

# Modelling leadership in a crisis

A summary of interviews with 30 industry leaders, looking at the tools in their toolkit which will help them to thrive this year and beyond

February 2021



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# Foreword

In our globalised world, it is comparatively rare for an event to impact the lives and awareness of absolutely everybody. Yet there can be few of the rising eight billion on the planet who haven't been conscious of and affected by the 2019 novel coronavirus aka COVID-19. And although individual citizens and families, communities and countries are living through this moment of history in radically different ways, we are all in some ways touched by this, the most profound health, social and economic upheaval for generations. The truth is, none of us actually knows how things will turn out. We can speculate and try to keep up with the science, the interpretation of the science and the endless media opinions and counter opinions. Frankly, it's exhausting at times, for all of us. There is no script or playbook for the first global pandemic in our lifetime.

Using the practical tools and methods of our business, we interviewed 30 clients and colleagues within our network – from C-suite and senior leadership roles across multiple industries around the world - about how they are leading into this year and beyond. We asked them 6 questions, to get a sense of what is on their mind and hear their insights as they contemplate the future.

This report summarises and captures their thoughts, and in doing so does three things:

1. It reinforces the fact that absolutely everyone is going through this experience: the unfolding of the pandemic, the losses, the frustrations, the impact.
2. It bears witness to the human spirit and the capacity to persevere.
3. It provides hope and optimism for the future and the impact of that is renewed motivation.

Huge thanks to the 30 people who shared their time and insights. I'm so grateful for the generosity of my network. Conducting the interviews and compiling this report has put a spring in my step and I hope reading it does the same for you.



**Susan Carroll**  
Founder, Scala Advance

# Key themes – summaries

## Dropping the corporate mask

Despite the uncertainty, a more personable, 'human' way of communicating has really emerged. It's as if the corporate mask has been removed and people are dealing with each other in a more 'real' way.

*"I'm hoping that what comes out of this is very much the concept of human first. We are all people, yes we're in business together, but ultimately we've got to trust each other. We work together and we're all in the same situation."*

## A greater focus on mental health and wellbeing in the workplace

One of the biggest changes is how we communicate around mental health. Conversations have become more open – it's not just about workload, but how employees are coping and is there anything they need to better support them. It's made the workplace a more open environment.

*"One of the things we've been talking about is how we achieve a better pace in everyday work, how do we achieve a better balance, how do we try and find time away from the screen and that it is okay to have time away from the screen."*

## Resetting the course for the corporate ship

Large organisations can get bogged down under layers of bureaucracy but faced with a crisis these corporate ships have shown that they can change course and adapt faster than anticipated.

*"Going forward to the point where we get past this pandemic, there will be others. And we will take the learnings and reapply them, and probably come out even better because we know what to expect."*

## Maximising the impact of every business trip

Business travel is still essential in many sectors but organisations - and individuals themselves - will focus on really maximising the impact of such travel, rather than relentless trips for the sake of it.

*"I said to a colleague 'One of the things I don't miss is the guilt when you don't travel enough.' And she said 'I got that all the time'. I said 'Did you always need to be there?' and she said 'No, it's just you felt you had to be there.'"*

## Rethinking our own future

Many of us have had more time to rethink what is important to us. Time to reflect and be surrounded by family, time which we may not have otherwise had. Organisations need to prepare for this. Loyalty may be enough for many, but there are others who will see this as an opportunity to reduce their hours, to try something new, to create a different lifestyle.

*"That's something I want to do to really focus people on themselves, their development, and the fact that they do need to own the future, along with my support and the wider businesses support."*

# Q1.

What are the most positive behaviour changes you've observed in 1) your people and 2) yourself, throughout the pandemic?

“

*I want the pandemic to end, but the sense of deeper humanity and connectedness to continue.*

**There has been a positive shift in the ways in which we communicate with each other – as leaders, peer to peer, and with our clients and customers.**

## Key team behavioural changes

### **A coming together of teams, even though we're apart.**

With working from home comes the challenge of no more 'water cooler' moments, no hallway interactions on the way to a meeting. But the upshot from 'being in this together' has been greater teamwork and collaboration. Teams are tending to have more frequent communications than when they used to see each other – with more regular check-ins with their boss, their teams and their peers.

Greater levels of adaptability and agility. "We picked up the office and walked out. We set up people with screens and laptops and chairs and remote access and we didn't miss a beat". Adapting to where we work, as well as to how we work, has required flexibility and agility from everyone. Learning new software, working longer hours at different times, juggling demands from home.

## Key personal behavioural changes

**A greater consideration for, and awareness of, other people's wellbeing.** This has been witnessed across teams, with both leaders and colleagues taking more time to ask how others are getting on. The impact of a global pandemic means that everyone is facing a common challenge. This has opened up a more 'human' conversation in the corporate workplace, with people having genuine concern for each other's mental health and wellbeing.

Being a role model. Leaders are having to role model their behaviour from a distance, and a greater resilience is required. Behaving in a way that they would want their clients and teams to behave has been important, such as not setting up early or late calls (to allow for those with families or other priorities at home), or not asking for things by the end of the day. Modelling how to really listen as well as communicating clearly and openly are key.

## Q1.

What are the most positive behaviour changes you've observed in 1) your people and 2) yourself, throughout the pandemic?

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*I feel that, as leaders, we have to have a sense of reality of course, but also ensure that we're giving hope to our colleagues and teams that this is a passing moment.*

“

*Teamwork and collaboration have been phenomenal. It changed the way we operated; people were suddenly incredibly helpful, 'what else can I do to help you? what else do we need?' Requests for information came back in seconds instead of minutes, days instead of weeks. We managed to get things done quicker, so the team that I run across Europe just talked to each other much more. They rarely talked to each other unless we were on a scheduled call and suddenly they were talking to each other behind the scenes - 'How are you dealing with X or Y?' - and making sure we had a more joined up approach to the problem.*

“

*The core positive is how protective as humans we have become even though we see each other less.*

“

*There is a consideration for people's well-being. That was being taken for granted before: if you showed up to the office, you were doing ok.*

“

*We have realised over the past nine months that people genuinely care about each other. I've always suspected it, but the fact that you see people genuinely caring, asking about how they are, asking about how their families are, that sort of behaviour is great.*

# Q2.

## What are the key ways you are leading your team/organisation into 2021? What is the single most important change between 2021 and 2020?

“

*Last year was all about the pandemic.... But for 2021, I want to make sure Covid isn't the defining element of what my people focus on.*

**Going into this year, a key theme is the acceptance that the workplace has fundamentally changed and things aren't going back to 'the way things were'. It's about leading with realism versus optimism, whilst giving people hope by being future-focussed - even when future is still uncertain. peer to peer, and with our clients and customers.**

### Key themes emerged:

**Keeping open channels of communication.** How can organisations replicate those unscheduled five minute chats around the office that sparked a new idea, when we're not physically together? Encouraging frequent, visible communications lines (including messaging, WhatsApp, coffee Zooms, virtual social events) is key to keeping teams engaged and connected. The challenge is to establish boundaries so that personal time isn't impacted.

**The physical workplace.** Whilst some organisations may have already had a level of acceptance for working from home, the pandemic has enforced this for all. The model of all being in the office, Monday to Friday, 9-5, looks unlikely to return. The question therefore becomes what policies will be required for these new hybrid workplace / remote working models?

**The virtual workplace.** The adoption of new technology, upskilling and learning new software, using different channels to communicate – with employees, with colleagues, with clients, or with suppliers. Our ways of working have fundamentally changed. 2020 was about adopting those changes, 2021 is about embedding them.

**Empowering employees.** Remote working – and thus not being in the same physical space – has required a greater level of trust from employees. In return, it has empowered people to make more of their own decisions. In addition, there has been a flattening of the hierarchy, with easier access to senior leaders and less micro-managing. Leaders and managers must ensure that as restrictions ease, this empowerment isn't taken away.



## Q2.

What are the key ways you are leading your team/organisation into 2021? What is the single most important change between 2021 and 2020?

“

*The way I'm leading now is 'this is the way it's going to be', driving acceptance of the situation and maximising our effectiveness as a team. Really taking them on a journey to determine what that looks like for them.*

“

*I've had to make sure to go through the formality of giving people an update as often as I can, even if it's 'we don't actually know what we're going to do about it at this moment but we hope we will know a bit more in 2 weeks' time'.*

“

*This year, we have planned out how we see the year and we need to stick to that plan. Sure we will deviate from it, enhance it, nip it, tuck it – but we have to stay true to our plan that we set at the beginning of the year.*

“

*One of the things we've realised we miss is the ad hoc nature of bumping into people in the office. Communication has worked really well with the people that you work with to get you day job done. But a lot of our jobs are also bumping into the Operations team, or Legal, or Sales, in the office. You might not have to speak on a regular basis, but that connection creates an idea or a spark.*

“

*I encourage routine, really focusing on the work-life balance, because it's not easy to switch off when your computer is on all the time. We have to make that distinction. We are home permanently, so you've got to be able to switch off, because otherwise people will burn out.*



# Q3.

## What is the most important thing you want to communicate to your people this year?

“

*I think that everyone has peaks and troughs of how they're feeling. One day they might be feeling brilliant and then the next day it's a real struggle. We now talk about it in every one to one which we never did before.*

**There is now a greater level of awareness of how people are, in terms of overall wellbeing, both personal and professional.**

### Key themes emerged:

**Recognise the positives and give hope.** Deliver positive messages through authentic employee communications, to support your teams' mental health. Recognise if things have gone wrong, but keep the message based on 'what we know right now', giving the vision of 'where we want to be'.

**You're still being heard.** Even if we're not all visible in the same way, let employees know you're listening. Empower them to be open and share when they feel challenged and when things are not OK. Encourage frequent one-to-one check-ins, but also use broader engagement and listening tools such as employee surveys, to hear what's happening 'on the ground'.

**Put a focus on self-development.** It's important to continue to allow people to grow as individuals. Enable them to learn with new training opportunities. Give them time to really focus on themselves and what their future looks like, knowing they are supported by their team and their manager.

**Know how to prioritise your own time.** Employees' home circumstances are unique to them. It's critical to understand where each of your team is at. Don't insist on them joining back-to-back zooms and meetings just because they're invited. Allow them to prioritise what's important.

### Q3.

What is the most important thing you want to communicate to your people this year?

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*It's ok not to be ok. It's ok to ask for flexibly and push back and say no. We're asking people to remain at the same productivity levels that they were at, in fact probably go faster and take on more work, whilst they're working from home and juggling everything that goes with that.*

“

*No matter what's going on outside, how do we drive the positive focus for where we want to go?*

“

*Work less, work smarter. First there was panic, then the realisation, then the excitement, then the grind. People have worked out a way of getting to good answers, individually and collaboratively, that are smart. Don't just give time away.*

“

*My underlying message is, if we as sales people can get through this year and last year, when the tide turns we are going to come out of this better people - better sales people, stronger people, better people personally. Because we will have survived, got through it in a really good way, gracefully. I think it will make all of us stronger and better.*

“

*Make sure you're talking and bringing in everyone at the right point, because it's easy to leave people behind and then they have to come in later in that conversation. That may mean overcommunicating - but it's about bringing everyone along on the journey. If you leave one person behind, you'll spend a lot of time helping them to catch up.*

“

*Forget the virtual world and go back to meeting etiquette – what's the meeting for, what's the agenda, what's the outcome, what am I here to contribute? If nothing, then do I really need to be here, is it a valuable use of my time - and prioritising our time. Because time is the thing that all of my team are struggling with.*

# Q4.

## How will/have your relationships with your customers change/d?

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*Life has changed, but it has changed for everyone.*

**The shift in customer relationships is clear.**

**Three key aspects emerge:**

### **The forging of deeper relationships with existing clients.**

People observed an increase in empathy, visibility and sharing. Relationships have strengthened and this in turn influences further referrals. It has always been true that retaining and growing existing client relationships (organic growth) is easier than winning new business and never more so for many than in this virtual climate. People are being creative in communication channels, switching between formal and informal platforms for different aspects of relationship building. A change in content and advertising offers clients more tools now to make the decisions themselves. There is less direct selling and more relationship building but there is a downside. People see their clients' facing financial battles as their situations change – in some cases this has meant an acceptance that they are making decisions on price alone and that service is no longer a differentiator for them.

“

*We have lost some customers because we cannot offer what they have got through doing things in a different way. Some clients are loving us and appreciating what we do even more and others really appreciate what we're doing but it's just not enough to keep them.*

### **The challenge to win new clients and gain their trust**

**online.** People are starting to see additional levels of scrutiny in the decision-making process and this is leading to a longer sales cycle. How do you build enough trust to convert a new client, when you're not able to meet face to face and build the relationship over time? People miss having the signals and nuances from in person meetings, the collaborative environment that comes from whiteboarding in person or having dinner together. It is considered harder to build rapport and trust online with new clients. The sales cycle has become lengthier for some organisations and is under much more scrutiny than before. There is an upside too: more accessibility to events and demos as geography is not a restriction.

### **Online communication and the technology to enable it has been fast-tracked.**

As physical location is much less important, there are new global audiences and greater levels of export. Adapting quickly to the crisis has led to greater returns for many. This has also been a challenge in some industries, which are having to rethink when technology and virtual does not work in their sector e.g. the elderly or certain sectors within society. In cases of resistance to the digital environment, the need to force the agenda to a digital mindset has seen some success.

“

*The way we responded to the pandemic and the way we operated immediately after the lockdowns started, a lot of the feedback was 'You guys are way ahead of the curve, whatever you managed to pull off in terms of getting your guys up and running, it's almost like nothing happened'.*

#### Q4.

How will/have your relationships with your customers change/d?

“

*Everyone is becoming more personal, because we are seeing people's houses, we are seeing people's children coming in. There's a sense that we are all human. I'm hoping that what comes out of this is very much the concept of human first. We are all people, yes we're in business together, but ultimately we've got to trust each other we work together and we're all in the same situation.*

“

*Really putting ourselves in the customers shoes, trying not to take short term decisions where there were difficult decisions to be taken but taking a midterm approach, and when we have to tell a customer something they didn't want to hear owning the conversation, getting on the phone, not sending an email, and really having that honest conversation I think customers appreciated that and that is fundamental to how we'll continue to try to lead in terms of how we treat customers and what our brand stands for.*

“

*What has become crystal clear is your existing customers are gold. If you didn't know that before you certainly know that now, and building that rapport building that relationship and having connections throughout the organisation is critical because you need that trust you need that belief from your customers in you and what you have to offer.*

“

*We have already experienced the sales cycle is much longer. Our customers are looking for commitment from us, for proof points, for reference ability, for case studies. Every single customer that we brought on board in the last few months all want to take up two or three reference calls so there seems to be a lot more qualification and more convincing for customers who are saying 'if we are making this investment we need to make sure that we have got all the facts and data in front of us before we make that decision. We are bringing the C level of our business into bigger customers. The CEO, CFO and COO are now getting involved in the final parts of the sale cycle just to give that validation and commitment from us that we are here to support them and help them. The real drive there comes from what we've promised in our proposals and our pitches.*

“

*People are a bit more reasonable and understanding because we're all in uncertain times so a recent negotiation I just did with a company was more informal and less confrontational than it might have been. Rather than just trying to get the best deal out of each other we were just trying to make something work that was acceptable and doable. We've all just got to get through it.*

# Q5.

## What thoughts and insights do you have for 2021 specifically, and the future beyond that?

“

*Society needs to heal for a bit and then think about what's important. We might still need offices, but the psychological aspect of how we work, we don't know. We don't want to ditch it all.*

**The future of work has fundamentally shifted and it's time to look ahead.**

### Key themes emerged:

**Not going back.** The underlying vision of the future is of not going back to what we had. So what will the workplace look like for each organisation? In many cases, it's likely to be a hybrid workplace/work from home model, but each organisation's model may differ and leaders will need to provide that clarity to their teams.

**Reframe and reprioritise.** Initially, our responses were reactive, managing day to day, month to month. Now's the time to say "this is no longer a stopgap" and put structures and processes in place for the future, not just the immediate.

**Keep engagement high.** How do we keep employees feeling connected to the mothership from afar? For leaders who've been used to leading from an office, they'll have been adapting their communication style, their way of collaborating, their connectivity with their teams over the last year. This has to remain.

**Spot signs of not coping.** Additional training may be required for all – particularly line managers – on mental health and wellbeing. How to spot the signs of not coping, where to signpost people, what questions to ask, what to say. Taking care of employees from afar requires a greater focus.

**Focus on customer service.** Smaller, local businesses are having to compete in an online world with giant global retailers. So making the customer journey as seamless as possible – whatever the size of the organisation – is key to growing and retaining clients. Those small businesses will be critical for helping to rebuild the economy and offer large companies a means to bring in expertise when needed without the need for 'permanent' inclusion on the payroll

**Q5.**

What thoughts and insights do you have for 2021 specifically, and the future beyond that?

“

*2021 is all about understanding what work is. Just because you're in an office, it doesn't mean you're working. It's really thinking about that, having the professionalism to get stuff done when it needs to be done and empowering the team.*

“

*I think the days of the office, the commute and the nine-to-five are over and gone.*

“

*How do you take your leadership style and make sure that, irrespective of looking into a webcam, there is that energy and drive and enthusiasm that colleagues would see if you were standing in front of them or having a one-to-one with them in an office?*

“

*Why do we return to some of the world's largest global online retailers? Because it's frictionless. When we have a pain, they solve it. When they say the customer is right, they mean it and they just refund you. You just go back there because you know it's not going to be any hassle. I know people had good intentions leading up to Christmas and people tried to shop local, but a lot of businesses are so far behind. Goodwill might get you 10% or 20% but you're not going to get rid of the global giants until you tackle these problems.*

“

*Crisis is quite easy to manage because there is an adrenaline response to crisis, but boredom is much more problematic – for 2021, that's very key!*

# Q6.

If you had to single out one thing in your entire suite of behaviours, tools, techniques etc that has helped you the most in your life through the toughest of times, what would it be? Not only during the pandemic...

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*I can't control that we are in a pandemic, I can't control Covid, but I can change the way that I get through the situation, so it has to be mindset.*

**There was a striking balance between internal resources that people draw upon and external resources in the form of trusted relationships.**

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Positivity, perseverance and perspective – all forms of resilience – were in the top five things that people singled out. Family, friends and loved ones, as well as coaching relationships and people who act as external sounding boards equally help people navigate tough times in their life, pandemic included.

Forging a sense of purpose, helping others and staying focused are the things that are contributing to coping – and indeed thriving in some cases - to this most challenging of situations.

## Q6.

If you had to single out one thing in your entire suite of behaviours, tools, techniques etc that has helped you the most in your life through the toughest of times, what would it be?  
Not only during the pandemic...

“

*I think it's perseverance and sticking close to people you know and trust and who love you basically. It applies in the business world as well, the feeling that you can make some headway and that you have to persevere even if it looks pretty bleak. That you can and people who are going to get you through that are the people you already know.*

“

*I have this belief that if you get up in the morning and you're breathing, it's going to be a great day.*

“

*Curiosity is the thing that always helps and takes you to interesting places.*

“

*I found having a coach or somebody as a sounding board for me to hear myself think as I'm working through something, that was a major change for me.*

“

*Everything is a learning and you can grow from it. The toughest things are often what you learn and grow most from.*

“

*You have to be comfortable being uncomfortable. If you can't get over the ability to feel uncomfortable a lot of the time you'll never succeed.*

“

*The power of coaching is phenomenal in being able to ensure that you take a positive approach to particular emotional responses.*

“

*Don't be held back by fear to go out there and find somewhere where you can have pride in what you do. Tackle fear if that's what holding you back.*

“

*There is a responsibility to be a role model, finding the positive and strength in any situation and convey that to people around me.*

“

*It's all about the focus – not having that constant noise in your head, so you can really just get through the year.*



# If you'd like to carry on the conversation...

**Susan Carroll** is the founder and Managing Director of Scala Advance.

She is a consultant, speaker and executive coach to clients around the world.

Susan brings learnings from neuroscience, behavioural science, and psychology to the workplace, helping people become better leaders and drive innovation and business results.

**If you'd like to have a conversation, please get in touch at:**

[susan@scala-advance.com](mailto:susan@scala-advance.com)

+44 (0) 7712 837144

[scala-advance.com](https://scala-advance.com)



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