and no one knows exactly what the future holds. However, we are all subject matter experts in our own lives and collectively we can steer a course for an inclusive, fulfilling future where all can thrive. It is the humility to know that we don't know it all, that is the key to open the door to the influence and contribution of others and ensure that everyone contributes to crafting better outcomes together.