



August Thought Piece – The Road from Challenge to Opportunity

For our first online leadership forum we hosted a global conversation between leaders who wanted to explore their journeys in light of the myriad challenges emerging in 2020.

Many thanks to our participants, who were senior leaders from a range of backgrounds, including: tech, management consultancy, customer experience, leadership development, comms, marketing, wellbeing, PR, policy and HR.

After a brief large group introduction, we divided into two breakout room conversations, from which the following six core themes emerged. Each theme is illustrated by abridged, anonymised verbatim.

This is a stressful time for leaders

There was broad consensus that the Covid pandemic has thrown up massive challenges for leaders. Rapidly changing events have understandably provoked anxiety about how best to discharge responsibilities to both *'our business and our people.'*

'As a leader, I am constantly on high alert during this this crisis. I'm needing to drive my team hard, and neither area is sustainable long term. This feels far more serious than a normal recession.'

From a consultancy perspective, there was a reflection that current upheavals have challenged leaders' identities, and that there is a noticeable contrast between UK and US leadership identity. With the latter, it was thought that *'what you do and how much you get paid'* are core pillars of identity, and so psychological survival for US leaders may, at the moment, be more difficult than for their UK counterparts.

However, while undoubtedly stressful, many felt that current upheavals present the opportunity for a much-needed global reset.

The global economic system is in dire need of overhaul

Several participants saw periods of economic upheaval as a time of opportunity to rebalance the global economy in a way that 2008 financial crisis could have done, but ultimately failed to do.

'Covid has shone a spotlight on the economic system and the need for aspects of it to change. There are opportunities available if we switch from short-termism focussed on the next quarterly profit toward longer term UN Sustainable Development Goals.'

Burnout and an unhappy workforce were seen as understandable responses to a system that lacks democracy. Consumer power was seen as a potentially key leveller, and the capacity to understand and influence consumers to make good choices gave leaders *'a loud voice.'*

This is a time to examine purpose

For the majority, current upheavals have led to questioning of purpose. For one leader, referencing the poet Mary Oliver, working alone remotely had prompted her to wonder, *"What am I doing with this one precious life?"*

This led to another leader reflecting on his realisation 20 years ago that there was a false dichotomy between business for profit and business for wider social good. This led to him developing and leading a purpose-led management consultancy business, and is once again examining his purpose, 20 years on.

For another leader, current events had helped to crystallise his thinking:

'I'd like to revisit my purpose, and for it to cluster around enrichment. For clients that means we add value to what they do, and for my team, that means feeling enriched by their work.'

However, there were also thoughts about how difficult it can be to grow a purpose-led business. One leader, who had left a marketing agency to start a purpose-led wellness business, found that it had been a tough financial decision.

Although, purpose can also be used as window dressing

There was scepticism voiced about some of the corporate giants who claim to be purpose-driven businesses. *'Is their stated purpose really a meaningless branding tool to make more money without any real change?'*

It was also felt that staff were being similarly misled.

'Pinballs in staff canteens are meaningless if you don't address a lack of democracy in your organisation.'

To further illustrate the point, one leader recalled working in a large agency whose motto concerned people being at the forefront of what they did, while asking workers to fill out timesheets for toilet breaks.

A new style of leadership is needed

Rather than waiting for the government's lead, proactive leadership was deemed important. Transparency with teams was also thought to encourage them to *'step up and be on this journey with us.'*

At the same time, strong leadership was called for, but crucially, to be to *'compassion-led'*, rather than driven by the traditional *'alpha model'*. This notion was partly in recognition of the current *'universal experience'*, which has reminded us that *'we're all connected.'* However, the notion was also a recognition of the current *'loss and grief in the system'*, which needs to be met with compassion and care. Consequentially, there was a call for leaders to see *'humans, not resources.'*

'We need a new model of leadership in which leaders are able to explore the meaning of resilience, vulnerability and empathy.'

Echoing this call, one leader who started a new senior role during lockdown recognised, *'I need to keep my head and my heart engaged.'*

We are in a story that's unfolding

There was a widespread sense of being in uncharted territory, and leaders need to help each other by sharing their stories as they are unfolding. However,

'It's too early to make a larger sense of what all this means yet because we are still going through it.'

While there was optimism about the collective capacity to *'shape the evolving narrative'*, it was wryly noted that rather than approaching the close of the second act of a film, we may only be one series into a box set.

Only time will tell.

Comment

This was an exciting, vital conversation to facilitate, with much to reflect on. The relationship between challenge and opportunity seems to connect a number of the core themes that emerged. To illustrate: the philosopher Martin Heidegger pointed out that the status quo encourages us to be complacent about the web of hidden

agendas that we are caught up in, and which colour our perception of the world around us. Like a car that we drive every day, we never question how *what we are caught up in* operates.

Challenge is like that car breaking down. We are forced to lift the bonnet, scratch our heads, quite possibly panic a little, and then finally set about the task of making sense of what we encounter.

Condensing Heidegger's notoriously dense prose for a moment, let's refer to this as 'the realm of the possible'. Thinking of another of the key themes that emerged in the forum, one essential act of care for Heidegger is to help others keep this realm open, so that genuine opportunity might reveal itself.

For leaders who are struggling with keeping their organisations on the road in 2020, keeping open the realm of the possible might offer the opportunity to see things more clearly, and to configure a path going forward that is more suited to the new world unfolding before our eyes.

While we all face moments of challenge in our lives, uniquely, current global upheavals have jammed the fast-moving highway with smoking cars, while their puzzled drivers try to work out the complexity of what they are caught up in.

Let's not squander this opportunity to work together collectively on a progressive way forward.

Tom Cotton

Founder, Mind Environment

14th August, 2020

Upcoming Mind Environment Leadership Online Forums

Our September and October forums are as follows:

Tuesday 15th September, 5pm – 6.30pm

Tuesday 13th October, 5pm – 6.30pm

We will continue with the same theme, but a slightly revised format.

Theme: As leaders we are expected to drive strategy development, ensure operational delivery and engage & motivate our people. As if that is not enough to occupy us, the macro environment raises so many more questions: the impact of the Covid pandemic; calls to action for fairness, in particular on race and gender; the consequences and opportunities that may flow from Brexit; the desire for an organisational purpose which delivers good for society, staff and stakeholders while also delivering profit. With so many forces at play, overt and subtle, we would like to give you a space to explore the following question: **“How is your leadership journey going?”**

Format: One-hour open and in-depth discussion facilitated by Andy Iwaniec and Tom Cotton, comprising * 15-minute briefing and introductions * 60-minute discussion in x 2 smaller facilitated breakout groups * 15-minute large group conclusion. This is a confidential space, so there will be no post-discussion recording available. As with August, we will follow up with a summary and our thoughts.

If you are a leader and interested in joining this conversation, please let us know by RSVP to leadership@mindenvironment.co.uk. Participation is free, but limited to one person per organisation. Please register beforehand and arrive on time so that you don't miss the briefing and introductions.

