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What Leaders Can Learn from 2020 to Make 2021 a Success

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The challenges of 2020 forged newly resilient and galvanized leaders armed with reshaped skill sets and strengthened resolve. One association leader shares her hard-won advice and lessons learned for the road ahead.

If 2020 has taught us anything, it is that resilience is a superpower. As architects of possibilities, it is incumbent upon leaders to serve as beacons of hope for a more promising future for our teams and organizations.

A global pandemic, heightened racial tensions, political unrest, and economic volatility, strained our strategic agendas, and put our leadership skills to the test. Yet many organizations demonstrated that rapid change under extraordinary circumstances is possible and needs to become the norm. Restoring common humanity and demonstrating empathy and compassion to ensure the welfare of our communities became paramount.

Leadership Redefined

In many ways, 2020 was like being on a deserted island. As leaders, we were responsible for getting everyone off the island but with little or no resources. We had to improve agility and reinvent ourselves to survive. We relied on experience and training to maintain hope, ensure open and transparent communications among staff, members, and stakeholders, instill trust, realign priorities, address equity and inclusion, harness staff creativity to explore new business opportunities, embrace technology, and strengthen resiliency among stakeholders.

In 2021, leaders will need to muster all resources to design the future of work. This includes adapting strategic agendas and rethinking what it means to manage a team and conduct business in a new workplace environment. Redefining leadership starts with reflection and building on the lessons learned in 2020. Here are some tips for the road ahead.

- **Pause to take a breath.** Acknowledge that you guided your organization through one of the most difficult periods in history.
- **Be clear on your “why.”** Reaffirm why your organization exists and the value you bring to your members, sponsors, and other stakeholders.
- **Assess operations.** Evaluate achievements, determine what remains to be completed, and establish a financial and operational plan for 2021.

- **Leverage your organization’s strengths.** Consider your products and services, reputation, customer brand, financial resources, and digital infrastructure, as well as your members and employees.
- **Balance your leadership style.** Reflect on past leadership approaches and consider “new normal” essentials, such as practicing empathy and compassion, supporting the mental health of staff, and adapting to new priorities and technologies.
- **Set intentional antiracism goals.** Dismantle entrenched organizational systems and practices that have perpetuated harm and inequalities and develop inclusive and equitable strategies.
- **Embrace a growth mindset.** Explore opportunities to leverage untapped potential to meet the changed needs of your community. Accelerate digital transformation and determine how teams, stakeholders, and volunteers will collaborate.
- **Recognize outstanding employees.** Show appreciation for the superstars who quickly kicked into action to support you through the convergent crises of the past year.

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Maintain Perspective

Employees want leaders who inspire and engage while maintaining trust, transparency, inclusiveness, sustainability, and flexibility, and who effectively manage the uncertainty of a rapidly changing world. As CEOs, we need to maintain perspective. Embracing our humanity and vulnerability establishes an environment of openness, growth, and learning. It enables authentic, deeper connections that inspire teams and drive success. Here are simple, yet valuable, lessons about what great leaders do that served me well this past year.

- **Great leaders emerge in the darkest hours.** When things go wrong, great leaders are those who are confident in their skills. They stay strong and keep going.
- **They instill hope and confidence.** Great leaders muster up the courage to find light at the end of the tunnel. They convey optimism and instill trust, confidence, and hope.
- **They communicate vision.** Great leaders are passionate about their organization’s vision, and they effectively convey their passion and the goals of the organization to inspire and motivate.
- **They walk the talk.** Employees want to see their executives lead by example. Great leaders institute real change after making declarations to end racial inequality and bias.
- **They show respect and appreciation.** Great leaders create an inclusive environment where all employees can be their authentic selves. Expressing appreciation builds self-worth, boosts morale, and leads to increased productivity.
- **They overcome fear of failure.** Being a great leader means subduing any fears and tapping into instinct, experience, allies, and available resources. You are not expected to have all the answers.

The extraordinary events of 2020 taught us a lot about our organizations, communities, humanity, and ourselves. The pandemic and racial injustices challenged us in a way that presented opportunities to create

positive changes in how we live and work. Amid the uncertainty and devastation, we saw extraordinary examples of agility, responsiveness, compassion, and resilience. Behind each of these challenges was often a leader who overcame tremendous barriers to keep their organization moving forward.