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Female Leaders during a Global Crisis:

Understanding the transitions
& challenges of senior
women leaders during the
COVID-19 pandemic

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Acknowledgments

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Foreword

Ruter Dam was founded more than 30 years ago. Our purpose is to support female managers as they advance to senior positions within their companies. Through mentorship, networking, and the development of personal leadership, participants prepare to take the next steps in their career.

Female leaders bring difference, and the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated questions about whether the female leadership style is more effective than traditional autocratic male styles of leadership. This research study by Hult International Business School contributes to this debate.

The research findings show how female leaders experienced and transitioned during the COVID-19 crisis, and the skills and qualities demanded of them. The challenges they addressed and those they are currently facing provide us with an understanding of their ongoing working priorities and opportunities, and the demands placed on them as they move forward in an evolving business context.

This research is important for us, our members of the Ruter Dam business network, our partners and the entire industry, as we address continuing uncertainty in the global workplace. Not least to ensure we do not lose the progress we have made, as we are presented with the risk of women leaving leadership roles.

Ruter Dam would like to thank Dr Debbie Bayntun-Lees, Dr Carina Paine Schofield, Joan Berglund and the rest of the team at Hult International Business School and Hult EF Corporate Education who have conducted this research in collaboration with us. We are excited to continue this collaboration to explore new areas of interest to inform our work. We would also like to thank the women from our business network who participated. Thank you for your time, and for sharing your experiences and insights so candidly. In doing so you made this important work possible.

Ruter Dam

Maria Billing
Program Manager

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Executive Summary



Executive Summary

This report describes the experiences of senior women leaders over the past 18 months, and the important challenges they feel they are facing going forward. The findings of this research highlight how these women exhibited a relational leadership style during the COVID-19 crisis. Demonstrations of empathy, adaptability, accountability, and inclusion were embedded in their narratives. It is important to highlight how aware these female leaders were of how the pandemic demanded they amplify and access their feminine qualities and skills to achieve their many successes during this time. The findings from this research highlight some of the key factors that can be used to develop and support female leadership in organizations and retain women in leadership positions.

Context

During the COVID-19 crisis there have been stories of how although women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic in terms of deepening inequalities, they have played a critical role in recovering from it. We have experienced powerful lessons as female leadership styles using collaboration, empathy, and humility have emerged in coordinating effective responses to the pandemic in political, corporate, public sector, and other contexts. Employees are now placing greater importance on relational skills and emphasizing abilities to ‘inspire’ and ‘engage’, ‘build trust’ and ‘collaborate’. They are also valuing female leaders for their awareness of stress and frustration,

concern for wellbeing, and emphasis on development, even when times are tough. The abilities and achievements of women during this challenging time may also inspire us to imagine a new vision of what strong leadership looks like, and how gender balance and equity in our organizations can be realized. Learning from leaders during a crisis can help us build back better for the future.

Research Methodology

The aims of the research were to understand and raise awareness of how senior women leaders have experienced work over the past year, and the range of challenges they are currently facing as workers move forward into a very different world.

In August 2021, almost 18 months after the COVID-19 pandemic began, around 40 senior women leaders based in Sweden took part in group inquiry conversations to explore these aims. The details and insights from these conversations are organized into two main sections: **Looking Backwards** (over the pandemic) and **Looking Forwards** (to an evolved world of work). Within each of these sections, six themes are presented.

Looking Backwards

The COVID-19 pandemic hit in a global context already characterized as uncertain, complex, and highly unpredictable. Many organizations had no choice but to focus on surviving immediate threats. Yet the need to look ahead was essential. The stakes were high, but decisions leaders made, and

are still making, will have consequences for years to come. As these leaders managed their way through the crisis, they also found a way to link current moves to future outcomes. They were acutely aware of their learning and evolving adaptation as new challenges emerged throughout the crisis.

Dealing with the crisis

As the COVID-19 crisis hit, stories were heard of the effort required to address both the urgent and shifting needs in the 'here and now', and the need for a sustainable future.

New working patterns

The way businesses and individuals communicate and connect seem to have changed forever. However, there is a real need to learn from the mixed blessings characterizing the experience of these new working patterns.

Relationships – A different level of complexity

Whilst the opportunity to spend more time with family and friends was a benefit of the personal restrictions placed on employees, relationships at work took on a different level of complexity.

Technical acceleration – The digital journey

The responses to COVID-19 have speeded up the adoption of digital technologies. These changes were

expected to be enduring and to have many benefits. In order to sustain these benefits, leaders felt that technological capability and investment needed to keep up if their companies were to stay competitive in the marketplace.

The inclusion challenge

While the crisis has tested organizations and people in a variety of ways, most leaders and employees have worked effectively to prove they can operate in virtual environments. However, developing the ability to lead thoughtfully and inclusively in the digital world is considered an imperative to build and sustain motivation and engagement of workers.

Wellbeing (self and others)

The COVID-19 crisis has radically changed the way people live and work. The consequences of this have been varied and far reaching. Whilst dealing with the impact on their own lives, leaders are also concerned about the wellbeing of their colleagues and employees.

Looking Forwards

The pandemic and resulting economic crisis have redefined how labor markets function and how businesses approach their workforces. There has been a profound shift that is shaping new ways of working. In this context, the main concern of the participants was paving the way forward - preparing and planning for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

The future workplace

There were questions about how leaders can organize and cocreate the workplace of the future. Listening carefully to colleagues and employees, these senior leaders had a clear sense that people do not want to go back to the way things were—at least not entirely.

The employee journey

The last year has seen a tidal wave of resignations. Leaders recognize some workers may have simply reached a breaking point after months and months of high workloads and psychological strain. Many employees, however, have deeper concerns. They have had time to rethink their work and life goals.

Building loyalty and engagement

Employee engagement is the emotional commitment an individual has to their organization's goals and shared values. As the new workplace evolves, leaders recognize the need to persistently develop innovative ways of engaging the workforce.

Culture making – fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging

Fostering inclusion in the evolving hybrid environment and learning to manage hybrid meetings will be a key challenge for leaders going forward. If organizations are to enable workers to

do their best work and achieve their potential, leaders will need to step into the role of culture makers.

Embedding wellbeing

Many employees are experiencing anxiety, stress and fatigue. Some are only now returning to the workplace; others have worked long and hard throughout the pandemic and are now feeling close to burnout. Leaders themselves are also experiencing some of this. Ensuring the wellbeing of everyone over time is key to ensuring organizational health and success.

Sustainability

The agenda of sustainability and corporate responsibility is moving to the forefront of corporate agendas. Having had time to reflect these leaders understood that the growth and prosperity of their business was dependent upon elevating their sustainability efforts across their business.

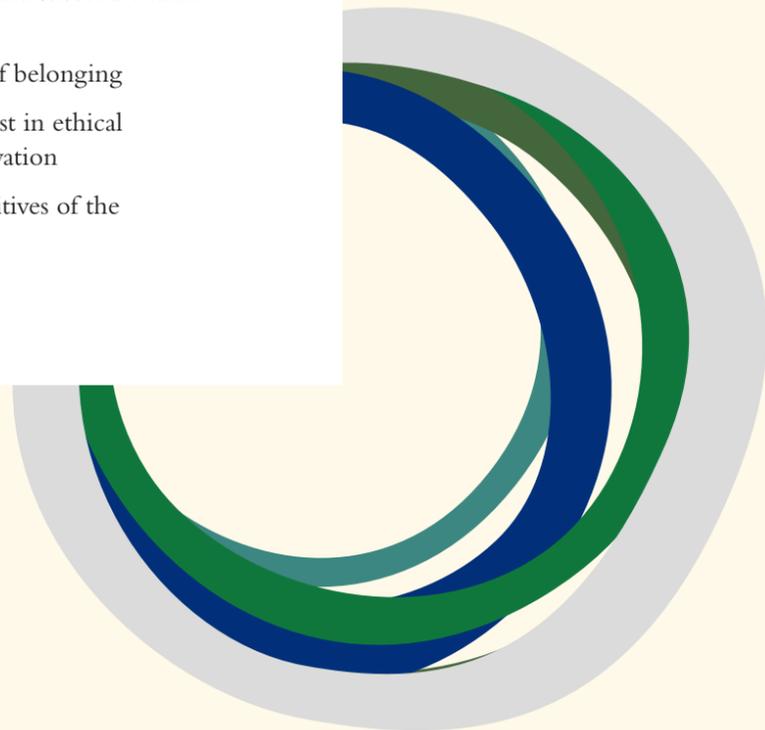
Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has brought into focus the experiences of women leaders involved during the pandemic crisis, the qualities they bring to leadership and their value to organizational performance. Yet this critical and invisible work often goes unrecognized and unrewarded. The risks to women and the companies that depend on their leadership are very real. We need female leaders and what they stand for.

The following recommendations are provided for companies who want to support this agenda, and are looking to develop strong leadership, regardless of gender, in organizations:

Recommendations

- Focus on building strong connections and relationships
- Put wellbeing at the center of all you do
- Maximize the opportunities for women to grow and succeed within the workplace
- Create cultures of belonging
- Continue to invest in ethical technology innovation
- Build on the positives of the pandemic



Context

Research into women leaders has been extensive over many decades and covers a wide range of topics. Much of this research has focused on the perceived challenges, or barriers, for women leaders (e.g. Linehan, 2002; Oakley, 2000). These challenges are not only barriers towards becoming a senior female leader, but they are also hindering workplace transitions. For example, structural obstacles such as not getting access to certain opportunities and networks interfere with women achieving the most important experiences and skills and building the most critical relationships and exposure necessary for career success. Such barriers include difficulty with “the glass ceiling”: a common metaphor for a barrier that prevents women from promotions and climbing the ladder of a company (Morrison et al., 1987). Other recurring challenges detailed in the literature include: a traditional male model of career development (Oakley, 2000); difficulties in choosing leadership style (Oakley, 2000); gender-based stereotypes (Oakley, 2000); a lack of networks and mentors for female leaders (Hill et al., 2016); and work-life balance (Hill et al., 2016).

Over the past year, the pandemic has upended working life and women are facing unprecedented challenges in the COVID-19 workplace (Zimmerman, 2020). There have been numerous press articles describing how the pandemic may be sending society and the workplace backwards when it comes to gender equality. Several reports have published statistics around the number of women leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers due to COVID-19 (e.g. Burns et al., 2021). As such, there are concerns about the impact of this on women’s representation in leadership positions in the future.

Academic research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on female leadership is just beginning to be published. However, we can see trends in society and in the workplace that are likely to have a significant future impact on leadership diversity. Early indications of the societal impact on gender differences in employment made observers refer COVID-19 as a “she-cession” (e.g. Bluedoern et al., 2021) due to the unequal impact of the pandemic on women. It is true that female workers have taken on an extra burden during the pandemic, and analysis of different markets showed a disproportionate decrease in employment among women compared to men (Bluedoern et al., 2021). Furthermore, when educational sectors closed or an increase in caregiving was demanded, the weight on female workers increased. Data from around the globe, including the US (Zamaro & Prados, 2021), the UK (Villadsen et al., 2020), Italy (Del Boca et al., 2020) and Sweden (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2021) indicated that female workers engaged with more ‘unpaid work’, such as home schooling, caretaking and household chores compared to males. These changes could further add to the challenges faced by female leadership described in the earlier research.

Despite the challenges, however, anecdotal evidence from the past 18 months suggests that women might in fact be more qualified to lead during the pandemic. Related to the metaphor of the “glass ceiling” mentioned above is the “glass cliff” (Ryan & Hasslam, 2004): the phenomenon of women being likelier than men to achieve leadership roles during periods of crisis or downturn, when the risk of failure is highest. Does this metaphor suggest that women might in fact be more qualified to lead during the pandemic? There is some evidence collected during the pandemic to suggest this to be the case (e.g. Zenger & Folkman, 2020). Given this context, our research aimed to explore how women leaders in business have experienced working during this period of crisis and what lessons they learned.

Research Methodology



Research Methodology

Research Aims

The aims of the research were to understand and raise awareness of how senior women leaders have experienced work over the past year, and the range of challenges they are currently facing as workers move forward into a very different world. An overarching ambition of the research is that the insights gained will inform how leaders need to develop to lead effectively in the future. In this way, the findings can be used to amplify and support female leadership in organizations and retain women in leadership positions. The specific research questions explored are shown in the following box.

Research Questions

1. How have senior women leaders in business **EXPERIENCED** working over the pandemic period?
2. What did these senior women leaders **LEARN**?
3. What are the **CHALLENGES** these leaders are facing now, and looking to the future?

The Invitation

Members of Ruter Dam's network of senior women leaders were invited to take part in group inquiry conversations to share their experiences, perspectives and transitions over the pandemic year, and describe the challenges they are currently facing. Over forty senior women leaders accepted the invitation to take part in the research, from both Ruter Dam and Spader Ess. Each was asked to attend a virtual inquiry group of 10 women at the end of August 2021, to explore the research questions together.

Ruter Dam

Ruter Dam was founded in 1987. The organization runs an executive development and mentoring program for female leaders and more than 1400 female managers have undergone this one-year program. Many of the network hold high positions in Swedish business today. Ruter Dam also runs the management development program Spader Ess, which is aimed at younger women at the beginning of their manager careers. Example organizations from both networks are listed here:

Volvo Cars, SKF, Tetra Pak, Sandvik, Skanska, Systembolaget, Telia Company, Atlas Copco, Electrolux, IBM, Stora Enso, Getinge and Stena.

The Research Process

The conversations of the four separate inquiry groups were recorded. Each group participated in two rounds of conversations. Appendix 1 shows the research process as an image, including each of the rounds of conversation. Each group discussion was facilitated by two researchers. All the group discussions took place virtually and lasted approximately 60-75 minutes in total. They were recorded and then transcribed.

In the first discussion, the participants were asked to *look backwards* over the pandemic year, and share their own experiences, perspectives, and transitions over this time. Following an unprompted discussion on this topic, the female leaders were then encouraged to discuss any impact of virtual working on their work relationships. They were also invited to share any impact of the pandemic on the quality of their conversations at work, and on how they experienced power in the workplace. Finally, they were asked about their own and their colleagues wellbeing.

In the second round of conversations, the participants were asked to *look forwards* and think about the challenges they felt they were currently facing or will face as they move into an evolved world of work. Again, following an unprompted discussion on this topic, the female leaders were then prompted on a few specific topics. The leaders were encouraged to think about how the challenges have changed over time (from the start of the pandemic, during the pandemic, to what challenges might be ahead). They were prompted to think about the quality of relationships and conversations going forwards (as people return to the workplace) and were also asked to think about the benefits of working virtually.

Prior to the whole group discussions, the participants were given the opportunity to engage with the research questions in smaller groups (pairs or trios). In doing so they would be able to share experiences and test some of their thinking with each other before speaking into the larger groups. The leaders were asked to record key themes of these smaller conversations on a 'Padlet board' so that the facilitators could refer to them and build on them during the main discussion. Figure 1 shows an example Padlet board from one of the conversations. The eight Padlet boards were also transcribed and formed part of the data set.

Figure 1: Example text captured on a padlet board during a group conversation

Group 1 - How did the pandemic impact you in your work context, particularly in relation to relationships, teams, working patterns etc. What has changed, and what impact did particular experiences have?

Stronger together

When covid hit, it was key to focus both on emergency response and the "here and now" but also look forward. To not just sit and wait and hope for things to work out but to take action. Drawing strengths from your values in the company and team has been important.

The amazing team spirit in the company on all levels became very apparent in this crisis and the "does mentality" taking action both for short term business continuity and longer-term sustainability.

Daily business has worked well and in some cases productivity has increased. However when not meeting face to face, creativity is starting to suffer. And it makes it more challenging to ensure and also further develop the culture, right behavior but also trust within individuals and in teams. Most definitely when new people join.

Clear, honest communication has been more important than ever. And also to do it more frequently.

Difficult to know how people are really feeling and you have to be humble to that people were (and may still be) very worried both from a health perspective and work wise in times of uncertainty (depending on company performance and how hit).

One positive has been the new ways of working, using digital tools to also be able to be more inclusive and flexible.

Working patterns

Worked truly hard during the pandemic as well. But of course a great deal less of traveling and therefore I've been able to spend more time with my family. For instance, taken part as a trainer in my son's football team etc.

Strong commitment

Strong commitment from the teams to act in a crisis, and very important to create communicative forums for leaders and employees. To train the leaders how to lead in crisis, create psychological and physical safety.

Pandemic impact in my work context

Early in pandemic: Frequent updates. Many different cultures difficult in international environment where different countries have had different approaches. Individuals and smaller teams have worked well and felt efficient. While interaction between teams is not happening to the extent needed. Very hard to spontaneously since most are very booked in teams meetings all day. Creativity and active listening is not as good via teams. Maintaining ongoing business is easier than creating new. my son's football team etc.

Impact on work context

Hard to create solid relationships (build trust). The "soft" and social part of the work have been lost or significantly harder to create and protect.

Take much longer to get to know people and read body language and get to the bottom of specific tasks/areas. work harder to work with customers. Working with the customer interface is a challenge.

The benefits have been looking in to peoples lives when looking in to someone's living room.

During this time the organization has been taking the opportunity to be more innovative and use problem solving. Big changes during a short period of time. Fast implementation of technologies and speed learning to get into "working". Discussions around - what to keep and how to protect the good learnings from the pandemic. New roles and "ways of working" have been established during the pandemic. New "set" of information is accessed during working through a technology.

New ways of working

New thinking and creative discussions on how to work is of essence in "post" COVID . Unthinkable is now possible and there are opportunities to avoid going back to travel for example. The Digital revolution is more tangible.

Dealing with the crisis

“The amazing team spirit in the company and at all levels became very apparent.”

Some would say that tough times build character. In fact, as the women shared their experiences and recounted stories of how they dealt with the crisis, the strength of their characters were revealed.

Women described how as COVID-19 hit, it was key to focus on both the emergency response – the ‘*here and now*’ – and to look forward. To not just sit and wait but to act. As one woman stated: “*never waste a good crisis*”.

This action orientated mindset, along with a new quality of team spirit, seemed to be key sources of strength for many of these women, enabling both successful adaptation to deal with the now as well as future orientated action for longer-term sustainability.

COVID-19 exposed many weaknesses and issues that have been present in business for a long time, in particular, how to interact and carry out work in the virtual environment. The women talked about the complexity of the working context characterized by constant change, pressure, fear, and a pervading sense of endlessness. These factors they said required a constant

reinvention of how they as leaders operated and generated deep changes in the workplace. Whilst juggling the need for business as usual, with the imperative to innovate, dynamic problem solving, tough decision making, digital acceleration, and new ways of working evolved.

Interestingly, a primary focus of these women was the learning they experienced. They had a clear sense of their personal adaptation and of being strengthened in many ways. This was accompanied by an awareness of the qualities and skills of these leaders being either brought to the fore, or accelerated through learning, as new challenges and change emerged throughout the crisis.

New working patterns

“It’s actually very convenient working from home. But it’s also demotivating.”

The evolution and experience of new flexible working patterns appears to be characterized by mixed blessings. On the one hand leaders talked of working from home being convenient, and daily business working well virtually, with evidence of increased productivity and effectiveness. However, creating new value and progressing business were found to be more difficult.

As these leaders reflected on improvements seen during the crisis there was a general sense that “*flexible working is here to stay*” and an acceptance that flexibility was possible in many more jobs than previously thought due to digital technology. This acceptance was accompanied by the recognition that the benefits they experienced working remotely may not be realized by women at lower levels of career and income brackets, and who may be living in shared accommodation or alone in smaller spaces. Lockdown was also a challenging time for many working parents and carers. Many people felt isolated and lonely, others felt overwhelmed or lacking in energy and inspiration: “*because of the fact that I’m always at homeI don’t get my inspiration and an energy from people and surroundings that I usually do*”.

Leaders described how many young new starters experienced tough indoctrination into the working world, whilst new leaders felt they hadn’t really started or got to know their teams and colleagues. For example: “*It was sad, not being able to meet and learn about people, or get to know the real organization*”. This lack of relational connection forced leaders to find and convey their compassion and empathy towards others in new ways, as well as develop coping mechanisms to overcome their own fraying motivation and increasing intensity of work.

Relationships - A different level of complexity

“Relationship building has definitely been more challenging, there’s a different level of complexity, especially for us females... we have to create relationship before we start acting.”

Whilst a benefit of the COVID-19 crisis was the opportunity to spend more time with family and friends, relationships at work had taken on a different level of complexity. The participants found that during the crisis quality communication with employees and teams was more important than ever before. Yet the lack of physical closeness and ability to read body language meant that trust and meaningful relationships were often harder to build and creating the psychological safety to deal with difficult issues more challenging: “*We miss out on how people feel and if we are handling and like a conflict or disagreement or something like that, it’s hard to know how people feel afterwards and it’s hard to take care of people*”.

Digital working was also seen to create a sense of vulnerability in some. As one senior leader explained “*Clearly digital interaction has increased but this gave us less visibility as leaders, and we are at risk of being perceived as less approachable*”.

Relational outcomes were also evident with customers, with some leaders finding that working at the customer interface was considerably harder in the virtual environment. Personal contact was missed particularly when trying to build new relationships and grow new business. For example: *“Not being able to read group dynamics, or get to know people, everyone... building trust and relationships is hard when you only have a camera”*.

The digital journey - Technical acceleration and the missing link

“The digital revolution is more tangible now.”

The relational context during the pandemic has overall been digital. Indeed, participants shared how the mobility restrictions caused by COVID-19 had accelerated their digital fluency and skills: *“All of us have new knowledge because everybody had to learn”* and *“It took us only 2-3 months to get fully used to everything being on Zoom and Teams”*.

The leaders' companies had digitized at least some parts of their business to protect and enable employees, maintain productivity and serve customers. These female leaders described how digitization of customer and supply-chain interactions, internal operations, and employee interactions, has happened in months instead of years. In many areas this has led to increased efficiency and productivity, and stronger relationships. For example: *“New ways of meeting and conversing with colleagues and customers have evolved, for example walk and talks, live broadcasts, digital roundtables”* and *“Somehow we came closer to our customers in a digital way, meetings were shorter but there was a stronger business focus”*.

On the other hand, the digital tools available were considered by participants to be inadequate for the complexity of the work ahead. Whilst appreciating the progress made, digital working was seen to hinder creative thinking and group working. Some expressed concern that the level of innovation was suffering “the tools have not really developed enough to experience the group dynamics you get face to face...or the creation of new ideas”. The leaders expressed how they experienced missing dimensions of interaction: “we are human beings used to seeing each other three dimensionally, we look into each other's eyes, see body language and the things that happen when people meet. It's very difficult to replicate this digitally”.

The inclusion challenge

“One thing that has been very difficult is how to get everyone to speak up and have airtime.”

One of the main areas of development for these leaders has been the need to learn to lead in the digital environment. This included leading inclusive conversation in the virtual space itself and leading democracy and inclusion more broadly across boundaries and countries. The consensus was that achieving quality of communication and conversation is harder virtually. Some leaders also shared challenges of getting their own voice heard over Teams and Zoom, and that the quality of listening was often not good.

As companies are trying to progress their diversity and inclusion journeys, digital interactions have posed a new challenge. Leaders recognized their need for skills to lead inclusively in the virtual environment; to connect with everyone, and to meet the needs of introvert and extrovert personalities and different cultures. How to enable everyone to have a voice and to speak up has been challenging. The need for good facilitation skills became apparent, and at an individual level determination was an asset. Some talked about doing their best under the circumstances and how the digital tools available were now limiting progress.

“I identify that I use so many more parts of myself in my leadership than my words, I use my body, I use sight, you know, everything, to just connect to people.”

There were also discussions around what will happen as some workers return to the workplace and others want to work more flexibly: *“What will happen with those who choose to stay and work from home, will they be excluded from many things they would love to do? Will they, over time, feel that they are they are outside and not part of the company?”*.

With many companies reviewing the need for the same expanse of workspace and embracing hybrid working, leaders were concerned about the impact on team engagement and performance: *“It is important to have this team spirit and feeling that you are someone, you're not only the name and picture on this team's meeting”*.

How to build teams, encourage collaborative working, and a sense of belonging would be more important as the crisis resolved. Whilst many felt there had been a strong sense of team and ‘pulling together’ during the crisis, as Zoom fatigue and general exhaustion kicked in the leaders were becoming increasingly concerned: *“I think it's easier today to just focus on the business and you forget that you're working with people so it's more easy to say that you are only a name in the organization. So, I think you're losing a bit about this caring about people.”* This theme is elaborated on in the following section.

The future workplace

“How do we stay an attractive employer... stand out from the others?”

Undoubtedly one of the main challenges going forward is how to organize and co-create the workplace. We talk about the future workplace, but leaders everywhere are dealing with this now. How to make it work, who will make decisions, how to listen to employees, are all questions with many answers. Trial and error will lead to conflict but there are few to learn from as yet.

Yet these leaders recognise that finding a hybrid model that works; one that is flexible and adjustable, will give them a competitive edge.

There is also recognition that an emerging hybrid workplace presents new challenges – how to build loyalty and company culture, how to create a sense of inclusion, belonging and engagement in everyone, how to collaborate and innovate across teams and countries. The change curve is not underestimated. Example quotes from women include:

“My biggest challenge is how to get the hybrid working model to work. How do I create the sense of belonging and maintain the culture that we have within our company, which I think benefits from us meeting psychically, without pushing people back to the office?”

“What will happen with those who choose to stay and work from home, they will be excluded from many things they would love to do, they will, over time, feel that they are outside and not part of the company.”

The employee journey

“We will need to work to retain female leaders.”

Around the world, workers are leaving or changing their jobs in record numbers, and leaders are trying to figure out how to keep them. The leaders we spoke to recognised that the psychological impact of COVID, along with the opportunity employees have had to reflect on their role, whether their skills are being put to good use, and how to find a much stronger sense of their own value, are all contributing to the resignation storm. The continuing risk of losing people is evident.

There is a clear need to build back better by putting humanity back in the workplace, at all stages of the employee journey, as illustrated by this leader's concern: *“I think it's more easy today to just focus on the business and you forget that you're working with people so it's more easy to say that you are only a name in the organization. I think we are losing the ability to care about people”*

New joiners need to build networks. Indeed some of these leaders themselves had started their roles during the pandemic. One woman described how she still *“felt like a new starter and wished she could do her first 100 days again”*.

The new world of work means that starting a new job is a different offer; attracting new people and retaining them will be a challenge. It's much easier to move from one employer to another, for example: *“We really need to think about how we attract and keep people in our organizations”* and *“We will need to invest time particularly with young talent”*.

Willingness of employees to return to the office is not straightforward. Differences in age, gender, and roles are determining how people feel and how they want to work going forward. Flexibility is key.

“Women have created their own working patterns, in going back to the office they want to be listened to.”

Leaders are concerned that it is harder to retain female leaders. As one leader stated: *“Women want to work well and look after their families well”*. Another leader described how she wants to *“find a place when I can protect my new way of working where I can be more civil for my family”*. Yet digital working and the pressure to be online and responding all day has created an unwanted vulnerability. How managers listen and respond to this, and the culture created in teams will matter. Women want to be listened to and to create their own personal working patterns.

Building loyalty and engagement

“It's hard to motivate people when you don't have that 'social interaction' with them.”

Many of the women described the importance of “building loyalty and engagement” as well as paying attention to their own. Having had time to reflect, several leaders felt they had missed out on important interactions, and the social aspects of the workplace, particularly when new to their roles and only meeting their colleagues virtually. As one leader summarized: *“I'm having problems with motivation and engagement, I'm really missing the interaction of the workplace”*.

The quality of employee experience will have a strong influence on motivation, energy and team spirit. Leaders are also working out what their responsibilities are and what is within their gift to influence here. There is a sense that building culture and engagement in a hybrid and technology-enabled environment will require strong relational leaders who stay close to their teams as well as structured and coordinated flexibility.

Some also foresee regulation and tax issues arising where employees are living and working in different countries. The complexity of working arrangements across regions and countries, and the liquid workforce, will also require new, flexible and thoughtful arrangements in organizational structure and how people are trained and developed.

The key to this they said will be to find new ways to clearly define and operationalize corporate purpose, and build purpose-driven, flexible working teams: *“Flexibility will be a really competitive edge for a company”*. It is loyal and engaged workers that will give their organizations a competitive edge.

Culture making – Fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging

“It’s difficult to communicate values and culture virtually.”

Diversity is one of the most powerful competitive advantages, delivering more innovation and stronger financial returns while creating products and services that meet a broader range of customer need (Eswaran, 2019). The responsibility of creating inclusive cultures where diverse employees can flourish requires leaders who see culture to be as important as the business case (Sweet & Shook, 2020). This understanding was evident in many of our participants. For example: *“It is important to have this team spirit and a feeling that you are someone, you’re not only the name and picture on this team’s meeting.....It’s easy to just focus on the business and you forget that you’re working with ‘people’, we are losing the bit about caring for people”*.

Fostering inclusion in the evolving hybrid environment and learning to manage hybrid meetings was

considered a key challenge for these leaders, particularly if organizations are to enable people to do their best work, achieve their potential, and generate the quality of creativity and performance that fuels transformation and growth.

Several women talked of rising numbers of relational problems that had required new skills to deal with. The absence of less formal meetings and conversations was seen to contribute to confusion and misunderstandings. As one leader described: *“We’ve had so many relational problems working digitally....it’s hard to help people relate, to understand the way to work together and how business should be dealt with”*.

The leaders felt their commitment to equality and inclusion needed to be a serious one. Yet they recognised the complexity of building inclusion, particularly with the limited functionality of the virtual tools currently available. Whilst these leaders now feel digitally skilled, many feel that the complexity of leading democracy and inclusion in a hybrid environment required new skills yet to be identified and developed. For example: *“You have to be alert, notice who has spoken and who hasn’t...more of a facilitator, making sure that people are really talking to each other”*.

There was also recognition that this could not be done alone. There is a need to be proactive and galvanise momentum in this important area of cultural development at all levels of the organization, if a sense of belonging is to be co-created across all employee groups. As one leader asked: *“How do we generate that collective energy in companies to build the future culture....we need to crack the code on how to get people out of their bubbles”*.

Embedding wellbeing

“We are missing that chit chat before you go into a meeting or before it starts, and after a meeting...when you ask “How are you feeling?”, “What do you think about this?” “What do you think I could do about this?”

Whilst recognising that all of the above themes will play a part, leaders understood that many employees are experiencing anxiety, stress and fatigue. Some are returning to the workplace; others have worked long and hard throughout the pandemic and are now feeling close to burnout. Leaders themselves are also experiencing some of this, thus ensuring the wellbeing of themselves and others over time is key to ensuring organizational health and success in the future.

Embedding wellbeing into the DNA of organizations will be an essential challenge going forward. Leaders recognised the need to build cultures and working arrangements that enable wellbeing. Again, leaders felt that they would need to stay close to their teams and envisaged making the time required for challenging conversations about life and career decisions. This emphasis on listening to employees will help to build a sense of inclusion and wellbeing.

These leaders also emphasised the importance of reflection during this time of uncertainty.

“It’s time for reflection after a crisis.”

Due to the impact of COVID-19 on the workplace, employees are likely to experience a world where everything seems to be a priority. Work and home life are blending more than ever before. They may get to the end of the day and find themselves exhausted and unsure about what they have achieved. Finding a way to help employees reflect allows them to see that even if circumstances have changed, they have still made important contributions and achievements. It was felt that time for reflection and learning after the crisis was important for all employees.

In a letter to his employees, Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella said, *“It is in times of great disruption and uncertainty that our ability to stay grounded in our sense of purpose and remain true to our identity is of the utmost importance.”* (Goodson et al., 2020).



Sustainability

“the direction has become clearer, now is the time for serious action.”

The agenda of sustainability and corporate responsibility is moving to the forefront of corporate agendas. This begins with making a commitment to incorporating social, environmental, economic and ethical factors into a company’s strategic decision-making. It extends to evaluating how these factors affect the business, including all of its customers, suppliers, and stakeholders, and what risks and opportunities these factors present. The sustainability agenda also asks businesses to adopt measures to mitigate risks and take advantage of opportunities, which will vary from sector to sector (PWC, 2008). While the global challenges related to sustainability are clear, defining how businesses can respond to meet the challenges can be daunting. Sustainability can encompass a broad range of issues that affect business — from pollution and climate change to education, poverty, health and human rights. Not surprisingly, leaders often wonder where to begin.

These leaders felt the direction had become clearer for them during the pandemic crisis. Possibly as a result a developing ‘opportunity narrative’, which according to Lehmann et al., (2021) has gained momentum during the COVID-19 crisis, opening up a window of opportunity to ‘build back better’, thus spurring societal transitions towards environmental sustainability.

How human, economic, and environmental sustainability issues can be incorporated into core business activity is the key question. Scanning the horizon for future trends, early detection of risks and threats and opportunities, predicting what will come next will be essential skills to acquire. Having had time to reflect these leaders understood that the growth and prosperity of their business was dependent upon elevating their sustainability efforts across their business. Concluding that now was the time for serious action.

“I’ve spent more time with myself, at home, thinking about the crisis around me and of course the environment. It has been a time of reflection; all of these things have impacted me.”

Conclusions and Recommendations



Summary

This study has brought into focus the experiences of women leaders involved during the pandemic crisis, the qualities they bring to leadership and their value to organizational performance.

In one sense the pandemic has emphasized the strength and resilience of these leaders and organizations, at the same time there is a clear sense of vulnerability. The challenges these CEOs and senior leaders are facing as they move into the hybrid environment are not to be underestimated.

Structuring a flexible workplace, recruiting, and retaining talented workers, and redefining the employee cycle. Building and sustaining relationships with customers and colleagues, to create loyalty, belonging and performance, and lastly ensuring the wellbeing of themselves and others over time. These are all challenges that require a focus on humanity, relational leadership and a new complex set of skills to build high effective teams, creative innovation, and high performance in a hybrid environment.

This report represents some of the most noteworthy experiences of these female leaders and the important challenges they face going forward. Like many other senior female leaders (Brandazza et al., 2021) they exhibited a different leadership style than men during the COVID-19 crisis, leaning toward empathy, adaptability, accountability, and inclusion. It is important to highlight how aware these female leaders were of the significant learning accomplished and the qualities evident in achieving their many successes over the pandemic crisis. The challenges presented demanded they access and amplify their feminine qualities and skills to respond appropriately and achieve their many successes during this time.

The task now is to ensure these qualities and skills are available for the benefit of everyone. As organizations move forward leaders will need to step into the role of culture maker, building these skills and qualities across teams and organizations.

Accelerated Learning

“we managed, and that built self confidence in us all, we thought, hey, we can really manage this crisis, we can do things differently, we can do things we previously thought were impossible, and now they have become ordinary.”

Over the pandemic crisis these female leaders achieved significant learning as they found themselves dealing with the speed and scope of the challenges presented. According to Kerrissey & Edmondson (2020), when contending with uncertainty in a crisis, leaders can easily fall into the traps of waiting for situations to clarify how to act and downplaying the threat in order to reassure people. It turns out that these instincts can result in actions taken out of fear and make people anxious unnecessarily. Leading in a context of crisis, uncertainty and ambiguity instead requires leaders to act in an urgent, honest, and iterative fashion, recognizing that mistakes are inevitable, and correcting course — not assigning blame. This means overcoming the natural human tendency to downplay and delay and deviate from some of the behaviours learned in traditional leadership and management training.

Many of the leaders here were acutely aware of having to pivot and learn ‘on the job’ of dealing with the crisis. Some found themselves more energized, motivated and productive as they experienced overcoming new challenges. They were positive, proactive and solution focused.

As these leaders juggled the challenges of running both homes and business, their success was dependent on their abilities to build and sustain relationships, collaboration, and productivity across multiple boundaries in an extremely challenging context, for example: *“everybody contributed to finding new ways of dealing with new situations”* It seems the leadership style that has prevailed is a female one — strong, compassionate, thoughtful, and relational, as shown in Figure 4.

“I got a lot of energy from getting sudden and unexpected inputs, and my thoughts would go off in all sorts of different directions.”

Figure 4: Relational Leadership style that has prevailed during the pandemic, with associated skills.



Leadership Qualities

The style and skills of leadership discussed above were brought to life by the stories shared by those involved in this study. Their accounts also evidenced the leadership qualities that mattered as they enacted leadership in this global health crisis – qualities that focused on humanity (See Figure 5). These leaders demonstrated strength, toughness, resilience, and timely action as they navigated the unknown and invisible threats associated with the pandemic.

Leadership in an uncertain, fast-moving crisis means making oneself available to feel what it is like to be in another's

shoes — to lead with empathy (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2021). The unfortunate scale of this pandemic required the participants in this study, to feel with empathy and compassion, and to think with intelligence as they worked to understand and adapt to the needs of their workforces. These leadership qualities (more often exhibited by female leaders) were not just 'nice to haves' they were as essential as their positions of authority in navigating a path forward for their people. In addition, they had a clear sense that these qualities will continue to aid in building a more sustainable future.

Figure 5: Leadership qualities required to address the challenges of a crisis with humanity



Recommendations for building better for the future

Whilst gains have been made in representation of women at senior levels, the pandemic is taking its toll. This report demonstrates how women are rising to the challenge and are taking on the extra work that comes with this. Women are doing more to support their teams and advance inclusion efforts. Yet this critical and often invisible work goes unrecognised and unrewarded.

The risks to women and the companies that depend on their leadership are very real. Many are experiencing burn out and looking for ways out (Cooper, 2021). Yet we need female leaders and what they stand for. Companies need to be proactive in addressing this as well as creating a human centric workplace for all. The following steps will go some way to supporting this agenda.

Recommendations

- Focus on building strong connections and relationships
- Put wellbeing at the center of all you do
- Maximize the opportunities for women to grow and succeed within the workplace
- Create cultures of belonging
- Continue to invest in ethical technology innovation
- Build on the positives of the pandemic

- **Focus on building strong connections and relationships**

An empowered and productive workforce requires quality interactions across all internal and external relationships not only to get the work done but to build a sense of community and belonging. A key focus here is developing the skills for quality communication and conversation. Senior leaders, teams and all employees should consider the following questions:

- * How do we want to talk and relate together going forward?
- * What will enable us to do our best work together?
- * What do we need to do to make this happen?

- **Put wellbeing at the center of all you do**

The work of supporting employees wellbeing is mission critical. Pulse check your organizations wellbeing and develop a listening culture. Make plans to keep your employees happy, healthy and engaged; both during the difficult times, and as we look towards and beyond the end of the pandemic.

- **Maximize opportunities for women to grow and succeed within the workplace**

The risk of losing female leaders is real. Organizations must work out how to advance female talent more effectively at all levels. Through addressing gender bias at a systemic level and supporting women's leadership development at all levels, organizations can maximize the opportunities for woman to grow and succeed within the workplace, and in doing so improve their overall business performance.

- **Create cultures of belonging**

Diversity is one of the most powerful competitive advantages. Cultures that exclude represent lost potential for businesses, societies, and economies. Leaders need to build diverse and inclusive workforces with the mindsets, skillsets, and resources to address bias and belonging at all stages of the employee journey.

- **Continue to invest in ethical technology innovation**

Use technology to add value not just cut costs. Scan the horizon for leading providers of technology and communication products that help humans succeed in work, unlocking capabilities, productivity and shaping the world of work in ways that improve the quality of life for all.

- **Build on the positives of the pandemic**

Find ways to recognize and reward employees for strong teamwork, thinking out of the box, stepping up and doing, and contributing their difference. Trust, empower, and generate accountability across teams, build relational skills and qualities at all levels and *'be the change you want to see'*. Well-developed leaders create durable competitive advantage.

These recommendations are in no way exhaustive. Leaders will continue to learn and define new work aspirations and possibilities as the post pandemic world evolves over the next few years. However, we cannot underestimate the organizational and cultural shifts required as the working environment expands, and the ecosystem of physical and virtual workplaces evolve. How people work, engage, relate and collaborate will be a priority for all.

Future Research/ Get involved

Hult International Business School is looking for organizations and individuals to take part in further stages of this research project. We want to work together to explore how leaders can encourage and facilitate inclusive, positive and productive conversations in a hybrid, technologically enabled workplace. To express your interest in taking part in this conversation please email research@ashridge.hult.edu

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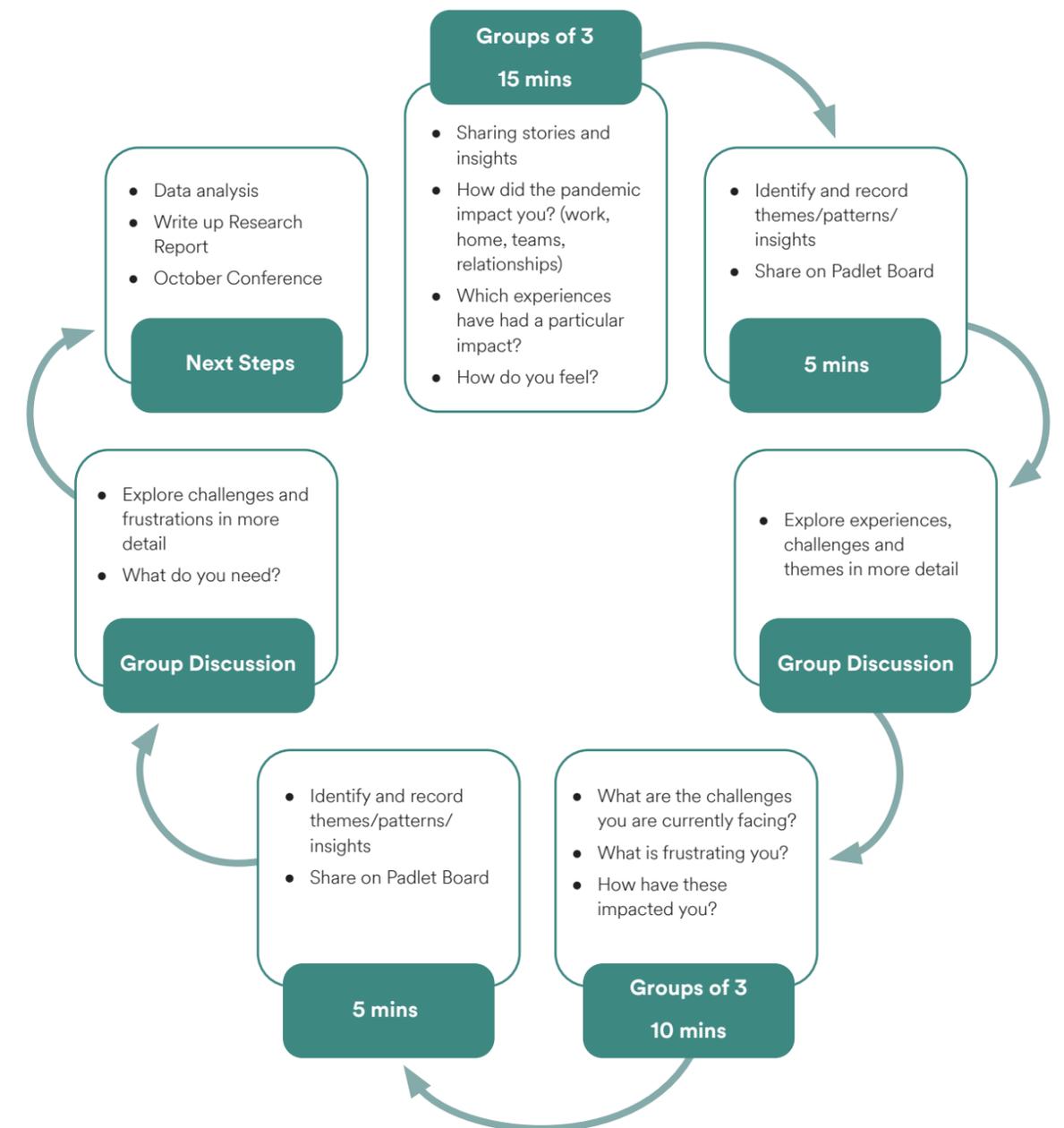
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Appendix 1

Research process: Cycles of research





About This Research

In August 2021, almost 18 months after the COVID-19 pandemic began, around 40 senior women leaders based in Sweden took part in group inquiry conversations. These conversations explored the women's experiences, perspectives and transitions over the pandemic year, as well as the challenges they were felt they were facing in the immediate future. This report organizes the details and insights from these conversations into two main sections: Looking Backwards and Looking Forwards. Within each of these sections six themes are presented.

Get Involved

Hult International Business School is looking for organizations and individuals to take part in further stages of this research project. We want to work together to explore how leaders can encourage and facilitate inclusive, positive and productive conversations in a hybrid-technologically enable workplace. To express your interest in taking part in this conversation please email research@ashridge.hult.edu