Shaping a Better Future:

The Essential Skills Leaders Need Today, and Tomorrow

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From the CEO

For the past two years, the pandemic has distorted our sense of time. Businesses have moved at an astonishing pace. And, at the same time, our lives have been marked by unceasing waves of uncertainty and a collective sense of deja vu. This paradox has been mentally, emotionally, and spiritually exhausting.

Yet, we are energized by the unprecedented opportunity leaders have to shape a better future.

The leadership vision we describe in this report is built on both decades of research and thousands of hours of coaching leaders at organizations around the world. In the coming years, we believe these skills will empower leaders to build organizations that are more equitable, more engaged, more innovative, and more prepared to navigate the challenges ahead.

Dr. Jonathan Kirschner, CEO, AIIR Consulting

How many of your organization's leaders are ready for the challenges ahead?

	2021	2022
They are not ready at all	**14%**	**31%**
Some are ready, most are not	**54%**	**27%**
They are mostly prepared	**32%**	**30%**
They are very prepared	**0%**	**12%**

For most of the six years we have asked executive coaches and talent professionals about the challenges leaders and their organizations will face, their answers have remained remarkably consistent — dealing with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and change. While the scale of these challenges increased, the challenges themselves were consistent.

Two years ago, COVID-19 changed everything. For leaders and their organizations, the pandemic ushered in "a new normal of change" that was:

- **Perpetual** - occurring all the time in an ongoing way.
- **Pervasive** - unfolding in multiple areas of life at once.
- **Exponential** - accelerating at an increasingly rapid rate.

At the same time, we spent 2020 and 2021 stuck in a pandemic haze marked by unceasing waves of uncertainty and a sense of what the New York Times called languishing — a mental and emotional middle ground that dulls our motivation, disrupts our ability to focus, and makes it difficult to derive meaning from our work and relationships.

Given the circumstances, it's no surprise that many of us have spent the past two years pining for pre-pandemic normalcy. While we are eager to put the pandemic behind us, putting the lessons of the pandemic behind us would be a mistake. In the years ahead, leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to fundamentally reshape how we live and work — to boldly author a better future. To do so, we must reshape what it means to lead.

Pre-Pandemic Leadership Skills

In 2019, AIIR Consulting launched one of the largest coaching outcomes studies ever conducted. Over the course of two years, our team of business psychologists and data scientists analyzed more than 600 strategic development plan goals from executive coaching engagements at top-performing companies around the world. The result is an unprecedented view into the key skills leaders needed to thrive pre-pandemic.

- **Leadership Brand** - Recognition of a leader's positive impact on the organization based on their expertise, accomplishments, and influence
- **Managing High-Performing Teams** - Aligning the functional tasks and strategic priorities and responsibilities of team members to drive business results
- **Influential Communication** - Influencing internal and external stakeholders through powerful and prolific communication skills
- **Leader-as-Coach** - Actively supporting the growth, development, and performance improvement of team members that advance individual and organizational needs
- **Managing Impactful Relationships** - The ability to utilize and manage day-to-day and strategic relationships with internal and external stakeholders and customers

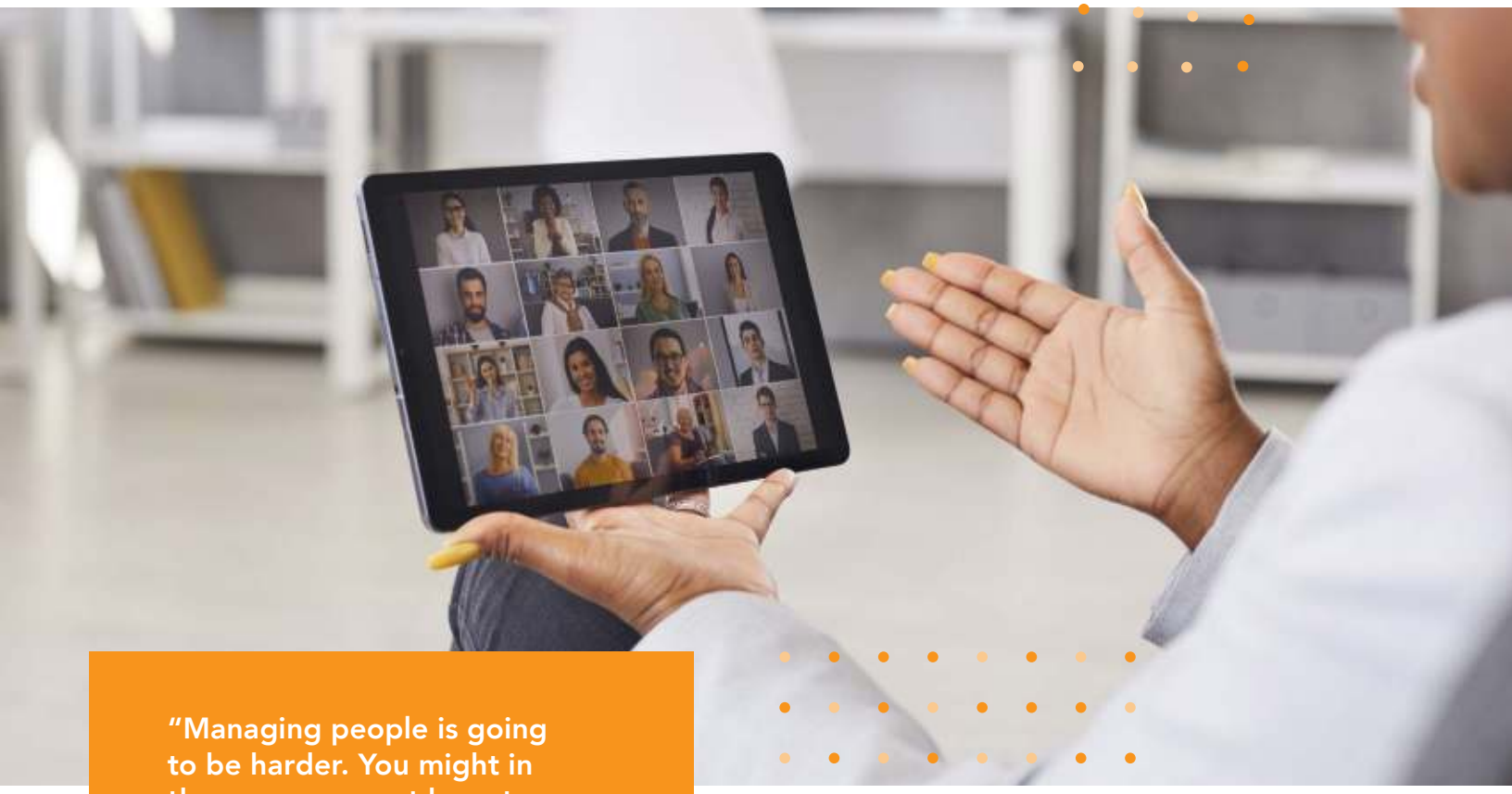
About the Survey

While the leadership skills that were important in 2019, 2020, and 2021 will continue to be important, the future will present a unique set of challenges. To understand the leadership skills required to meet these challenges, we surveyed hundreds of talent professionals and conducted in-depth interviews with talent leaders at leading companies across industries ranging from technology and life sciences to professional services, construction, and utilities. We also consulted the more than 140 coaches in the AIIR Global Coaching Alliance, who have collectively spent thousands of hours advising leaders and teams at Fortune 1000 companies. Based on their experience, our survey data, and decades of leadership research, we have identified five leadership behaviors that will help leaders shape a bold new future: hybrid management, focused engagement, rebuilding connection, managing complexity, and modeling self-compassion.

"Leaders will make the mistake of trying to return to how they operated before the pandemic. We are now used to managing our time and don't miss the commute. It's easier to shift back and forth during your day — to pick your child up from school and then pick up your project when you return home. Our day might be extended or broken up but as long as we produce the results, it shouldn't matter. Leaders will need to develop the flexibility to let their employees manage their own time as long as results are still high quality."

Cathie Murensky | AIIR Denver

Hybrid Management



"Managing people is going to be harder. You might in the same moment have to manage people in the office and remotely, and you have to be purposeful about how you're leading each group. And therein lies the resistance to hybrid work. Any time you go from being an expert to being a novice, no matter what it is, it provokes a certain amount of anxiety. Leading a hybrid workforce is new, and it's provoking a lot of anxiety for leaders."

Erica Bennett,
Leadership Development Institute
at Independence Blue Cross

How to Help Leaders Develop Hybrid Management Skills:

- Empower Leaders with Self-Awareness
- Increase Resources for Self-Development
- Help Leaders Coach their Employees

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In March of 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic spread around the globe, workers packed up their laptops and headed home. Now, many of these workers still haven't returned to the office. And, many never will. According to a recent survey, less than 20% of companies plan to require their employees to return to the office. Instead, most companies are moving toward a hybrid workplace, with some employees working from home, some working in the office, and some moving between the two.

"It's a more complex change than people expected, but we're still in a pandemic — so, the people who are criticizing hybrid as a way of working are doing so prematurely, because most companies aren't actually working that way yet."

Head of Executive Development,
Fortune 500 Technology Company

For individuals, the hybrid approach holds the promise of autonomy, flexibility, and better work-life balance. And, more autonomy, flexibility, and better work-life balance tend to make employees more engaged, innovative, and productive. Which, in turn, makes organizations more competitive and more profitable.

But, for leaders, navigating the change to a hybrid workplace will be more challenging than rearranging the desks. Leaders will be required to fundamentally rethink their roles. As Todd Harrison, Senior Director of Leadership Development at GE Healthcare told us: "Leading others is both art and science. Our leaders have been really strong at science — the processes. Now, we need leaders to focus more on the art — the people."

More than anything, a successful transition to the hybrid workplace depends on an engaged and empowered workforce. As stated by the Harvard Business Review: "To cope with this new reality, companies are moving away from traditional command-and-control practices and toward something very different: a model in which managers give support and guidance rather than instructions, and employees learn how to adapt to constantly changing environments in ways that unleash fresh energy, innovation, and commitment."

20% of employees are engaged at work

But, a recent study suggests that most leaders don't have the skills necessary to lead this way. And, it shows. A 2021 Gallup survey shows that, globally, only around 20% of employees are engaged at work. That tracks with a separate survey that showed just one in five employees feel managed in a way that motivates them to do outstanding work. And, while 71% of the most senior workers felt empowered to make decisions and contribute new or innovative ideas to their organizations, only 32% of those at the manager level and just 22% of individual contributors felt the same.

"For leaders and teams, especially in organizations built around physical presence in the office, this is a new way of working. And, like all new skills, it may feel clunky at first. The idea is to keep experimenting with new ways of working to see what helps."

Supriti Bhandary | AIIR NYC

Helping Leaders Develop Hybrid Management Skills

Empower Leaders with Self-Awareness

To succeed in a hybrid or fully virtual environment, leaders must be acutely aware of how their behaviors impact their employees. Most leaders already struggled to achieve this level of self-awareness. Now, in an environment where most interactions are remote, and where many of them happen asynchronously, it can be difficult for leaders to understand their impact before it shows up as weakened engagement and waning effectiveness.

Change starts with self-awareness. Giving leaders access to feedback from their superiors, peers, and employees will give them the information they need to understand how they're showing up, and how they can be more effective. Assessments and 360° feedback will be invaluable tools for hybrid managers.

Increase Resources for Self-Development

Navigating the hybrid work environment will require leaders to adjust their leadership style to meet the needs of a particular moment. This requires not only tremendous self-awareness but also self-determination and self-control.

These qualities don't come naturally. But, providing leaders with resources and tools to help them build self-determination and self-control will make them better able to navigate the sensation of being "split in two," as one talent leader described, and to bring their most effective selves to the challenges they face.

Help Leaders Coach Their Employees

Numerous studies have shown that coaching — helping employees achieve desired outcomes by sharing feedback — is a critical leadership skill. Google identified coaching as the single most important skill set of its most effective leaders, and a McKinsey & Company study showed that organizations whose leaders empower their employees through coaching have workers that are more engaged and more productive.

Traditionally, leaders could check in with employees and have coaching conversations in the moment — after meetings or over lunch. Now, these conversations have to be held asynchronously, where they may feel impersonal, or scheduled in advance, meaning employees will receive feedback less frequently, if at all. Here, talent professionals can be powerful allies for leaders, providing both the structure and the training leaders need to deliver feedback effectively and with the frequency necessary for success.

"Leaders are telling us they're struggling to find enough time to succeed at their role and also to develop their people. It can be hard to pull them away from the technical side of their role — not only because it's more familiar and exciting to them, but also because the technical side of their role has a clear deliverable. A clear understanding of success. Developing people is not like that — it takes time."

Jackie Schwartz, MS
Associate Director,
Global Talent & Leadership at Merck

Focused Engagement

"When you're physically in front of someone, it is easier as a leader to see if employees are engaged. On a video conference, it's harder and takes more effort to read body language and ask engaging questions to tell if you have someone's attention, and if they have their camera off, it takes even more effort. The key in each of these scenarios is to identify ways to build and keep engagement, acknowledge and address distractions, and take action to make sure you keep their attention."

Deb Pool, SPHR
Learning & Development at PSEG

How to Help Leaders Build Focused Engagement

- Tame the Digital Firehose
- Create a Camera-On Culture
- Enable Immersive Experiences

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Working remotely offers concrete benefits. A 2015 Stanford study found, free from the long commutes or countless interactions with colleagues that characterize the office, workers were 13% more productive working from home.

But, this gain in productivity is not without its downside.

1 in 3 employees trust their leaders

Even before the pandemic forced our lives online, we struggled to manage the digital firehose. Leaders and their employees were bombarded by inputs, from instant messages to meetings, and many spent more than half of their workday receiving and responding to messages. Now, the intensity of our workdays has increased. A study of Microsoft 365 users showed that workers are:

- Spending 2.5x more time in virtual meetings
- Spending 10 minutes longer in the average meeting
- Sending 45% more chat messages per week
- Sending 42% more chat messages outside of working hours
- Sending and receiving 40.6 billion more emails per month

Microsoft states in its report that "workers are feeling the pressure to keep up. Despite meeting and chat overload, 50% of people respond to chats within five minutes or less. This proves the intensity of our workday, and what is expected of employees during this time, has increased significantly."

To cope with this increased intensity, leaders have become world-class multitaskers. Or, at least they think they have — studies have shown that our perceived ability to do two things at once rarely reflects reality.

But, what is the real harm in answering a message or monitoring your email during a long meeting? While very skilled leaders may be able to track the content of the meeting while multitasking, they are likely to miss key pieces of information.

More importantly, they miss the tremendous amount of information that is being communicated nonverbally. Nonverbal signals give us important context about the information we are receiving and allow us to connect, empathetically, with the person we are receiving it from.

Loss of this connection leads to loss of trust — a problem considering that only one in three employees trusts their leaders, and that employees who trust their employers are less stressed and less likely to burn out than those who don't.

"Be it hybrid, remote, or back to the office, teamwork will never be the same. Work from home brought down personal and professional barriers and accelerated the crumbling of formal facades. What's left is an opportunity to focus on the need for human-centric leadership."

Maureen Rabotin | AIIR Paris

Helping Leaders Create Focused Engagement

Tame the Digital Firehose

Leaders and their employees have spent the past year drinking from a digital firehose. In the Microsoft study cited above, 40% of people said they had to work during video conferences to keep up with the sheer number of meetings on their schedule. So prolific are virtual interactions with our coworkers that we are collectively experiencing Zoom Fatigue — "the tiredness, worry, or burnout associated with overusing virtual platforms of communication."

If multitasking during meetings is a response to too high a volume of meetings and messages, the answer is to reduce the flow. Leaders are responsible for setting norms for communication on their teams — when people are responsible for responding, what should be communicated asynchronously and what should be a meeting, what are the appropriate number of meetings per day, and what is a humane interval between those meetings. HR and talent professionals can create company-wide policies that help leaders establish healthy norms.

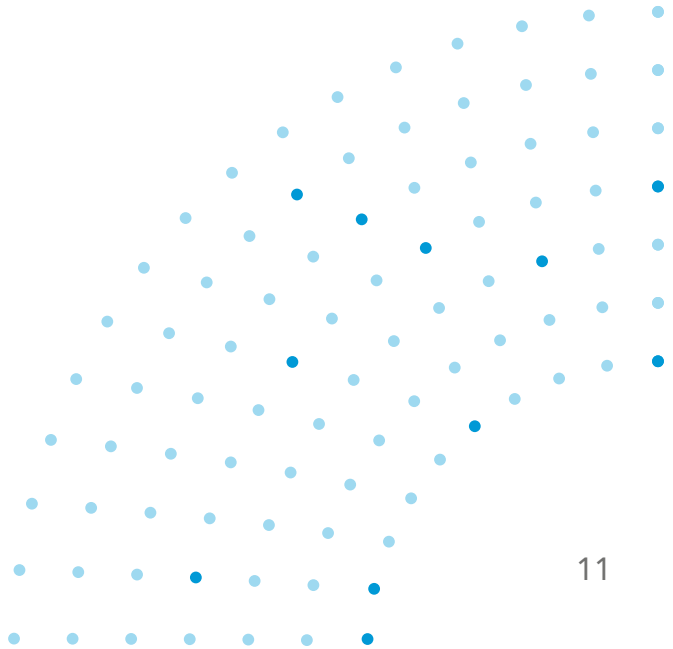
Create a Camera-On Culture

Nonverbal signals account for a large part of communication. That means that if leaders or their employees have their cameras off, they're missing more than half of the information on the call. They are also missing the opportunity to connect with their employees. Studies have shown that video conferencing increases social bonding as opposed to voice calls or asynchronous modes of communication like messaging and email. The eye contact that video calls allow, though not perfect, triggers the release of oxytocin, a powerful neuropeptide key to social attachment and building trust between individuals.

Create Immersive Experiences

As much as leaders can do to establish focused engagement with their employees, there is a practical limit to how focused one can be via video conference. As a species, our attention span was steadily waning before we had multiple screens and the distractions of our home offices competing for our attention.

Neuroscience studies have shown that when team members engage with each other, their bodies and brain waves actually sync with each other and achieve a kind of flow state. The more eye contact and face-to-face interaction the subjects in the studies had, the stronger the synchrony in their brains. Innovation requires a level of synchrony that is hard to replicate in a virtual environment. That's why finding ways to bring people together for immersive, focused experiences in a safe environment will be one of the core challenges for leaders, and for HR and talent professionals, in the coming year.



Rebuilding Connection

"After two years of remote work, employees' sense of belonging is waning. Even as we video conference into our colleagues' homes, our interactions have become more formal. Meetings are scheduled to handle specific tasks. Informal connections aren't being made, and casual collisions don't exist. This limits innovation, but it also leaves employees feeling disconnected. They are less loyal and more easily distracted by a hot labor market. Leaders need to focus on engaging a disengaged and disconnected workforce."

Cindy Wolpert | AIIR Boston

How to Help Leaders Rebuild Engagement

- Uncover Interpersonal Dynamics
- Create Conditions for Connection
- Focus on Community

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As much of the workforce began working from home at the beginning of the pandemic, many predicted that productivity would plummet. Now, we know that the opposite is true. In a survey of business leaders around the world, 94% said their employees were equally or more productive than they were pre-pandemic.

But, much like working virtually has lessened our ability to connect on one-on-one calls, it has also lessened our capacity to connect with people on our teams and with our larger organizations.

"Human beings are fundamentally social – more than any other animal species on the planet, our own destinies are linked to each other," said Michael Platt, Ph.D., a renowned neuroscientist and co-founder of the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative.

61% of adults struggle with loneliness

Loneliness has long been a problem in the workplace. As early as 2017, former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called loneliness a public health crisis. A 2019 survey found that 61% of adults struggled with loneliness. But, since the beginning of the pandemic, the problem has become even more pronounced.

For leaders, lonely employees are a big problem. Loneliness reduces our ability to perform tasks, limits creativity, and reduces reasoning and decision-making. Socially isolated team members are less likely to collaborate with others, and research shows that their colleagues are likely to perceive them as unapproachable and uncommitted to the organization.

Analysis of team assessment data shows that, while average scores for team productivity have remained steady since the beginning of the pandemic, team culture has taken a dive. And, we know that without the foundation of a strong culture to support productivity, team performance will eventually collapse.

This happens especially quickly in a hybrid workplace, where a lack of interaction highlights a lack of culture. When members of a driven team are all in the office, interactions around the water cooler or before or after meetings can act as a pseudo-culture, masking the team's dysfunction and allowing it to maintain performance — for a while. When these interactions are replaced with endless video conferences, team members experience a sense of disconnection.

Connection isn't just important for teams. It's important for organizations, as well. In a recent study, Microsoft analyzed the collaboration and communication habits of more than 65,000 of its employees before and during the pandemic. The study found that, while the time employees spent communicating with their coworkers increased, time spent communicating or collaborating with people outside their functional units decreased. In a separate survey, 70% of HR professionals said they were more concerned about employee collaboration this year than they were before the pandemic began.

These relationships are essential to organizational culture and performance. If leaders can't find ways to reestablish connection, our workplace cultures risk becoming void of meaning, joy, inspiration, and innovation.

"We need collaborative leadership that creates the open, transparent, and psychologically safe environments required to coordinate and react to unexpected challenges and opportunities. Leaders need to sharpen their abilities to hear feedback and empower others."

Ned Eustace | AIIR NYC

Helping Leaders Rebuild Connection

Uncover Interpersonal Dynamics

More than ever, leaders need an unparalleled understanding of the interpersonal dynamics that drive their teams. While many teams will experience similar challenges, each will respond to those challenges differently.

Assessment will be an essential tool for team leaders in the hybrid workplace. A valid team assessment can provide leaders with information about the relationships on their teams. It can tell leaders whether the members of their team trust them or each other. And it can give leaders concrete information about how team members communicate and handle conflict.

Create the Conditions for Connection

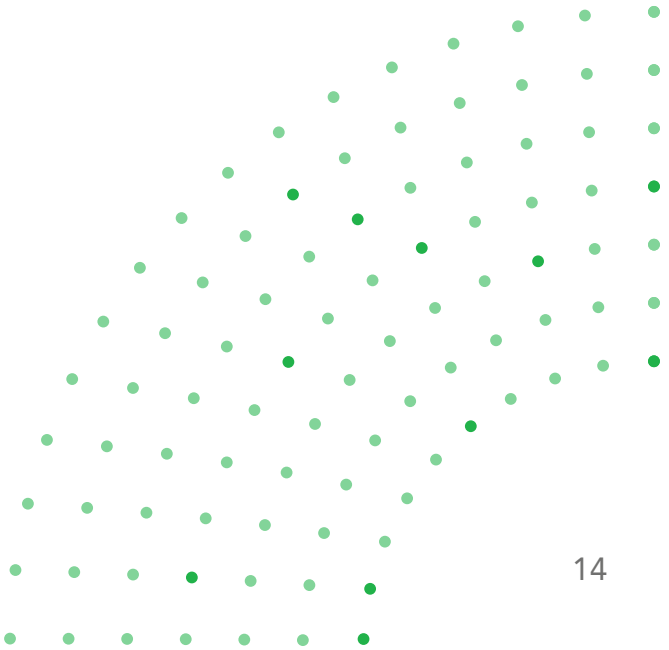
While it's impossible to replicate the hundreds of interactions team members would naturally have in the office, leaders can encourage their teams to take a moment at the beginning and end of meetings to check in with their coworkers.

Studies show that these interactions trigger the release of oxytocin and build trust and psychological safety between individuals. They also give team members an opportunity to hear about the personal and professional challenges their colleagues are experiencing, and to show empathy for their peers.

Focus on Community

Innovation comes from exposure to novel ideas or perspectives. Countless studies have shown that more diverse leadership leads to more and better innovation and improved financial performance. Diverse companies are 70% more likely to capture new markets. But, for most of us, two years of pandemic and the subsequent shift to remote work have made our worlds significantly smaller.

Leaders and organizations must go beyond culture to build what the isolation of the pandemic took away from us: a sense of community. Think of community as a more inclusive form of culture — rather than being built around a set of norms and behaviors, community is built on the connections between employees and the connection employees feel to the organization.



Managing Complexity

"As they continue to navigate the uncertainty of the pandemic — record inflation, wage pressures, and the great rehiring that will follow the great resignation — it will be important for leaders to view these challenges as opportunities for evolution."

Marie Leithauser,
AIIR Philadelphia

How to Help Leaders Manage Complexity

- Master Simplification
- Become Rooted in Values
- Connect People to Purpose

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Over the past decade, disruptive startups, breakneck technological advancement, geopolitical tumult, and technological leaps have propelled businesses forward at stunning speed.

Even before the pandemic, 68% of business leaders felt overwhelmed by the rapid pace of change. And over the past two years, this overwhelm has been evident in the ad hoc way many leaders reshaped their businesses — as a function of adaptation rather than aspiration. They were just trying to survive.

In the coming year, leaders and their organizations will face a barrage of distractions — a disrupted supply chain, depressed interest rates, an unpredictable market, and unforeseen challenges of an unprecedented scale. This, overlaid by a protracted global pandemic, makes every challenge more complex. And, while we are hard-pressed to imagine experiencing another crisis with the same scale and human suffering as COVID-19, large-scale disruptions occur with relative frequency.

To stay competitive in complex, always-changing markets, leaders will be required not only to adapt but also to anticipate change.

Thriving will require leaders to develop strong situational awareness, but it will also require:

- The ability to step back, radically simplify, and evaluate what is essential to the organization
- Becoming grounded in their own and their organization's values
- Connecting their employees to purpose

All of this translates into an opportunity to enact significant change, and shape a better future. But, it will require leaders to engage in serious self-reflection.

> **"Given everything we know and, importantly, everything we don't, leaders must approach the new year whole-hearted and half-sure. Whole-hearted means leaders must be clear, committed, and inspiring as they communicate vision, direction, and expectations. Half-sure means they must be prepared to change course, even abruptly, and be just as clear, committed, and inspiring as they communicate a completely different vision, direction, and expectation."**
>
> **Jeffrey Janowitz** | AIIR Tel Aviv

Helping Leaders Manage Complexity

Master Simplification

In 2022, leaders will need to slow down in order to speed up. In complex environments, many leaders are tempted to capitalize on every opportunity. But we have seen what happens when companies take their eye off the ball, devoting time and resources to chasing down rabbit holes, leaving them vulnerable to disruption.

Leaders need the ability to flex their mindset — to zoom in and assess problems and situations with nuanced, detail-oriented thinking, then zoom out to see that problem in the context of broader patterns and trends. When faced with daily challenges, leaders must instead focus on the core of their business — to reconsider the idea that less is more. Instead of starting new initiatives, ask what the organization could stop doing. And, embrace opportunities in a focused way that prioritizes high-value initiatives.

Become Rooted in Values

Constant change and upheaval can leave leaders and employees alike feeling rudderless, discouraged, and disengaged. Amid stress and uncertainty, leaders and their followers benefit from a clear understanding of their values and the values of the organization. Leaders and organizations must imagine that they are starting with a blank canvas, then be thoughtful and purposeful about the future they want to create.

Clarifying core values requires self-examination and self-awareness. Formal assessments can help leaders identify the motives and values that get them out of bed in the morning. Leaders can leverage this understanding of their values and the values of their organizations as a guide against which they can test their actions and decisions.

Connect People to Purpose

79% of leaders know that connecting their people to an inspiring purpose is critical to success. But, you shouldn't take for granted that your teams understand their purpose. Fewer than 30% of leaders regularly communicate purpose to their teams, and only 27% of organizations "guide supervisors to have conversations with their teams about why their work matters."

As an organization, it is critical that leaders and employees have a unified understanding of the purpose of the organization and how each of their teams fit that purpose. State and restate it. Print it on laminates that employees can put at their desks and in their home offices. When the individuals on a team coalesce around a common mission, it can achieve parabolic outcomes.

"In some ways, we have already reached the other side of the pandemic. In other ways, we never will. The workforce has different expectations for its leaders. Leaders must dig deep to understand the magnitude of these changes. Then they must find new ways to motivate their employees and drive performance."

J. Todd Ross | AIIR Washington D.C.

Model Self-Compassion

"Leaders need to develop the ability to slow down, say no, do less, and become the leader of their lives first. Many of the leaders and teams that I serve have been completely burned out for a year. Whether we call it 'self-care,' 'protecting the instrument,' 'recovery,' or 'energy management,' leaders will rise or fall based on their ability to take physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual care of themselves first."

Bob Kinnison | AIIR Dallas

How to Help Leaders Model Self-Compassion

- Establish Boundaries
- Focus on Building Sustainable Resilience
- Build a Culture of Self-Compassion

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The past two years have taken a tremendous toll on the workforce.

As we emerge from the pandemic, leaders have to face complex and, at times, confounding business conditions — supply chain issues, depressed interest rates, record consumer demand, an unprecedented labor market, and the shift to virtual or hybrid work, among others. Layered over these challenges are the difficulties leaders face in their personal lives — the continued psychic toll of the pandemic, the stress of uncertainty, and the exhaustion that stems from balancing their roles as professionals, partners and parents.

A recent Gallup poll showed that 57% of workers reported feeling stressed out on a daily basis, an eight point increase over last year. The most recent CDC Household Pulse Survey showed that 37% of U.S. residents report feeling anxious or depressed, an alarming 237% increase over 2019.

"Leaders need to develop their ability to look after themselves. To take time away from work to recharge their energy and attention."

Nicky Westhead | AIIR Philadelphia

As a result, workers are burning out at a spectacular rate. 75% of workers report feeling burned out at work, with 40% saying they've experienced burnout specifically during the pandemic. And, even before the pandemic, leaders reported more stress and burnout, worse work-life balance, and worse physical health than their employees.

In this environment, leaders and their teams will undoubtedly experience setbacks. How they respond to those setbacks will determine their success.

Clearly, the level of burnout leaders and their employees are experiencing is not sustainable. To combat this burnout in the next year, leaders will need to take self-care seriously.

Leaders will need to develop resilience — the psychological capacity to adapt to stressful circumstances and bounce back from adverse events. Studies show that resilient leaders experience less stress, have better mental and physical health, are more able to adapt to change and overcome setbacks, and tend to lead more successful teams and organizations.

But, even more than self-care or resilience, leaders will need to develop the capacity for self-compassion. And, they will need to model it to their teams. As stated in a recent article in the Harvard Business Review, self-compassion is a psychological construct centered on three behaviors: being kind rather than judgemental about your own failures and mistakes, recognizing failure as a human experience, and taking a balanced approach to experiencing negative emotions without letting them overwhelm you.

"People across every organizational level are juggling work, managing relationships, caring for children, and trying to care for themselves in a period of enormous anxiety, uncertainty, and change. Leaders can use this opportunity to lead with empathy and to build a workplace culture that allows its employees to leave a meeting to tend to their child without it impacting their careers."

Rosa Grunhaus Belzer, Ph.D.
AIIR San Diego

Helping Leaders Develop Self-Care and Self-Compassion

Establish Boundaries

Under increased pressure, the tendency for many people is to put in increasingly long hours at the office. In the early days of the pandemic, panic productivity and the looming threat of layoffs prompted workers to put in extra hours to prove their value.

Research has shown this to be counterproductive. Pushing oneself past the point of exhaustion leads to reduced working memory and capacity for problem-solving, less creativity, and worse outcomes at work. It increases the chances of burnout and reduces your resilience over time. A recent study of investment bankers showed that around the fourth year of enduring grueling 100-hour workweeks, many started to see their bodies physically deteriorate.

Rather than pushing themselves to work ever-expanding hours, leaders need to embrace a simple truth that too many ignore: that they are human beings. Last year, we encouraged individuals to acknowledge their limits. This year, leaders must learn not only to acknowledge their limits but also to hold compassion for them.

They also need to develop compassion for the limits of their employees. Consciously or unconsciously, employers have been capitalizing on their employees' panic productivity. And, as organizations reopen their offices or settle into hybrid working styles, few workers think the expectation of overwork will vanish. Leaders must establish, and enforce, firm but flexible working hours and encourage boundaries around off-work hours.

Focus on Building Sustainable Resilience

Leaders and employees alike will need to build resilience and cope with the stress caused by the relentless pace of change. Resilient people experience less stress and better mental and physical health and are more able to adapt to change and overcome setbacks.

But most of us tend to think of resilience in heroic terms. And while perseverance or "grit" are important components of resilience, and do contribute to long-term career success, many leaders take the idea to the extreme.

Psychologist Ann Masten points out that an important part of building resilience is building and protecting what she calls surge capacity — the mental and physical resources we use to survive acutely stressful situations. Faced with continuous challenges, this capacity becomes depleted, and we get exhausted and overwhelmed. Self-care is an important part of protecting our surge capacity.

Build a Culture of Self-Compassion

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we are not in control. This means that leaders and their teams will need to become more comfortable taking measured risks and making decisions even when the outcome is uncertain. This requires an atmosphere of psychological safety in which team members feel safe both to admit their mistakes and point out the mistakes of others without fear of retribution. By modeling self-compassion to their teams, leaders can create the cultures of trust and psychological safety necessary to overcome the change and uncertainty of the coming year and beyond.

"Leaders need the humility and authenticity to admit what they don't know, and the courage to advance the best plans based on the available knowledge. They need to be relentless in seeking data-driven solutions and tempering them with human knowledge. They need to risk being wrong. They cannot risk inaction. They need to embrace ever-changing ways of getting things done as a permanent condition. And, most importantly, they need the courage to lead from the front and show their teams the way."

Jack Huston | AIIR NYC

Shaping a More Connected, Compassionate, and Inclusive Future

We understand that a long road lies ahead. Leaders will continue to contend with changing markets, an uncertain economic recovery, social and political unrest, and intense competition. And, although we tend to think of the coronavirus pandemic as a discrete event, as business becomes more global and the pace of change continues to increase, large-scale disruptions will become more and more frequent.

The challenges will be substantial, and many leaders and organizations feel unprepared to meet them. But, inherent in these challenges is an opportunity to reauthor how we live and work. And, as they strengthen the competencies we described in this report — hybrid management, focused engagement, rebuilding connection, managing complexity, and modeling self-compassion — leaders will be empowered to build a future that is more equitable, more engaged, and more innovative than before.

About the Authors

Dr. Jonathan Kirschner
Founder and CEO

Jonathan Kirschner is the Founder and CEO of AIIR Consulting. An experienced executive coach, Jonathan founded AIIR Consulting with the mission to make individuals and their organizations more effective through science-based, tech-enhanced leadership solutions.

Megan Marshall
COO and Head of Executive Coaching

Megan Marshall is Chief Operations Officer and the Head of Executive Coaching at AIIR. In her role, Megan collaborates with the more than 140 senior executive coaches in the AIIR Global Coaching Alliance to deliver scalable coaching solutions that produce measurable results.

Derek Lusk
Head of Executive Assessment

Derek Lusk is Head of Executive Assessment at AIIR Consulting. In this role, he leverages AIIR's experience, expertise, and proprietary assessment methodology to help Fortune 1000 organizations improve performance at the executive level.

Andrew Smith
Head of Leadership Development

Andrew Smith is the Head of Leadership Development. In his role, Andrew collaborates with global learning leaders, talent managers, and instructional designers to design strategies and training programs that result in lasting behavior change.

Dave Gloss
Head of Team Effectiveness

Dave Gloss is Head of Team Effectiveness at AIIR Consulting. In his role, Dave works intimately with AIIR clients to ensure teams across their organizations are prepared to meet the challenges posed by a faster and ever-evolving world.

About AIIR Consulting

AIIR Consulting is the premier provider of tech-enabled leadership solutions. Leveraging business psychology, a proprietary methodology, technology, and a global community of expert coaches and consultants, AIIR delivers high-impact solutions that help leaders and organizations navigate the challenges they face and shape a better future. Learn more at http://www.aiirconsulting.com.

About the AIIR Institute

The AIIR Institute is a dedicated group of researchers, data scientists, and technologists dedicated to advancing applied leadership development through science and data. Deploying advanced quantitative and qualitative research methods, the AIIR Institute continuously analyzes both individual, aggregate, and Big Coaching Data® in order to arrive at cutting edge insights that benefit our customers and industry at large. Through partnerships with the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative and The Coaching Center of Excellence at Columbia University, the AIIR Institute pressure tests new ideas and hypotheses in order to advance AIIR Consulting's mission of developing great leaders around the world.