

Leadership lessons from a turbulent year: what the business schools say



Amanda Goodall, of Bayes Business School, said that leaders with expertise were all the more important in times of uncertainty

If, as the old saying goes, problems are just learning opportunities in disguise, then the past year must surely have been packed with rich educational experiences for entrepreneurs and business leaders everywhere. Coping with big challenges such as spiralling costs and shortages of both materials and talent while simultaneously trying to make hybrid teams work and decide when, or whether, to get people back in the office, running a business in topsy-turvy 2021 seems to have required the skills of a tightrope walker or contortionist as much as those of a leader.

Who better to ask about those lessons, learnt or otherwise, than some of the UK's leading business schools? We canvassed the views of a range of academics to find out what they have gleaned about the changing nature of leadership over the past 12 months.

“Leadership has never been more necessary, or more difficult,” Kathryn Bishop, associate fellow at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, said. With remote employees spending much more time alone than those who choose or have to work on site, maintaining the vital sense of shared endeavour has become much more challenging, she added. “As a leader you have to be more flexible than ever before because those different groups of people want very different things from you.”

Take empathy for example. In the lockdown phase at the beginning of the year leaders had to show that they understood the “lived experiences” of their teams, so dialling the empathy up to 11 was de rigueur for a while. “You may be working from a nice home office with a comfortable chair, but others are balancing a laptop on their knees at the end of the bed, or trying to work and educate their kids at the same time. We may all be in the same storm but we are in very different boats,” Bishop said.

Hybrid working became more normal over the summer, needs changed and many leaders whose empathy glands were running on empty may have heaved a silent sigh of relief that they could turn down the level of added warmth for a while. “You do have to moderate it because otherwise all the ‘Let me show you my dog, and tell you how I am feeling’ becomes too much.”

Now Omicron is upon us, will extra empathy be required once again? It depends, said Bishop. “Leaders just have to adapt constantly and be very aware of the context. Leadership has become less about me — who am I, and how can I be authentic? — and more about meeting the needs of others.”

Expertise in the ascendancy

All those external challenges concerning supply, costs and talent have made it a good year to be an expert, and not just if you happen to sit on the SAGE Committee, Dr Amanda Goodall, senior reader in leadership at Bayes Business School, said. The firms that have most successfully navigated the choppy waters are those whose leaders understand the value of specialist knowledge. “When I go to my hairdresser or the dentist I want the person who is wielding the sharp instruments to really know what they are doing. My research shows that you really need to keep your core business at the heart of what you do.”

She said that expert leaders succeeded in tough times, first because they are less likely to make rookie mistakes, such as over-reliance on suppliers who may not themselves be able to deliver. Secondly, they are more in tune with the changing needs of customers and markets and how those needs can best be satisfied.

Thirdly, because employees respond more positively to leaders whom they respect for their technical ability than they do to smooth-talking bosses who say all the right things but who struggle to execute. “In our recent study we have found that having a boss who you rate as a technical expert and who you feel could do your job is the biggest single predictor of job satisfaction, even above pay. People want to do their jobs well and to develop their careers and that means having a boss who is an expert and can mentor them on that course.”