

Conscious Leadership Survey

The 3 Attributes Senior Leaders are focusing on in 2021



What impact did the events of 2020 have on leaders?

As last year was ending and jingle bells were in sight, we asked senior leaders within our client network for their views on how they navigated the challenges of 2020, what they will focus on in 2021 and their overall levels of wellbeing.

We conducted some face-to-face interviews plus a short, online survey across ACT/NSW/QLD/VIC with a balance of respondents across public and private sectors.

We first asked them to reflect on their experiences of 2020 and the attributes they focused on to lead through such rapid, unpredictable change. Core themes were:



Increased and consistent communication

This was amplified by the need to work from home and adopt online platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. With the removal of ad hoc conversations that office life provides, there was a need to organise more regular catch ups, both formal and informal. These helped leaders listen for issues, especially around mental health, and act on them quickly.



Realigning with vision and purpose

Leaders quickly realised they needed a strong anchor for their fragmented teams, so created opportunities to clarify the way forward with shared vision and purpose. This helped teams to feel less isolated and reminded them that, despite the physical changes to their working conditions, they were still part of a team and their contribution was important.



Being more agile

The saying “adapt or die” was a core theme of 2020. Those who adapted were able to survive and often thrive. Those who did not adapt got stuck and were faced with some very tough decisions about if and how to continue. Leaders who thrived found it through agility. They adopted agile ways of working, breaking down their projects into smaller sprints and learning to move with the rate of change within their organisations.



Modelling resilience

Quarantining, lock downs and the word ‘pandemic’ incited fear in most people. Leaders were charged with both being humans experiencing COVID-19 themselves and simultaneously holding strong for their teams. They achieved this with resilience. They didn’t sweat the small stuff and made sure to communicate the big stuff. The ones who adopted an agile stance were able to recover quickly when things changed. With this came the confidence to embrace challenges and this influenced their teams. Through modelling resilience themselves, they built it within their organisations.

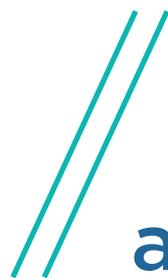


Empathy

It’s undeniable that 2020 was an emotionally draining year. The expected and cherished freedoms we enjoy in Australia were suddenly at risk and as a culture we found ourselves in a contracted, defensive position where our threat responses were activated: fight, flight, or freeze. This was compounded by working remotely. Leaders had a much tougher time getting a clear read on how their teams and team members were coping. The ones who did well were the ones who dialled up the empathy. They drew from their own experiences of living through a pandemic and used that to connect with how others may be feeling as well. They didn’t shy away from tough conversations or moments of vulnerability.

How much of what was learned by leaders in 2020 will carry into 2021?

What are the three main attributes guiding their decisions as this year unfolds?

 **Adaptability,
Authenticity,
and Grit.**

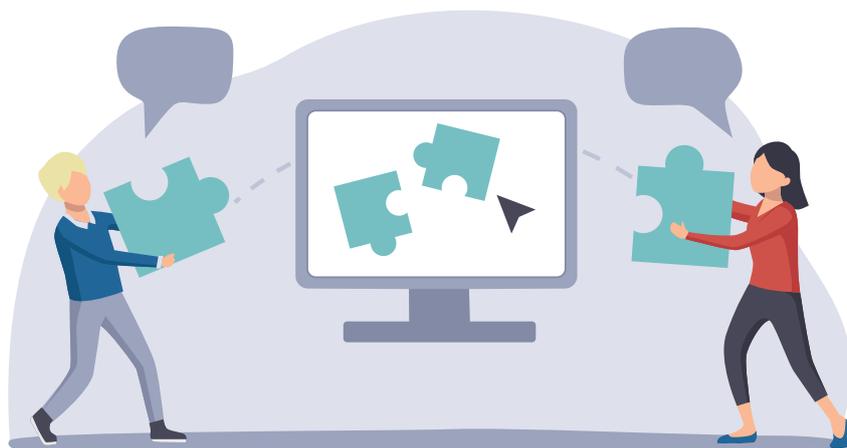
Adaptability

Leaders have always needed to be adaptable. The difference in 2021 (and beyond) is becoming more comfortable with constant and often highly disruptive change. It's about transmuting the stress of change into a mindset of quickly seeing opportunities, applying creative thinking and maintaining momentum. Change is no longer seen as a departure from the norm, but a way of being that builds and iterates success.

“...Structured informal’ interactions to replicate ad hoc interactions that would ordinarily happen in person.”

What that will look like:

- **More flexible AND more structured** – Working in agile ways and ensuring consistent communication.
- **Daily stand ups** – The lifeblood of agile ways of working. Everyone stays informed and issues are noticed and dealt with quickly.
- **Working from home scheduling** – Leaders have realised they can still run a team that's working remotely, and in fact, many team members have thrived in this environment. Some organisations will have to amend their current policies to support this change and to facilitate a hybrid model with some working in the office and some working remotely.
- **Trust and delegation** – The big learning from 2020 was that leaders often take on too much of their teams' workload for various reasons: time, quality, budget constraints, etc. The combination of remote working with unprecedented change showed leaders they need to spread responsibility and shift their own working styles to include more coaching and support their team members.



Authenticity

// *“Talking openly about stress and impacts on work”*

Building on the increased need for empathy in 2020, leaders are now willing to bring more of themselves into the workplace. Lockdown and working from home were great equalizers for many people. It pulled aside the veil of hierarchy and allowed us to see one another, not just as colleagues or employees, but as real people with real lives: Kids, pets, kitchen tables, home offices, casual clothes, home deliveries...all these elements reminded us the people with whom we work are just like us.

Leaders who choose to maintain authenticity and allow others into their whole lives, will continue to build trust and respect with their team members. It's the opposite of the old 'command and control' model, where instilling fear and passing judgement were seen as the pathways to respect. Now it is about acknowledgment and vulnerability, modelling work/life balance and supporting others to do the same.

// *“We ran a morning coffee check-in which was optional and where we didn't talk about work. Was a great way to understand things that are happening in people's lives.”*

What that will look like:

- **Authentic communication** - being present, really connecting and listening, being available, being clearly visible.
- **Practise empathy and compassion** – remembering that everyone is doing the best they can with the information they have. Seeking to understand before making judgement.
- **Promote collaboration and engagement** – agile collaboration is an effective way to get things done. Working in short, intensive, all-in sprints will maintain momentum, focus, shared purpose, and let the team see tangible results.



Grit

// “...(maintaining) positivity in the face of change.”

In the natural world there are two types of systems: open and closed. Closed systems are like pressure cookers: controlled environments where nothing gets in or out. Open systems require ongoing exchanges of energy between different organisms to adapt, grow and evolve.

Human beings work in open systems and our greatest evolutionary growth often comes through crisis. We saw this phenomenon in many forms throughout 2020: businesses rapidly moving online, the shift to remote working, more focus on wellbeing and mental health. Rather than succumbing to the immense challenges of 2020, leaders and their teams are learning to breathe, keep calm and carry on. 2021 is about having grit.

Grit* is the combination of resilience and persistence. It's an optimistic stance firmly facing the future and taking the necessary steps to achieve outcomes. It embodies flexibility, awareness, and readiness. That's why it is important for organisations to have a strong vision for themselves and regularly communicate that vision through their leaders.

It also requires reflection. Part of an agile approach is to run regular retrospectives on completed work. This now needs to extend into the acknowledgement and discussion of the human and emotional factors at play. Grit is built from this: it's a way to say, "yes, that was tough, it hurt, I was overwhelmed at times, but it taught me x, y, and z. Now I'm ready to push on."

**Grit is inspired by Angela Duckworth's work on this topic.*

What that will look like:

- Structuring team and individual reflection at the end of sprints or when milestones are reached
- Acknowledging challenges and co-designing solutions
- Building resilience through mindfulness training
- A greater focus on wellbeing, providing team members with tools
- More horizontal collaboration, giving and receiving support from other leaders



Summary

2020 was a challenging year and we all felt it. However, with adversities come gifts. For leaders, the gifts were flexibility in thought and action, centring and focus, and the permission to be more real. They discovered immense inner strength and resolve, but also how to let their guards down and still get things done.

At Silverstone Edge, we support leaders to become more aware of who they are and how that impacts the way they lead. We call this conscious leadership. With the shift in approach that 2020 brought for many leaders, we look forward to assisting their further evolution in 2021.

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