

HENLEY CENTRE FOR LEADERSHIP



**Leading with the new normal:
challenges and insights**
Webinar Summary



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Henley Centre for Leadership Webinars

Leading with the new normal: challenges and insights

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The Henley Centre for Leadership welcomed the chair, Henley Alumni Jo Garland, Customer Support, Asda, and panellists *Jo Regan-Iles*, Chief People Officer at Ascensos, *James Clarke*, Director of Planning and Performance, Home Office, *Monique Choudhuri*, Managing Career Path & Non-Executive Director at Brentford FC, and Professor *Bernd Vogel*, Founding Director Henley Centre for Leadership, Henley Business School.

The webinar focused on the role of leadership with a context where the pandemic has induced a shift to remote working in an instant. This has shaken the society, organisations, and employees in a way and speed never experienced before. Now we can confidently say: Some level of remote working is here to stay, and many organizations see the shift to a hybrid working and leading. Our panellists shared insights and challenges on **Leading with the new normal**.

Here some of the key ideas, practices, and challenges from our panellist for our three guiding questions:

1) What are the biggest challenges for leaders in the hybrid way of working?

Speaking first, *Jo Regan-Iles* mentioned the specific context of the contact centre industry, how everything has changed overnight, and how the big focus became whether the organization had the right resources to support people working from home:

"The challenge was making sure we had the communication in a virtual world, so everybody felt that they belonged, and they could reach support if they actually needed it."

James Clarke drew on his experience at Border Force, where 9.500 employees have continued to work in offices throughout the pandemic and 500 people switched to working from home:

"I think there has been that slight resentment caused between the 500 fortunate employees who worked from home and 9.500 who had to go into offices 24/7"

Monique Choudhuri mentioned that the biggest challenge for leaders was learning how to get the best out of individuals with different working styles:

"I think it is the individualized consideration of a leader to understand and include people with different needs and preferences when it comes to work"

Bernd Vogel argued that the major challenge businesses have now is that they want to find individualised local solution for hybrid working and leading, and that at scale! Organizations want to manage this productive tension to individualize at scale and have ground rules embedded and commercial pressures addressed. He also mentioned that the last two years provided a great but unintentional opportunity at assessing managers' true leadership capability:

"We could see who is thriving, struggling, in what way and how we can support people. That's something not to be underestimated."

The third and final challenge *Bernd Vogel* spoke about was related to defining healthy performance over time:

"How do we create workforces that create enjoyable performance, not today, not next week, but in the long term?"

The second question on which the discussion revolved around was:

2) What have you implemented or experienced that has been successful at overcoming these challenges?

In response, *Jo Regan-Iles* illustrated the use of employee assistance programs in relation to employee well-being and HR point of view.

"We implemented twenty-five mental health first aiders, we got lots of internal volunteers, so people always had access to talk to other people. We also implemented things like breathing exercises, as with things such as online yoga, which allowed us to support our colleagues beyond work hours."

James Clarke mentioned the announcement of the Future Hybrid Working guideline in his organization and talked about creating meaning at work:

"I think the big thing that I'm hearing loud and clear from teams is making sure that there is a purpose to going back to the office. It's actually about making it meaningful and how to build it around operational visits or team days and workshops."

Monique Choudhuri on the other hand highlighted the idea of leaders carving out specific timelines:

"It's really the responsibility of the leader to learn where do individuals get their energy from and structuring their working way in order to provide those energy raising or sustaining exercises for people."

Bernd Vogel emphasized that one of the things that organizations should do to be successful in this era is to quickly recognize the false assumption that before February 2020, everything was great:

"Covid has been a catalyst of change and if organizations and managers had noticed that this is not a one-off and probably part of a longer pattern, we would have been much more successful. People were happy and unhappy in February 2020, even if we can't imagine that anymore"

The final question which the panellists shared their views on was:

3) *If there was one thing you would urge leaders to consider to support leading in this environment, what would it be?*

James Clarke reiterated the need to create meaning in returning to the office and the work you do:

"It is about having a purpose to what you are doing."

Bernd Vogel referred to how despite hybrid work, leadership should be considered as a contact sport and a mature view on performance should not be overlooked:

"We often hear the people side of things and address that, but we also need to look at the performance side, real understanding of expectations and what the outputs are in a role. And not presenteeism as performance as it is creeping in into the digital world. Considering the classics of task-focused AND human-centred leadership goes quite a long way for healthy and sustainable performance."

Monique Choudhuri talked about using the right technology to engage people so you can share information across the board, also mentioning that there has to be a focus on performance as well:

"Look at what you want to achieve, how you want to do it, what your success measures are, and ask yourself: How does that translate to the virtual environment, or being in the office environment? I think this comes back to what James has said: What is our purpose of being here in the office, if we can accomplish tasks in front of a screen?"

Jo Regan-Iles contributed on what the leaders have to do to be successful in this new normal:

"For me, it is about taking small steps. I think for me it's around doing phased approaches, also as a leader and leaders, people also have to acknowledge that people's working styles and patterns have changed. What leaders do not want to do, is create lots and lots of attrition in their business so they have to re-hire the skills."