



Shifting horizons in a new world

Reflections on conversations with HR/L&D
Leaders and Global Leadership Consultants



The
Oxford
Group

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Foreword

In the midst of the challenges, chaos and uncertainty of COVID-19, The Oxford Group has been privileged to bear witness to the courage, authenticity and resourcefulness of our clients and partners as they seek to find ways of being and doing in a world that is unexpected and uncertain.

One particular forum includes a series of 'Open Mind' sessions dedicated to HR and L&D Leaders. The invitation has been to create a space to take time amongst peers so that insights, fears, experience and ideas are shared.

In addition to this, we have gathered insight from clients and consultants based in every corner of the globe with whom we have been in close contact collectively and individually.

As an organisation dedicated to exploring and learning, it seems important to step back, to capture and to share some of the themes that have emerged over the last six months from our clients, our consultants and academic articles that will provide insights and also questions for all of us to consider as we move onto the next stage of our journey.

Jane Aubriet-Beausire
Principal Consultant & Executive Coach,
The Oxford Group

1. A return to what is essential

The first theme we have observed is a clear focus on what is essential. As the pandemic took hold and markets began to lock down, organisations responded with a focus on the wellbeing of their people whilst also working to keep businesses running.

In the first few weeks of intense need, we supported our clients as they made key decisions about planned learning and coaching events. Within organisations and between organisations we witnessed conversations with greater levels of transparency, questions being asked with an openness to explore possibilities, creative solutions that forced everyone out of their comfort zones, uncomfortable dialogues that couldn't be avoided or pushed aside ... and all of this with tremendous levels of enforced trust and care, as though we had no choice but to be present and exemplify the leadership we have so often discussed.

The forced reminder of how precious life is and how unexpectedly vulnerable we are, allowed us to connect and resonate emotionally and fundamentally, regardless of our culture, gender, status, or perspective. It also allowed us to experience and appreciate the importance of how emotion is a powerful ally in being present as a leader – an idea which our participants have often acknowledged and are now fully embracing.

Now that we are no longer in those first few weeks where everything was so intense and almost surreal, it seems important to reflect on the value of focusing on what is essential and how we can continue to focus on this, as we navigate our disrupted organisational and social landscapes.

Perhaps we can begin by asking ourselves the following questions:

- Are we focusing on what's essential?
- Do we know what really matters to our stakeholders right now? What about in the mid to long term?
- How can we create the conditions of success needed for ourselves, our stakeholders, and the wider community?
- What could we let go of right now?



2. Organisational transformation

Conversations amongst leaders shared that whilst organisations shift and change over time, the last year has shaped organisational transformation at pace and in significant ways.

Personal connection

The first element to become apparent is the need for connection. This resonates with a return to what is essential and refers to a definite need for people to connect and to feel connected. Connected to each other, to the organisation, to clients and to the wider community. This was observed and shared in terms of people missing the casual connections they have in the workplace. HR is seeking how to maintain strong connections with

employees, teams are exploring how to hold virtual space to connect and share best practice and how to maintain inclusion across the organisation. The power of conversation – real conversations about real issues where some people have felt closer than ever to their teams, colleagues and clients. There was also the paradox of feeling less connected and at the same time, privy to a greater level of intimacy as we observed elements of each other's lives that would not normally be visible.

Adapting to the new world

Everyone agrees that our world has certainly changed and what was shared is the need to accompany others to adapt to this new world. It's a world that is emerging rather than defined and this means we need to shape and be part of the change rather than simply to respond or react to it. This requires a different mindset and organisations are asking themselves how to manage the cultural and mental shift towards a new world and a new normal now that the initial crisis is over. From a practical perspective this includes how we work, how expectations from stakeholders have changed and how products and services will need to evolve as well as the entire value chain being committed to bringing them to market.

The new workplace

The new workplace refers to the challenges organisations are experiencing as we grapple with how to adapt to new ways of working and engaging employees. First and foremost, organisations are ensuring their employees are safe and they also need to explore how to support their success and engagement in the short, mid and long term.

Not all employees have the necessary logistics to work from home and others have roles that require them to work elsewhere. In addition to this, issues around travelling, health and safety regulations, PPE, social distancing,

quarantine and local and national government guidelines are continually shifting so organisations have to work with this constant flux to make sure they find the balance between getting results and maintaining wellbeing, especially when there are no blueprints to follow. This is also a big challenge for managers and leaders to maintain a cohesive team as they guide and support individuals working from home as well as others working from the office and operational sites. A new polarity appears in an already complex system.

This is a challenge in the short term but what will be the consequences of this in the long term on organisations and their cultures? Culture is formed in the spaces where people physically gather so if those spaces are no longer used in the same way or people are dispersed in new and unpredictable ways, where will the culture live? We see organisations questioning the value of keeping office space and considering how to anchor their culture without a physical location. Particularly with organisations that place a lot of emphasis on their physical and architectural legacy.

Managing wellbeing

Organisations have shared that transforming the organisation is not only about the practices of work and how we adjust but also how we take care of employees and support their wellbeing during a period of intense change and uncertainty.

As individual and collective psychological safety is challenged by the COVID context, organisations recognise the need to manage people's fear and anxiety so as not to be in a constant flight or fight mode. In addition to this, the current economic context, with organisations needing to respond with changes to work, mean that managing wellbeing must remain at the heart of organisational transformation.

This begins with leaders and managers ensuring they are themselves taking the space and time needed to acknowledge their own mindset so as to support others. Organisations are also making sure they explore how to provide practical support for anxiety, mental health and stress. There is also a constant paradox between the need to safeguard employee wellbeing and at the same time safeguard organisational performance. Managing this virtually is not always easy to do and checking in and having the courage to openly ask how others are doing is essential, especially as organisations grapple with the loss of the organisation as it used to be. There will be emotion and collective grieving that needs to take place for companies to move on to new beginnings.

In considering the elements of cultural transformation that were shared in our Open Minds sessions, we invited HR and L&D leaders to explore:

- What kinds of initiatives are you putting into place to ensure that people are connecting to each other and feeling connected to the organisation?
- What is the shape of your organisation now in terms of onsite and offsite workers?
- How can you support those onsite connecting with those working from home as well as creating other forms of community?
- How can you deepen connections with all of your stakeholders as the organisation reshapes?
- How often and with whom are you having the conversations that matter?
- Where is your organisation in terms of letting go of the past and welcoming the future? How can you make space to support the transformation?
- How are you taking care of people's wellbeing and how is the organisation showing that it cares?

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We are all showing our vulnerability more - only good things have come from us letting our guard down.

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HR/L&D Leader
Open Minds Participant



3. Strategic HR and L&D focus

The current crisis has given HR/L&D functions an opportunity to demonstrate how critical they are both strategically and operationally to the outcomes and longevity of today's organisations.

The success, agility, innovation, and culture of organisations is shaped and driven by the people working within them and, therefore, the strategic focus and role of the people functions is absolutely essential.

The following themes emerged and were explored in more depth over time.

“We are changing our strategy in direct response to the pandemic. We are asking ourselves what are the core strategic priorities we need to focus on and how do we maintain a strong connection with stakeholders and employees.”

HR/L&D Leader

Strategic focus

Initially observed was a difficulty to understand where, apart from a short-term prioritisation to ensure that people were safe first and able to work second, to focus as the market was so volatile. Soon after this, however, it became apparent that the focus needed to be on how to support business success and, specifically, how to have conversations with stakeholders about what success would now look like. This to and fro in terms of now and the future was a constant, as was the need for action versus reflection and short-term versus long-term thinking. What was evident was the need for HR and L&D to provide leadership touchpoints, guidance and presence to the leadership and employee communities - demonstrating a true strategic business partner role.

Stakeholder Engagement

As organisational leaders focused on business continuity, staying afloat, and managing the crisis (and in some cases the opportunity this brought), the quality of the relationships created prior to the crisis came to the fore. Where these were strong, HR/L&D leaders had the access to the necessary influencers to be able to engage and retain their focus on building the future as well as on crisis response. Access to critical decision makers was essential and clarity around corporate governance was key as urgent and new ways of working emerged.

Role of L&D and HR

We have seen the HR/L&D community ask themselves tough questions about what is needed by the organisation and how can they be of service.

This is reflected in challenging the value of projects previously seen as a priority, the behaviours being exemplified by the leaders and teams in these functions and even questions around why learning and development functions in their current form exist and how they need to adapt. What was very clear was the importance of connection, conversations, and constant focus on how to support the business pragmatically but also strategically.

Alongside significant self challenge there was evident presence of creativity, resilience, willingness to challenge the status quo and a constant reinvention of how to partner with all stakeholders. What was striking in all the exchanges we observed in the Open Mind sessions was the willingness of participants to be vulnerable, open minded and curious as they shared their own experiences and questioned what next as they moved forward.



Virtual world

Finally, people shared that HR and L&D functions also needed to focus on how to be effective and supportive while working in a virtual world. Whether it was to explore how to make services available virtually or which services to focus on, it was clear that innovation and agility were needed.

Points of reflection from this section for organisations and professionals to think about include:

- How strong are my relationships with the key decision makers and leaders within the organisation?
- How can I facilitate the key discussions amongst stakeholder groups about how the business needs to adapt moving forward?
- What do we see as being essential in our role as HR/L&D leaders? What do we need to focus more on and what can we leave behind?
- What do we need to do to be more effective as we work in a virtual world?
- How do we need to adjust our offer and our ways of working?

4. Learning and growth

What characterises this period is the need for individuals and organisations to demonstrate agility, quick thinking, initiative, a service orientation and the capacity to explore and find alternative ways of being and doing, whilst taking decisions in a world where there is no blueprint and where things move quickly and unpredictability.

What supports organisations to do this is the way they learn, and we believe what will ensure that companies continue to grow and survive post the initial crisis is their ability to learn and grow from the experience.

We believe that for an organisation to be truly learning driven, it needs to do three fundamental things:

- Look outside of itself, noticing the wider environment, getting intensely curious about disruptions and about today's and tomorrow's disruptors
- Decide how to respond. Choose how to position itself in the landscape, deciding where and how it wants to play on the field
- Keep learning day by day – practical, applied and context rich learning, in the light of their chosen market position, equipping people to learn and also how to future proof their learning.

Adaptive leadership

Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership work has added resonance right now in how it addresses these dimensions. Organisations need to be fluid and highly adaptive in taking the strategic 'view from the balcony', in reading and positioning their 'adaptive challenges' and in creating the holding environment in which adaptive work and learning can occur.

Get on the balcony

Observe wider patterns external and internal to the organisation as well as emerging trends.

Identify the adaptive challenge(s)

A challenge for which there is no ready made 'technical' answer.

Create a holding environment

May be relationships, physical space, forums etc, where adaptive work can be undertaken.

Cook the conflict

- Create the heat
- Sequence and pace work
- Regulate the distress

Maintain disciplined attention

- Keep people focused
- Combat avoidance
- Combat move to default

Give back the work

- Invite responsibility-taking
 - Give support
 - Support learning
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An organisation may in the past have taken a process and control approach to this, using performance metrics and processes as a means to shape and direct learning.

An alternative approach is based on collaboration and the building of truly inclusive organisations. Creating conditions for people to release and apply their full potential, supported by a dynamic learning environment.

At The Oxford Group, we believe that the second way is the one organisations need right now. The limitations of the 'hero leadership' approach have been exposed over time. Decision making by executive teams acting in relative isolation from their wider businesses is limited both in range and in impact. Recent socio-economic global disruptions have dramatically illustrated how much people need to be heard, to be seen and to be included.

In the current climate, how are we:

- Supporting individuals to challenge their thinking?
- Developing curious and open mindsets conducive to growth?
- Collectively facilitating conditions for individuals and groups to share, exchange, challenge and grow from their experience?

Finally, how are we supporting individuals and organisations to be more focused on purpose and finding sense, meaning and engagement to move forward more effectively, sustainably and proactively?

"An organisation's employees could create, acquire and transfer knowledge that allows the organisation to adapt to unpredictable market conditions more quickly than competitors and by the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, an organisation can shape its future"

**Senge (1990)
Fibuch and Robertson (2017)**

A photograph of two hikers with backpacks walking across a vast, undulating sand dune under a clear sky. The hiker in the foreground is on the right, facing away from the camera, while the second hiker is further ahead on the left. The dune's surface is marked with numerous footprints, suggesting a path. The overall scene is serene and expansive.

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Inclusive and compassionate leadership has come powerfully to the fore. A mindset and behaviours that acknowledge our ‘humanness’, that welcome our diversity and value presence and space are increasingly valued.

The human and commercial value of inclusive organisations is already well evidenced. Leaders who are able to bring emotional authenticity and a willingness to be vulnerable are creating fresh models of leadership in action, reflecting many of the ideas and evolutions shared in the leadership development space

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Elizabeth McManus

Head of Research and Thought Leadership
The Oxford Group

Powerful blended solutions

To support the creation of learning environments, in the Open Mind sessions professionals spoke of the importance of the 70% rule in 70/20/10 learning where individuals are invited to review how they have grown over the last six months and what they want to incorporate into their work as a result of this?

In the learning offers now available it was shared that organisations are looking for short and sharp interventions, content that can be applied straight away, community based learning with collaboration on key topics or issues, the use of virtual resources where pairs and groups connect and discuss as well as an overall emphasis on making learning fun, efficient and applicable.

At the same time, we observe at The Oxford Group, that participants the world over, celebrate learning that allows them to connect with each other, to share their current experiences and then challenge, explore, investigate and experiment new behaviours and new ways of being and doing. They understand, at all different levels of the organisation, that there is a need for them to contribute to the more fundamental systemic and foundational changes that are taking place.

Collaboration, conversations and community

As referred to above, a focus on collaboration, conversation and community is very important and specifically as we explore how to maintain contact and connect in a more virtualised world. As we need organisations to work on accessible meaning ('meeting in hallways' as described above) and if people are not in physical offices then other opportunities for informal sharing and exchange must be made available. This means finding the spaces where people can share and create a sustainable community of learners. It's also about being very interactive and using the resources available to do this (such as learning platforms) and communities of practice.

The subject of space is often shared, and this is very important – how can we create space in terms of time amidst hectic schedules? How can we create space when people are not in one physical location but working remotely? How can we create space in terms of people feeling safe to share what is going on for them emotionally as well as practically?

How are we creating communities across groups and regions?



Making resources available

Making resources available includes assessing the right tools and also understanding what is available in a very fast evolving market. Learning Management Systems and Learning Experience Platforms are playing a vital role as platforms such as Zoom, Webex, Teams, Google Meet and additional applications such as Klaxoon, Mentimeter, etc. It remains essential for professionals to be able to share across organisations, industries and geographies.

Points to reflect from this section include:

- Where is your organisation in terms of the learning driven organisational model?
- What is available for employees to share and connect informally?
- How are you adapting your learning offer to respond to the need for fast, dynamic and community-based learning?
- What kinds of tools do you use and are they the most effective and efficient?
- How are you harvesting the learning from the organisations experiences over the last six months?

5. Sustainable leadership

Sharing during the Open Minds sessions has allowed everyone to explore and observe what leadership behaviours have been most important during the initial pandemic, and also question what will be required as we move forward.

Of interest is also how leaders can respond sustainably, both in terms of maintaining their presence and governance over time and, secondly, in terms of questioning if there are new ways of being and doing that will better serve wider stakeholder groups in the future.

"We have pressed fast forward - completely changing our strategy in working with the business. We are looking for new, different and innovative ways to partner with all our stakeholders."

HR/L&D Leader

Challenges and opportunities

The challenges and opportunities for leadership over this period have been multiple and examples shared include:

- Managing the lockdown and the immediate need for employees to be safe whilst also managing the business
- Navigating the crisis across different sites and regions with guidance being provided by governments at different speeds, with different messages and expectations
- Communication from CEOs that ranged from exceptional to non-existent and the challenges this created for the extended leadership teams
- Needs for future focus and the creation of space to explore what this might look like
- Challenges of leadership teams with strong and differing opinions leading to constant changes in crisis guidance
- Lack of management capability within the organisation rendered more visible due to the crisis
- A clearer focus on what matters in terms of deliverables rather than a focus on time spent
- Leaders being prepared to share their vulnerability amongst their peers and therefore creating dialogue and opportunities for greater trust and collaboration
- Leaders needing to focus on safety followed by business continuity today and tomorrow.

What is very clear is that leadership is necessary at all levels of the organisation and how leaders show up is more visible with greater positive or negative repercussions depending on how leaders behave. This will continue to be the case in the months ahead as companies continue to be challenged and tough people and business decisions need to be made with no guarantee of a positive outcome.

In an article by John Amis and Brian Janz entitled 'Leading Change in Response to COVID-19' they write about:

A 're-evaluation of the nature of work' and the importance of developing purpose led organisations (which aligns with the importance of learning and finding meaning shared earlier). There is a call for people in organisations to be seen as more than 'human resources' and an invitation for people from extended stakeholder groups to be at the heart of people centred collaboration. Organisations will need to have high levels of trust at every level of the organisation as well as transparency of decision making and information sharing throughout the system. The two conditions for companies to be able to adapt are their ability to harness collective insights with regards to customer needs and then a willingness and ability to engage rapidly with new ideas and to take advantage of new economic environments.

(Amis and Janz, 2020, pp 272-3)

Care

Aligned with the leadership and management context described above, another trend that emerged was the appreciation of care and concern demonstrated and communicated by managers and leaders.

The impact of these behaviours at such a profoundly difficult time cannot be underestimated and seeing this in action reflects many of the ideas and evolutions shared in the leadership development space over the last few years.



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Leaders who are truly committed to building inclusive organisations and communities grasp the significance and value of creating high trust environments. In such environments, each person in the organisation feels able to share more of who they truly are. The barriers limiting authentic human connections can finally come down. Each person's potential can be released.

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Caroline Taylor
Director of Client Solutions and Innovation
The Oxford Group

Lessons from the frontline

To complete this section we would like to share some learning from those leading the COVID crisis from the frontline – the nurses. In an article in Nurse Leader entitled COVID-19, there is a sharing of the key learning from the situation which is extremely relevant and valuable for all leaders and managers in whichever industry. they find

Learning 1: Stay calm

Leaders are in a fish bowl and staff will model the behaviours they see. Action will guide reaction.

Learning 2: Communicate

Managers are looking for guidance so that they are fully informed and therefore confident in the next steps they need to take. Consistent and continued communication is key.

Learning 3: Collaborate

"It takes a whole village" – whilst there is a strong message that all hands need to be on deck, there is a need for teams to understand that resilience must also be maintained. Full team commitment is required and managers need to be able to lean on each other whilst also being able to hand over when necessary to avoid burnout.

Learning 4: Coordinate

During a quickly evolving and challenging time coordinating work efforts is imperative for success and efficiency. Frequent coordination with key stakeholders yields higher quality and a safer environment. Alignment and trust among the senior leadership team is also essential.

Learning 5: "We have to love them through it"

Leadership is hard and holding a team accountable is not wrong; however, loving them through transition and challenge is OK too. Hearing the voice of the customer, even if that customer is your employee, is important.

Wise words from the frontline and humbling given the responsibility we know this profession has held during the pandemic.

Finally, at The Oxford Group we refer regularly to the need for individuals to feel safe in their roles and work environment whilst also having a healthy level of stimulation to ensure that people are engaged and developing. To this we add space – space for dialogue, for reflection, for collaboration ... to simply breathe. Today we add the notion of sustainability – how can we take care of ourselves and our people to stay resilient and well during this important period of transition?

This was the final theme that emerged ... how important it is to take care of ourselves. To manage our wellbeing and the wellbeing of our teams and our families. Not only in staying safe with regards to the virus but also in managing the impact of huge change, of loss, of downsizing, of letting go of what might have been and of the world as it was. By taking care of ourselves we can create the space from which new ways of doing and being can emerge.

Final questions to ponder on sustainable leadership:

- What are we doing today to support leaders and managers to take care of themselves?
- How can we use the learning of the frontline healthcare workers to support our own leaders?
- How can we show our employees we care in a sustainable way?
- What do we need to do to ensure we maintain our engagement and resilience over time?
- How well do I take care of myself?
- How can we make our employees feel safe?
- What mechanisms do we have that allow us to check people are not over stimulated?

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Agriculture House | Oasis Park | Stanton Harcourt Road | Eynsham | Oxon | OX29 4TP | UK