

Leaning In and Leading Through a Pandemic

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As we begin a new year, our heads full of visions of vaccines and a return to in-person gatherings, the reality of the continuing pandemic is still throwing a damper on our hopes for a return to pre-pandemic normalcy. And the continued reality of operating in a virtual world is placing new demands on leaders to both innovate and embrace change to ensure that their organizations not only survive, but thrive in the “new normal” we face.

A world that is both rapidly changing and full of uncertainty can create tremendous angst in the workforce, particularly for those who are risk averse. Managing this angst while leaning in to drive change and ensure continued relevancy are tasks that leaders would be wise not to lose sight of—while also being reminded that times of uncertainty can often provide the “burning platform” for more rapid, enduring and transformational change.

We should take comfort in the demonstrated ability of the federal technology market to rapidly embrace new technologies to continue without interruption the important mission of government. Virtual technologies are breaking down barriers to participation, allowing government and industry leaders to collaborate from any place, at any time, freed from the expense and time consumption of travel. Organizations are seeing an uptick in participation and, in many cases, companies are seeing an increased cadence of contact with their

government clients.

That said, thoughtful leaders would do well to keep a few things in mind as they navigate the year ahead.

Resiliency. Adapting to the pandemic has raised questions about the continued relevancy of current business processes, certain jobs and even the capabilities of entire companies. Leadership success through the pandemic requires a laser-like focus on resiliency. How are you ensuring your organization seamlessly adapts to the world we find ourselves in? How willing are you to rapidly shift to new processes and technologies? How are you ensuring consistency for your employees even in this time of great change? Expectations for 24/7 service delivery are increasing, and those unwilling to adapt will find themselves losing their position in the market.

Engagement. Many of us grew up in a leadership world that espoused “management by walking around,” a fascinating concept to adapt to a world of virtual-only meetings. And while the use of virtual meeting software has opened the door for more voices, more collaboration and more engagement, savvy leaders are paying attention to the challenges of maintaining “active listening” skills in the face of endless Zoom sessions, being able to pick up non-verbal cues in a world without in-person contact, and recognizing that people are struggling with everything from isolation to overload as they manage their jobs from their homes.

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Mr. Wennergren is the CEO of ACT-IAC, the national non-profit public-private partnership dedicated to advancing the business of government through the application of technology. He has extensive leadership experience in information technology and change management and has served in a number of senior positions, most recently in the private sector as a Managing Director at Deloitte Consulting LLP, EVP & COO at the Professional Services Council and a VP at CACI International Inc., and prior to that in government as Department of the Navy CIO, Vice Chair of the Federal CIO Council, DoD Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense/Deputy CIO and DoD Assistant Deputy Chief Management Officer. He is also a fellow at the National Academy of Public Administration.

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Leading Change. A couple of months ago, I had the opportunity to do a fireside chat with leading change icon, Dr. John Kotter, author of a number of bestselling books to include “Leading Change” and “A Sense of Urgency.” Concepts like the imperative to create and maintain a sense of urgency, the power of coalitions (and the difference between a coalition and consensus) and the importance of an aligned vision are even more important in the world of uncertainty and distraction posed by the pandemic. They’re worth a fresh read and a reframing in light of the changing world.

Character. Of all the leadership skills most crucial today, none ranks higher than character. Your actions speak far louder than your words and as the leader, your actions have an amplifying effect on the actions of others across the entire organization. Dr. Jack London, in his book, “*Character — The Ultimate Success Factor*,” noted that “by choosing to do the right thing, instead of simply anything, you will learn how to define and gain success and live with yourself your character will absolutely determine the kind of life that you will live.” Even amidst a pandemic, it’s a wonderful time for leaders to pick up the brush, and as demonstrated by their actions, paint an even brighter future. ■