Thriving in the New Normal

Leader Competencies for Success

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Introduction

It is time to move past survival. Some businesses will thrive as COVID-19 loosens its grip on the global economy, others will flounder, while still others will become extinct. The usual business circle of life becomes accelerated through wars, technology, and global pandemics. Inside the storm, these events feel life altering, perhaps terrifying, and, in some cases, seem insurmountable. Hyperbolic statements like "The New Normal" abound. Anxiety is pernicious. Yet, despite the challenges and changes, humans do not just survive, but find a way to thrive. The COVID-19 pandemic will be no exception.

Sea-changing events unfreeze thinking (Lewin, 1947) and great leaders embrace the opportunities arising from the business seismic shakeup. Successful leaders refuse to romanticize the past, forge new opportunities, and most importantly, leverage or develop the competencies that drive success following the unfreezing event.

While teaching at Princeton, Albert Einstein gave his students a final exam that was identical to the exam he had given the previous year. His assistant noticed and asked Einstein if this was a mistake. Einstein looked at the exam and said, "You're right, these are the same questions as last year – but the answers have changed."

Like Einstein, the questions facing leaders in the post COVID-19 environment are the same as they were in the pre-COVID-19 business environment, but the answers to those questions are radically different.

This paper examines the pre- and post-COVID-19 unfreezing event and how the competencies that drove success before the pandemic must evolve or be re-imagined in the post-event environment. Global and domestic business trends have shifted, and these shifts require leaders to leverage and develop new competency challenges that will create new opportunities and drive future success.

We are all in this together

Global Environment

"We are all in this together" is a mantra that has never been more accurate than it is with the advent of COVID-19. Nearly every country in the world has been directly affected. Viruses do not respect borders. In early 2020, it would have been difficult to find a leader anywhere that would have predicted what is ostensibly a complete global shut down. Leaders now have an entirely new perspective on global issues and the ripple effect that can occur down to the smallest government or business entity.

There are numerous trends that are tied to the global environment and have implications for leaders worldwide. Of those trends, globalization, climate change, and global

economic impact are particularly salient and have direct implications for leaders looking to thrive in the New Normal.

Globalization. The "Globalization Genie" is out of the bottle making globalization a crucial element to long term success; however, leaders will take a more circumspect approach to their globalization strategies. Emphasizing additional "what if" scenarios and contingency planning is fundamental to averting potential disaster in international operations. While the planet is extremely interconnected, making isolationism impossible, the COVID-19 crisis shows that leaders who find answers to increasingly more expansive and difficult scenarios and plan accordingly will yield greater success than those who do not.

Climate change. Developing clean energy solutions to curb the use of fossil fuels represents one of the top issues confronting leaders. This issue, however, may take a back seat to global health. COVID-19 devastated the world in mere months. Successful leaders will recognize this trend and build precautions into their strategic plans that directly address employee, customer, distributor, and supplier health concerns.

Global economic impact. Changes to domestic and international monetary policy will be a huge opportunity for leaders. Money is being printed and distributed like never in history. Leaders must take advantage of this opportunity, especially if it can be key

to future growth. Perhaps more obscure, but equally impactful, will be inflation and the potential for the Yuan to become a key reserve currency. Leaders will have to be prepared for inflation because of the vast pricing and cost implications. Reserve currencies have similar implications especially for businesses engaged in global commerce. The impact is not as discernable as it is with inflation but adopting a singular focus on the dollar could be a strategic misstep.

These are just three of the many trends that impact the global environment as the result of COVID-19. A leader looking to thrive in the New Normal must be adept at leveraging the opportunities and complexities each trend presents.
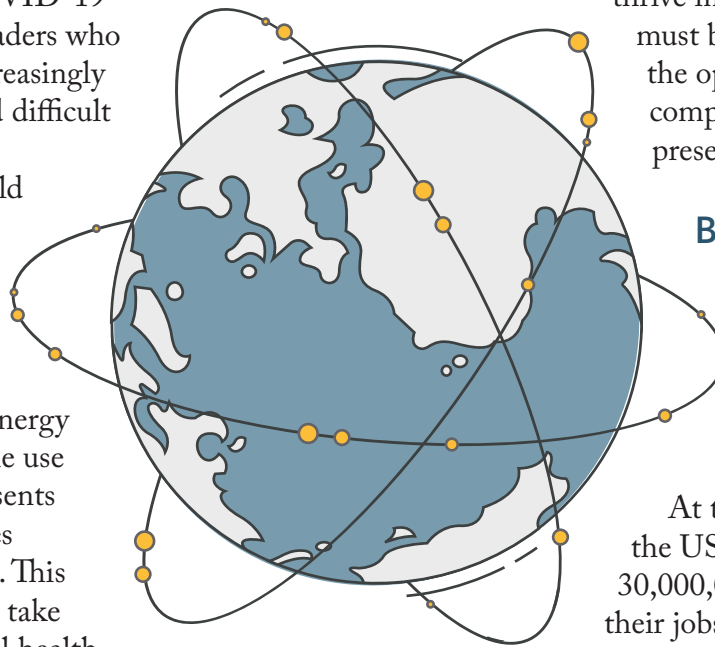
Business Disruption

The business disruption caused by COVID-19 is nearly incalculable. At this writing, in the US alone, more than 30,000,000 people have lost their jobs, the stock market is swinging dramatically, annual growth for 2020 is projected to be in the range of -5%. A shocking level of social unrest has sprung forth directly on the heels of the pandemic. It is impossible to say if the pandemic opened the door to the social unrest or systemic racism (the purported root cause) was a kettle waiting to boil over and the pandemic simply added fuel to the fire. Clearly both events have caused major business disruption and demand demonstrable actions from organizations (public, private, and governmental) and their leaders. The business disruption will not

just go away on its own for events of this magnitude. There is every indication that such events will continue into the foreseeable future, forcing leaders to refocus the way they lead to meet the challenges they present. There have, however, been several success stories worth noting as leaders struggle to address the challenges of COVID-19 and the social unrest.

New operating models. Technology-based businesses are booming, especially those helping individuals work remotely. For example, a company that offers online video conferencing services recently announced plans to hire 500 technology workers to keep up with the pace of growth. Similar stories exist for other "essential" businesses associated with industries such as transportation of goods, food suppliers, auto repair, television media, etc. Other companies are adapting and learning new ways of doing business. Perhaps the best example can be found in the restaurant industry where takeout and food delivery have moved from a customer convenience to a customer and business necessity. Those who are approaching the COVID-19 crisis with an entrepreneurial spirit are finding niches for new products from protective clothing to in home gaming and entertainment.

Social unrest responses. There are also companies successfully taking on the social unrest and confronting systemic racism with actions that extend far beyond what some view as the "lip service" of the past. The leaders of these companies quickly recognized that the issues being protested in the US, and internationally, could be equally as disruptive as a stock market crash or a global pandemic, perhaps more disruptive. Leaders experiencing success are challenging themselves to listen more and take responsive action, aspects of leadership competencies

that have never been more important than they are today.

These are just a few of the encouraging signs that there will indeed be a rebound from the business disruption created by COVID-19 and the social unrest that has followed. Many are projecting a rebound that could exceed pre-COVID-19 economic levels. Entrepreneurs and businesspeople will lead the way transforming the skills and competencies morphing into the leaders who thrive in the New Normal.

Employee Disruption

COVID-19 and civil unrest have proven to be equally disruptive for employees, resulting in long-term shifts in the employee/employer relationship and workplace practices. While the expression, "We're all in the same boat," plays multiple times daily on all media platforms, a more apt expression might be, "We're all in the same storm, but we're in different boats." Everyone has experienced some change and stress from the pandemic, but the experiences differ greatly. Skyrocketing unemployment, weeks of isolation that turned into months, and work environments suddenly being classified as high-risk have left many employees uncertain about the future and with a higher expectation of employers moving forward. Common themes already surfacing include, workplace safety, flexible work arrangements (e.g., work from home), and the relationship with one's manager and co-workers.

Workplace safety. Physical safety and security will take on a new meaning in the workplace. Safety within the work environment will include a "clean" workplace. This can come from better facilities' standards to create appropriate distancing and cleaning protocols, as well as flexibility and support to work remotely.

Inclusion. Emerging emotional safety and encouraging dialogues around inequality and company practices that support inclusion for all are becoming more common. Certain demographic and employee groups will be impacted by this new environment more than others, affecting established diversity and inclusion efforts. For example, working families and essential workers will continue to be challenged with childcare as schools determine how and when students will return to the classroom.

Flexible work arrangements. While the trend for more flexible work environments, including working from home, was underway prior to recent events, this trend is accelerating, even in companies that were skeptical about remote workers maintaining productivity. Many companies are realizing that their workforce can continue working remotely and see the associated financial benefits. Approximately 30% of the workforce will work from home multiple days per week by 2021 (Kelly, 2020). Employers will most likely provide complete remote working options or offer periodic office attendance options. For many employees, this will assist with commuting and managing family needs. Some employees, however, will not welcome these changes or want these options as the employee will miss the camaraderie that being with colleagues brings as part of the job.

Work relationships. Remote employees need to show initiative to build and maintain strong relationships with managers and colleagues. Employees will want to continue to develop and progress in their career, which requires involvement from their manager. It will be important to consider how to proactively develop interactions with one's manager to ensure that work is being acknowledged and employees are getting the

assignments and exposure necessary to fuel growth and development. Managers will also need to be more aware of being inclusive when assigning development opportunities across employees. As companies re-evaluate their Diversity/Inclusion strategies, there will be a continued or renewed focus on development for diverse employees. Executing development plans has always required discipline and follow-up to ensure a return on the investment. This will only become more challenging in virtual work environments. Employees will need to ensure they are getting the coaching needed to stay on track with the agreed upon work goals. Essential employees who do not have an option to work from home will also experience a new way of working with a manager and colleagues. Social distancing and masks create a new dynamic that could strain relationships if these relationships are not proactively nurtured.

Culture. Companies will also need to be thoughtful about how they maintain social connections among their employees, which helps drive the company's culture. Cultures that had existing rituals and norms in their work practices may have an edge in maintaining their culture in a virtual environment (e.g., consulting firms with distributed workforces). Other companies will need to cultivate new ways to reinforce their values and culture virtually. Some examples, like daily company updates for all employees, are already surfacing and proving to be practices worth sustaining. Leaders who are more empathetic to their people's experiences and deliver on their needed changes will lead the way and thrive in the New Normal.

Leadership in Transition

So, what does all this mean for leaders? Given the upheaval in the external environment, the first order of business is the business itself. Keeping with Einstein's notion that "the questions are the same," a SWOT analysis is still a great tool with which to ask the right questions, although leaders will need to conduct the SWOT with less information than in the past. They will have to base their assessment on best guesses. Some leadership teams use scenario planning (Schwartz, 1991) to model several likely future scenarios and use those possible futures to develop multiple business strategies.

Unfortunately, there are no templates to copy, or other shortcuts for this work; each business has a unique set of internal and external conditions and must pursue this process independently.

Historically, crises have shaken up the status quo and have asymmetric effects across industries and companies within industries. After the global crisis that was World War II, a new world order emerged. The pre-war global powers, France, Germany, and Great Britain ceded the top spots to the US and the Soviet Union. Likewise, the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 resulted in a major gasoline price spike in the US. Over the next year, Japanese auto manufacturers, with their more fuel-efficient cars, saw US sales increase dramatically while US manufacturers experienced the opposite effect (Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Brooks, and Mulloy, 2015).

In another study of over 4000 public companies following the last recessions, Gulati, Nohria and Wohlgezogen (2010) found that while 17% of public companies went bankrupt, were acquired, or were taken private, 9% of the companies thrived – recovering to their post-recession levels and going on to outperform competitors by over 10%. The study notes that while winning during a crisis might be attributed to "right place, right time" (or luck), how a company performs after the crisis is due to their financial health at the end of the crisis and the sometimes bold strategy adopted by their leaders.

Experiences shape personality and one's perception of reality. The second quarter of 2020 was clearly a unique time, and no one was spared the stresses from the pandemic; but, the individual experiences changed each person differently. Think of the experience of a single parent with school-aged children, working from home, being the spouse of an ICU nurse, a cancer survivor with a compromised immune system, or being in a family with an elderly parent who became ill in a nursing home. Different experiences coupled with personal characteristics and behavioral tendencies, like resilience and emotionality, will determine how each views each day post-crisis.

For some individuals, there may be little or no obvious change. Others may be excited to return to work and arrive with a new appreciation for its role in their life. Still others may react more negatively than they did pre-crisis. The cancer survivor may express displeasure with co-workers not wearing masks, the single parent may miss the role of daily caregiver who enjoyed working from home and may not be happy about having to commute to an office again. Still others may question whether they want to work in a "nonessential" (or "essential") business anymore at all, while some may question whether the company did enough to help the employees during the crisis. How will leaders address these "changed" employees?

In addition to the changes in employees, the work environment is changing. Safety procedures will be different. To help protect workers and customers, some companies will

allow a much higher percentage of workers to continue to work from home. The wearing of masks or daily monitoring of temperatures might be instituted and will be a constant reminder that things are not back to the way they were. What happens when an essential employee tells his manager that he encountered someone with Covid-19 and needs to quarantine for two weeks despite having no symptoms and feels fine? What happens when a co-worker comes to the leader and questions the coworker's alleged exposure?

Many staff meetings, one-on-ones, and town halls may continue to happen, but occur online. All the above changes will render some traditional leadership "best practices," like managing by walking around, ineffective. While it may be easy to determine what will not work in a geographically remote, virtually connected world, it may be a trial and error process to determine what does. For example, what is the best practice for ensuring a positive team culture? What replaces that quick, "How are things at home?" discussion on the way to the coffee maker? What replaces a closed-door one-on-one discussion that happens when a manager notices an upset employee?

In most cases, the "leading people" part of a leader's role will not change. She or he will likely still be involved in hiring and onboarding, determining, and communicating goals and standards, managing performance, building effective teams, motivating, coaching, and developing; but, given that the work environment and the people themselves have changed, the specifics of how leaders can most effectively perform their role and thrive in the post-crisis world will need to change.
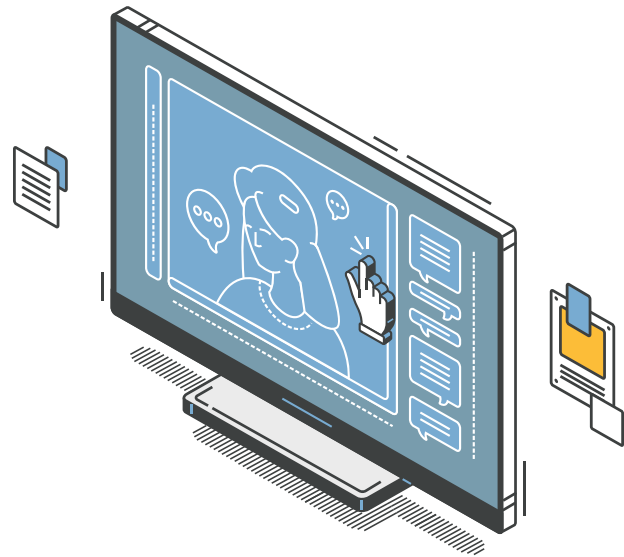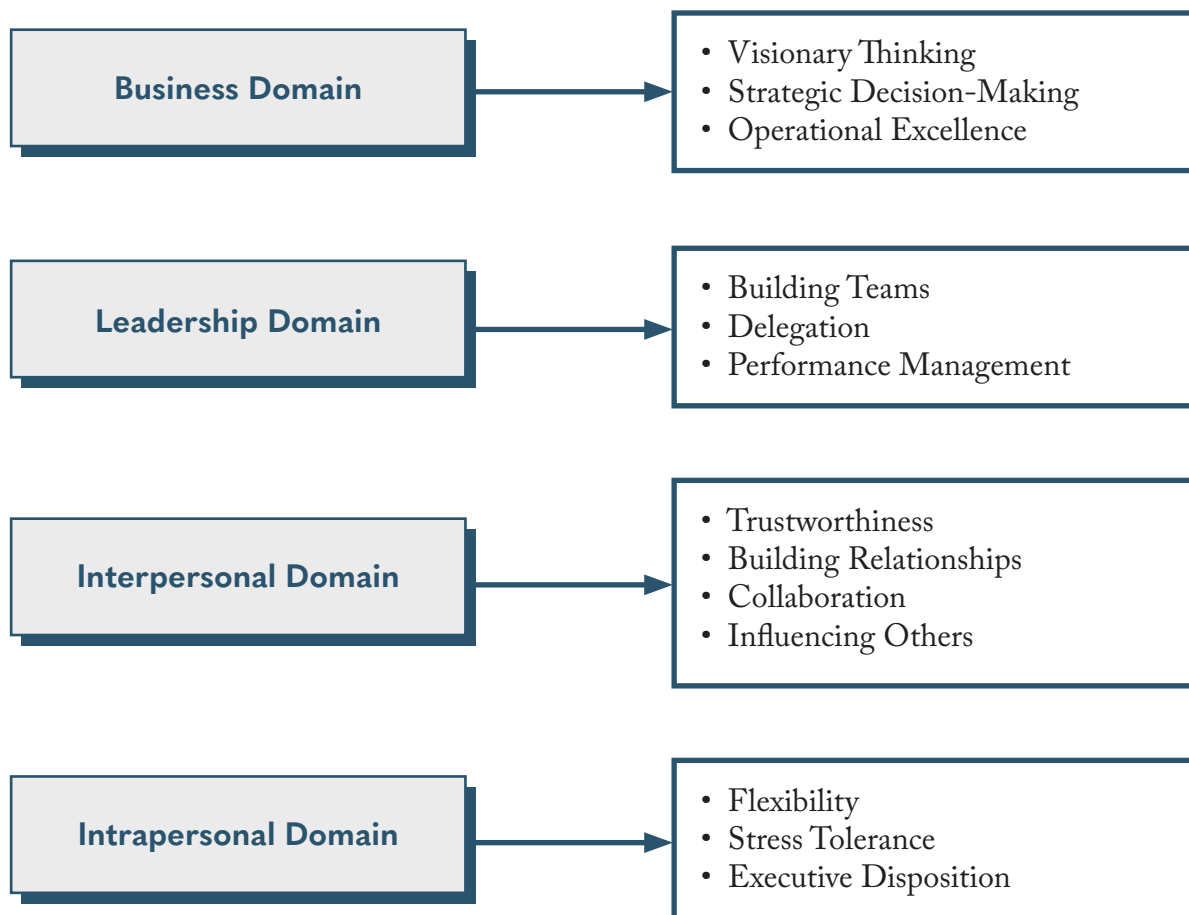
Domain Model

Thriving, successful leaders will cultivate a range of New Normal competencies. The Domain Model, a useful organizing heuristic for competencies, captures most of the competencies that commonly occur in business, specifically the business, leadership, interpersonal and intrapersonal domains. (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003; Hogan, Hogan & Warrenfeltz 2007; Warrenfeltz & Kellett, 2016).

- *Business Domain –* competencies done on one's own and involves information processing

- *Leadership Domain –* competencies required to effectively manage others

- *Interpersonal Domain –* competencies used to interact with others

- *Intrapersonal Domain –* self-regulatory competencies considered to be at the core of how one approaches any work assignment

These four domains are developmentally related. Intrapersonal competencies often are formed early in life, followed by interpersonal, leadership, and business competencies. The earlier in life a competency forms, the more difficult it is to change. For example, developing financial competencies (Business Domain) is easier than developing a competency like initiative (Intrapersonal Domain). The following diagram (Figure 1) illustrates the Competency Domains with sample, aligned competencies.

Figure 1: Domain Model

| Business Domain | • Visionary Thinking
• Strategic Decision-Making
• Operational Excellence |

| Leadership Domain | • Building Teams
• Delegation
• Performance Management |

| Interpersonal Domain | • Trustworthiness
• Building Relationships
• Collaboration
• Influencing Others |

| Intrapersonal Domain | • Flexibility
• Stress Tolerance
• Executive Disposition |

Successfully transitioning and thriving in the New Normal will require competency strengths associated with each of these domains. Some of these strengths will build on competencies that have been ever-present in great leaders. Some competencies will require a shift in focus and others may be new, requiring focused development. Table 1 illustrates each domain with a description of the competencies likely needed to thrive in the New Normal.

Table 1 – Domain Model with Associated Competencies

Business Domain Competencies related to the processing of information to address business challenges.		
Traditional Competencies	**Emerging Focus**	**Impact**
Visionary Thinking Envisioning a future state for the business in which the performance of the business will grow and thrive against the competition.		This competency will continue to be the single biggest challenge for leaders regardless of events of the magnitude of COVID-19. Innovation is the only real modifier and it tends to fall in the Intrapersonal Domain.
Strategic Decision-Making Identifying and establishing the goals, objectives, and priorities necessary to advance toward the envisioned future state.	**Strategic Anticipation** Applying judgment and wisdom to anticipate variables that could shut down or severely disrupt operations.	The change to this competency is like adding a fourth side to a prism. COVID-19 demonstrated a level of business disruption that few considered possible – a full shutdown of the economy.
Operational Excellence Evaluating all available information and making the operational decisions necessary to achieve goals, objectives, and priorities; making operational adjustments as needed to overcome business performance barriers.	**Virtual Management** Using virtual management techniques. **Digital Fluency** Learning and applying appropriate digital tools. **Contingency Cost Management** Managing costs to handle major business disruption.	Of the competencies often associated with the Business Domain, Operational Excellence has been the most severely impacted by COVID-19. Leaders will have to become experts in virtual management, digital technology, and financial preparedness to ensure survival in a future business disruption of the magnitude of COVID-19.

Leadership Domain Competencies related to leading people.		
Traditional Competencies	**Emerging Focus**	**Impact**
Building Teams Developing the structure and guiding the creation of a cohesive and effective team; facilitating the completion of team goals.	*Virtual Team Building* Developing structure and guiding the creation of a cohesive and effective team despite diverse backgrounds, locations, and time schedules, by leveraging technological solutions.	"Going virtual" allows businesses greater flexibility to hire the best talent regardless of location, reduce commute and travel times and provide expanded work schedules. Traditional high touch methods for building teams and running meetings will not work with virtual teams and will require new capabilities.
Delegation Allocating decision-making or task responsibility to others, to maximize the organization's and individuals' effectiveness.	*Planful Empowerment* Allocating responsibilities to maximize results, develop skills and experience, and give visibility; establishing effective two-way update and coaching flows.	With the expansion of virtual working arrangements, some of the traditional aspects of delegation, such as guidance or coaching as needed, establishing procedures to keep informed of issues and results in areas of shared responsibility, become more problematic. A more planful approach is required.
Performance Management Ensuring that the set of activities and outputs performed by direct reports meets the organization's goals in an effective and efficient manner; providing opportunities to develop skills for enhanced performance.	*Personalized Performance Management* Ensuring that the processes for setting goals and standards, monitoring results, and coaching and developing talent are effective given each team member's individual personal situation.	With the advent of virtual teams and non-standard work schedules, the acts of establishing goals and work standards, monitoring results, providing development opportunities, and coaching all need to be tailored toward each individual team member's personal situation.

Interpersonal Domain
Competencies related to building and maintaining relationships.

Traditional Competencies	Emerging Focus	Impact
Trustworthiness Trust is comprised of an individual's character and competence. Attributes of a strong, positive character include integrity, doing the right thing, honesty, and keeping commitments.	**Vulnerability** Emotionally connecting to others and their experiences (Brown, 2018). Demonstrating authenticity, empathy, and active listening. Being willing to show emotion and admit mistakes.	Trustworthiness has become a requirement for effective leaders. Vulnerability is becoming an increasingly critical and accepted component to build trust. (Cohn & U.S. Rangan, 2020). Behaving in a more caring and humane way to encourage a sense of "psychological safety" will be necessary.
Building Relationships Builds trust-base relationships with people by treating them with dignity, respect, and fairness, while valuing their diversity in background and views.	**Social Respect** Accepting and practicing a new level of interpersonal sensitivity that recognizes individual life circumstances and challenges of maintaining work-life balance.	Building relationships will require a greater degree of interpersonal sensitivity as work and life become increasingly intertwined in a work from home world. Plus, casual interactions will decline, giving way to the need for more scheduled and purposeful interactions.
Collaboration Developing positive working relationships that emphasize team accomplishment in conjunction with individual contribution.	**Virtual Networking** Leading and coordinating the accomplishment of work across boundaries often under virtual circumstances or with remote co-workers.	Work requiring multiple team members and working across boundaries will be even more challenging, requiring individuals coming together that have little familiarity with each other with more empowerment to act.
Influencing Others Creating and executing influence strategies that persuade stakeholders to act, advancing business goals, objectives, and shared interests.	**Communication Sincerity** Communicating openly and sincerely through multiple media that informs and reassures people's confidence and faith.	Multimedia communications will become central with more remote work. Using video and/or audio tools to communicate emotions such as passion and sincerity without face-to-face interactions will be essential.

Intrapersonal Domain		
Competencies related to the way one approaches challenges in the workplace.		
Traditional Competencies	**Emerging Focus**	**Impact**
Flexibility The ability to modify or change a course of action to manage situational realities more efficiently or effectively.	*Responsive Agility* The ability and willingness to successfully deal with uncertainty, ambiguous situations, and rapidly changing conditions. Finding ways to get work done as efficiently as possible.	How effectively a leader responds to a crisis or changing environments determines how successfully they will survive and thrive moving forward. Today's realities require more than being flexible. An agile leader is flexible, adaptable, and rapidly responsive.
Stress Tolerance The degree to which an individual can effectively and consistently manage difficult or challenging situations with minimal anxiety.	*Grit* Having the passion and perseverance to achieve long-term goals in the face of adversity and bouncing back after struggling or failing (Duckworth, 2016).	Leaders will need to go beyond managing stress and need to demonstrate resilience and grit during tough times to overcome obstacles, leading to more curiosity and innovation. (Folkman, 2020).
Executive Disposition Leading others in an authentic way while demonstrating poise, confidence, and a positive attitude that reassures others and commands respect.	*Self-Calibration* Managing and motivating oneself in new and challenging situations, requiring self-monitoring one's emotional, mental, and physical abilities, or acquiring new skills, as needed based on the situation at hand (National Research Council, 2011).	The changing landscape of the work setting from "work from home" to "physically distanced" office settings will require leaders to modify how they conduct themselves in these new work environments. Employees will have more autonomy, requiring managers to have more innovative and proactive approaches to engage teams and colleagues.

Jump Start Thriving

The signs of emerging from the COVID-19 crisis are starting to show up everywhere. Even with the continued presence of the virus, the stock market is rebounding. Businesses are opening in some capacity. Some states are relaxing restrictions. The question remains as to which businesses will thrive in the New Normal.

Leaders are looking for ways to gain a competitive advantage as the recovery gains strength. The focus on traditional competencies will be changing, and leaders will need to take specific actions to accelerate their personal growth and the growth of the people they lead. We recommend actions in four areas to help leaders jump start their ability to thrive in the New Normal.

1. Organization Change Workshop

Leaders need to make sure that employees have an opportunity to discuss the New Normal and the changes that will be needed to thrive. These discussions are underway across many organizations and are instrumental in the change process. A systematic Organization Change Workshop can be a key component and accelerate the process of change, getting people on the same page and working together to achieve a common vision. An Organization Change Workshop can be an excellent initial step, bringing leaders together to structure a systematic path to change. An effective workshop can be conducted over several sessions in a virtual format covering:

- *Purpose* – Mission, vision, values, & competencies

- *Strategies* - The way the organization competes

- *Systems* – The way work is processed

- *Structure* – The way people are organized

- *Behavior* – The way people transact business

The Organization Change Workshop creates an actionable change plan, implemented over 4-6 months.

2. Leader Assessment/Selection & Onboarding Process

New leaders will be an important consideration for many organizations. A structured assessment process helps to ensure that new leaders exemplify the emerging competency focus. A well validated process includes:

- *Situational Context Assessment* – identifying unique aspects of the culture that may play an important role in determining a candidate's fit.

- *Individual Assessment* – focuses on cognitive, personality, and motivational characteristics that are at the foundation of the leadership competencies.

- *Structured Interviewing* – based on individual assessment results.

The results of the components should be combined in a decision-making format that provides managers with the data necessary to make accurate hiring decisions and facilitate onboarding.

3. Leadership Assessment/Feedback & Coaching

Strategic self-awareness will be key to successful performance of current leaders in the New Normal. It combines insight into one's own behaviors with a deep understanding of the situational context in which those behaviors are performed. Feedback and coaching includes:

- *Situational Context Assessment*

- *Individual Assessment*

- *Feedback and Aspiration Planning*

- *Ongoing Coaching Sessions*

These components can be combined into a 6-9-month engagement that can help leaders make a smooth transition into the demands of the New Normal.

4. Team Development Workshop

Finally, a Team Development Workshop brings leaders together, forming a cohesive team, focused on meeting the challenges of the New Normal. A Team Development Workshop can be customized to meet the demands unique to each organization, but should include the following components:

- *Foundation Building* – team member interviews, gathering data on team challenges.

- *Theme and Message* – workshop theme with supporting goals, objectives, and agenda.

- *Optional Modules* – customization options to meet unique organizational demands.

  - *Culture Change* – preparing a team to take on a culture change process.

  - *Diversity and Inclusion* – raising awareness regarding diversity and inclusion issues.

  - *Organizational Survey* – an action plan addressing organizational survey data.

  - *Strategic Self-Awareness* – assessments providing individual and team performance insights.

  - *Team Charter* – building operating principles necessary for team success.

- *Leader Debrief* – workshop summary report with leader debrief.

- *Scorecard Development* – scorecard used by the team to calibrate ongoing results.

This format is sufficiently flexible to be divided into sessions, conducted across multiple days, and delivered in a virtual format.

Summary

COVID-19 and the subsequent social unrest has dramatically impacted business worldwide. Events of this magnitude are viewed as unprecedented and create challenges thought to be insurmountable. Mankind has faced many challenges of similar magnitude of COVID-19 and the current social unrest. There is always a way forward.

Great leaders rise to the occasion and find a way to not just survive crises but thrive.

Great leaders leverage traditional leadership competencies while refocusing on behaviors that provide a sustainable competitive advantage in the New Normal.

This paper systematically outlines traditional and emerging leadership competencies that will help leaders effectively refocus and thrive in the New Normal. The paper also describes four action areas that leaders can use to jump start thriving. Leaders must always chart their own course in times of crisis. The competencies and action areas described throughout this paper offer leaders and their organizations a roadmap to creating a custom approach to accelerate progress beyond the current crises and thrive in the New Normal.

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