

Facilitated conversations – a new role for leading with empathy.

Leadership is all about taking people from here to there. If we are not taking people on a journey, then by definition we 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 you are leading. All of this requires high involvement of people and an inclusive process where facilitated conversations shape a new role in leading with empathy.

1. Sessions that are facilitated to ensure inclusion, not only build the psychological safety necessary for people to feel confident to share their hopes and fears about the future, but also provide a framework for the challenging conversations to come as we navigate our way forward. Our prime focus at this stage is not reaching agreement, but rather deepening understanding of the lives we lead and the work we choose to do, as we transition through to the next phase of this pandemic.
2. Leaders play an important role in guiding people and teams and steering them through the challenges and uncertainties we all face. Leaders have an important sense-making role and are often the most trusted source for guidance and reassurance. These sessions 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. As people work remotely and increasingly virtually, there is also a need to recreate something of the serendipity of the workplace and so be reminded of aspects of the culture that we don't want to lose and which have previously helped us to work effectively together. These sessions can also 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. These are challenging times for everyone, 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 all of us.
5. Shared experience can deepen insight, accelerate learning and increase our confidence as 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 lighten the load and 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. This systemic shock to our public and personal lives 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 the greatest strategic decisions we will have to make as we reshape our workplace.
7. Our mindsets are filters through which we see and make sense of the world and when they become habitual, they can easily become groupthink. Our biggest limiting factor in terms of reimagining the future may well be the way we think, rather than the circumstances we find ourselves in. Shedding habitual thinking and embracing strategic thinking centered on making wise choices may open up a whole new world of discovery.
8. Facilitated conversations are not intended for leaders to solve problems, but to begin 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.

Leaders are not leading 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 thus ensure that we craft better outcomes together.