

The logo for Optimal Consulting Group, featuring the word "optimal" in a blue, lowercase, sans-serif font. A small blue dot is positioned above the letter 'i'.

Developing Leaders. Optimising Performance.

A dynamic background image showing a large splash of water in the center, with numerous water droplets suspended in the air. The scene is set against a sunset or sunrise sky, with a warm orange and yellow glow on the left side that fades into a darker blue on the right. The water surface is dark and reflects the light from the sky.

THE NEW NORMAL LEADER

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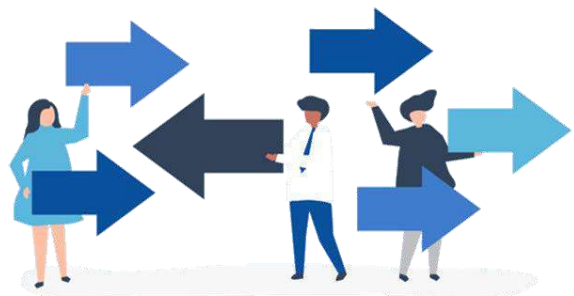
PREAMBLE

On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organisation announced an outbreak of “pneumonia of unknown cause” in a Chinese city, Wuhan. We now know that this respiratory illness, known as COVID-19, is caused by a coronavirus and is highly infectious, spreading via human-to-human transmission.

What started as an epidemic in Mainland China has now grown into a global pandemic with devastating impact on the whole of humanity. While individuals experience shifts to their lifestyles and disruption of livelihoods, organisations — in both public and private sectors — have had to grapple with the world economy in free fall and the ever-evolving nature of the crisis.

For many of us, our lives have taken a drastic turn that seems inconceivable just five months ago, when we bid farewell to 2019 and welcomed 2020. We now think about the world in terms of before-and-after, wondering what the future holds for us. While we may hope for life to return to normal after a vaccine is discovered and the disease is eradicated, it is more likely than ever that this life-altering event will leave profound and lasting effects on the way we live and work.

*How can leaders bounce back from ravages of the pandemic and move forward in a crisis that currently has no end in sight, while ensuring that people whom they lead remain equally **resilient**?*



*We think that leaders have to approach their situations with a radically different mindset, one that involves thinking in terms of a new normal and embracing it. **Leading in the new normal will thus require setting new norms, which calls for quite a different set of leadership competencies.** We propose the following competencies, which should be viewed as a synergistic set and executed in combination, rather than one without the others.*

LEAD THE FUTURE (NOT LEAD FOR THE MOMENT)

In the short term, survival and recovery will be a leader's topmost concerns. Once these priorities have been addressed, what lies ahead?

In the new normal, it is not business as usual. Leaders who can bring their organisations and teams to greater heights are not only performance-driven but also far-sighted. With a radically different business landscape, these leaders need to take a long view, envisioning the road ahead and anticipating trends for tomorrow's success. As their situations evolve, they should be prepared to reshape their strategies.

Many organisations will find themselves at a turning point; they can no longer operate via tried-and-tested means, and must seek to reinvent themselves. Leaders who will flourish in the post-crisis era will have one quality in common: ingenuity. They dare to break with precedent and think outside the box for new ways to grow. Since innovation carries risk, the most astute leaders are also adept at spotting ideas with the greatest potential for success, before they take the leap.

From perfume factories making hand sanitisers to carmakers producing ventilators, we have heard of countless moments of innovation and experimentation over the course of this crisis. Leaders can take heart from these examples, and know that there is a place for them and their businesses in the new normal, as long as they approach their situations with an eye to the future.



- Perspective
- Innovation
- Take Risks

LEAD THE FUTURE

*In short, for a New Normal Leader to **LEAD THE FUTURE** competently, he/she needs to have **PERSPECTIVE, INNOVATION** and be able to **TAKE RISKS**.*

SELF LEADERSHIP

Change starts from oneself. For organisations and teams to successfully adapt to the new normal, leaders have to be at the heart of that change. This is often easier said than done, given that leaders are also human with fears and doubts, and all the more so in such dark times.

Leaders who will thrive through the crisis and in a post-pandemic world are the ones who can reframe their negative thoughts, seeing hope where others do not and viewing the crisis in terms of possibilities. They can be described as realistically optimistic — cognisant of the challenges ahead, yet not daunted.

Preventive measures due to the pandemic have forced most of the workforce to telecommute, prompting us to rethink the way we work. Leaders who perceive working from home as a positive disruption, placing the pros above the cons, will be in the right frame of mind to embrace change. For many, this unprecedented turn of events spells opportunity to reskill and/or upskill themselves in preparation for an increasingly digital workplace.

*In a nutshell, a New Normal Leader needs to exemplify **SELF LEADERSHIP** competencies of **ADAPTABILITY, REALISTIC OPTIMISM** and **LEARNING AGILITY**.*



The most agile leaders will seek to put learning in context, applying their newly gained experiences to their situations for the benefit of their organisations and teams, rather than just themselves.

Given the rise of telecommuting, future-oriented leaders will build upon this trend and lessons learnt from their personal work-from-home experiences to kickstart digital transformation within their organisations and teams. This can give rise to possibilities and new growth areas for leaders to explore, and also illustrates how a true-blue New Normal Leader can Lead the Future, while also possessing Self Leadership.

PEOPLE LEADERSHIP

In such trying times, it is typical for employees to look to authority for support and reassurance. With their personal resilience as a starting point, leaders play a critical role in tiding their organisations and teams over and beyond the pandemic.

The impact on businesses has been severe, and the road to recovery appears prolonged, with many major economies on the verge of recession. Inevitably, there will be hard decisions to make on wage cuts and layoffs that hurt livelihoods. Therefore, leaders in the new normal must not only show empathy, but also display a great deal of courage to broach uncomfortable yet necessary topics with those affected.

For remaining employees, experiencing the crisis and its fallout can be hugely demoralising. More than ever, leaders who understand their raison d'être will be able to lift their team members' spirits with possibilities of a better future. These leaders and their teams will emerge from the pandemic with a renewed sense of commitment, motivated to overcome challenges together.



- Interpersonal Courage
- Bring Others Along
- Political Savvy

PEOPLE LEADERSHIP

*Briefly, a New Normal Leader needs to have effective **PEOPLE LEADERSHIP**, which is achieved by demonstrating **INTERPERSONAL COURAGE** and **POLITICAL SAVVY**, along with the ability to **BRING OTHERS ALONG**.*

PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW NORMAL

While leaders are key to galvanising organisations and teams, the most effective ones will do so with clarity. They think and act with a clear head, driving for performance in a purposeful manner.

More crucially, to keep their teams involved, these leaders know that establishing a strong line of communication is key. In times of turbulence, employees depend upon their leaders for the truth. Therefore, leaders must be honest when delivering messages, readily admitting when they do not have the answers. To rally their people around a purpose, leaders first need to be convincing with their words and actions.

Given the seismic shifts expected in the post-pandemic world, many business models risk becoming obsolete. Leaders navigating these uncharted waters will have to remap the direction and recalibrate plans for their teams. They need to work with a strong solution focus, actively searching for ways to solve problems and not dwell on them.

Those who will excel in leading the crisis and the aftermath are able to move at speed, recognising that there are no perfect plans and solutions. Even with change and uncertainty abound, an effective leader in the new normal will remain anchored to the organisation's core purpose, making decisions without losing sight of what really matters.

*To sum up, a New Normal Leader needs to step up to **PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP** by being **PURPOSE-DRIVEN**, having a **SOLUTION FOCUS** and ensuring that he/she will **COMMUNICATE TO WIN**.*



- Purpose-Driven
- Solution Focus
- Communicate to Win

PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP

LOOK OUT BLIND SPOTS TO STAY CREDIBLE AND COACHABLE

It has been forecasted that humanity will witness multiple waves of infection before we can end the pandemic once and for all. Similarly, leaders will experience ebbs and flows in their respective journeys to stabilise and build up their organisations and teams.

The competencies of Self Leadership, People Leadership, Performance Leadership and Lead the Future are best viewed as an iterative process, during which a leader should refine his/her approach as he/she advances through the crisis and into the new normal. An additional quality of being coachable ensures that the leader can stand the test of time: trying, failing and trying again until he/she succeeds.

NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON RESILIENCE LEADERSHIP

- Arrogance
- Self-Blame
- Blame Others
- Impulsivity
- Habitual Distrust
- Lack of Accountability
- Emotional Dependence



Leaders who have the ability to be coached are, in essence, willing to be vulnerable. To begin, they are self-aware, recognising that they are not perfect (and do not try to be). They have a sound understanding of their weaknesses, which can include

BLIND SPOTS that may impair their effectiveness.

Such **red flag characteristics** can often creep into leaders when they are in the midst of the storm. For example, some leaders have a tendency to play the blame game when mistakes happen, attributing the problem to others and even themselves, instead of fixing it and moving on. Other leaders can be increasingly reluctant to take charge as the crisis worsens, failing in their responsibility to their teams.

Eventually, these leaders can appear to lack accountability, greatly eroding trust with their teams. Many leaders may also lack self-restraint and strength of will, failing to remain consistent by matching their words with deeds and honouring their commitments. In the eyes of others, these leaders have failed to manage themselves, and cannot be depended upon. Unbeknown to such leaders, they are creating a credibility gap between themselves and their people, calling into question their character and competence.

Nevertheless, the most **COACHABLE LEADERS WILL BE ABLE TO ISOLATE THESE BLIND SPOTS BEFORE THEY TAKE ROOT.** By dropping their defences, these leaders have the humility to seek help and advice from others, while opening themselves up to constructive criticism. In addition, they are able to let go of any preconceived notions, stepping out of their comfort zones to change for the better.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the saying goes, leadership is most tested in a crisis. For most leaders, the COVID-19 pandemic is a trial by fire, stretching them to their limits. Mediocrity is no longer an option, and only leaders with the fiercest resolve will triumph in the aftermath and the new normal.

We believe that the hallmark of a New Normal Leader is resilient leadership, which has to be present on all fronts and at every step of the leader's journey. Unprecedented times call for an unprecedented approach to leadership. In this period of upheaval with information overload, we hope that the above-proposed competencies of a New Normal Leader provide a coherent framework and a beacon for all leaders in these dark times.



This article is written based on Optimal Consulting Group's researched and validated Resilient Leadership Model. Please contact us for Resilient Leadership assessment and development programme.

About Optimal Consulting Group (OCG)

OCG is Hogan Assessment Systems distributor in Singapore, Malaysia, China, Hong Kong and Japan and the author of Optimal 4Cs Talent Review and Succession Model, Resilient Leadership Model, The Fruitful Team Model and Optimal e360. OCG partners clients to build a continuous pipeline of future leaders in Asia for social, economic and political roles.

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