

5 Skills Your Employees Need You To Lead With Right Now

by Joe Folkman

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The Hertz Corporation, Neiman Marcus, Frontier Communications, McDermott International, and JC Penney are just a few large corporations that have filed for Bankruptcy in 2020. According to recent data, this list of bankruptcies will continue to grow larger than we have ever seen before. The pandemic has impacted, mostly in a significant and negative way, nearly every employee and leader worldwide. Work is forced to be done in different ways. Employees have developed heightened anxiety and

concerns about their future.

Are we powerless in our circumstances? Is there something leaders can do to soldier on through these difficult times? Are there certain skills that can even make a difference in a pandemic?

As my colleague Jack Zenger and I searched for what exactly is required in these new circumstances, we realized we had some very unique data. We could look at our database of 360-degree assessments and see if there were

any significant changes in the way direct reports scored their leaders after the pandemic hit. Were there certain traits that were now more important? We weren't sure if we would find anything significant or if the reports would be the same. What we learned from these leaders was regardless of culture, industry, or position, there are traits that we cling to in times of need.

A group we will call Alpha was a senior management team. We appreciated this data because senior leaders have had the responsibility to make a significant number of difficult decisions during the pandemic. The other group we call Beta was 1,276 leaders. These leaders have been forced to work in different ways and address challenges. About 50% of these leaders were from the US, the remainder were scattered across the globe. Leaders in this group came from a variety of different organizations, levels, and functions. To analyze the data, we separated those leaders who scored above average on the 60 items of a multi-rater (or 360-degree) assessment compared to those scoring below average.

As we looked at all the reports, we began to see that regardless of the organizations or locations, we see the same behaviors

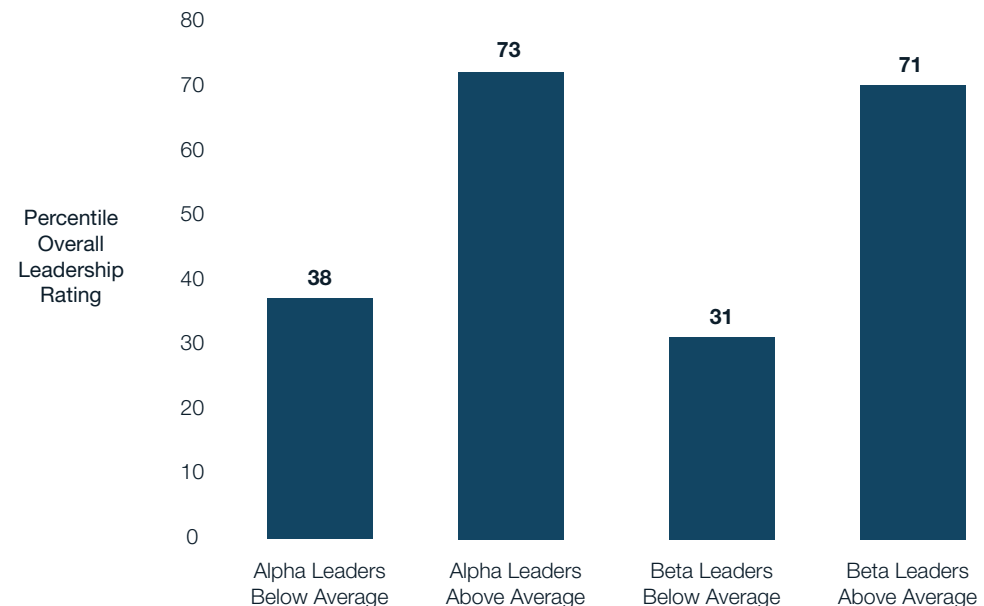
popping up and being scored entirely differently. We discovered a consistent set of 11 behaviors that differentiated high scorers and below-average scorers in both Alpha and Beta. In addition, we observed that five items were showing larger differences within the Alpha or senior executive group than in the Beta group.

Further analysis of these 16 behaviors confirmed that leaders who scored above average had a significant positive impact on their overall effectiveness. (For Alpha

leaders T Value = 5.80, Sig = 0.000, for the Beta leaders T Value = 54.28, Sig = 0.000.) These 16 behaviors were deemed essential skills that enabled leaders to be more successful in the pandemic.

The graph below shows the impressive difference these 16 behaviors made in how individuals were perceived on their overall leadership effectiveness. Looking at our extensive database, we modeled the impact of high and low performance in these areas.

Fig 1. – Difference in rating based on 16 Essential Skills



Five Skills That Make The Biggest Difference

While many leadership skills have maintained their importance regardless of the situation, we were curious to learn which behaviors have become more critical in this pandemic. The data revealed five behaviors that moved up in importance. This suggests that respondents put more weight on these issues today than in the past. These five are:

1. **Balancing getting results with a concern for the individual needs of people.**

Pre-pandemic, our belief is that the balance was 60% results 40% individual needs. The desired pandemic balance needs to be 40% results, 60% individual needs. Many employees are anxious, stressed, and unsure about their future. They need a leader who cares about them.

2. **Cooperation from people in other parts of the organization.**

With increases in remote work, the need for cooperation across groups had substantially increased.

3. **Conveying a high level of energy and enthusiasm.**

Uncertainty creates anxiety for employees, and they are desperate to hear a positive and enthusiastic voice.

4. **Helping others understand the organization's vision.** For most organizations, the pandemic has required a shift in strategy and direction. Employees working remotely also need greater clarity about their goals.

5. **Quickly recognizing where change is needed.** The pandemic has required many significant shifts in how work is done and how goals and priorities are set. No doubt, there will be a need for additional change in the future.

The Power In Learning From Each Other

Consider this article a small look at what leaders are doing or not doing right now that is making a significant difference. One of the biggest lessons I learned from this data was the large emphasis on balancing results with other's needs. It ranked number one for a reason. People need their leaders to understand the challenges they're facing with compassion and be able to guide them back to solid ground.

Leaders we have been working with since the start of the pandemic have been very appreciative of having an accurate and reliable assessment of their essential skills. Especially now, our own intuition about our performance may be far from accu-

rate. With more employees and managers working remotely, it has become even more difficult for leaders to understand their performance.

Will you take on an assignment based on the five most essential skills for a pandemic? I encourage you to gather feedback on the following questions from your manager, peers, direct reports, and others.

- Do I balance getting results with a concern for the individual needs of people? How can I improve?
- Have I enabled there to be cooperation from people in other parts of the organization? How can I adapt my work to involve others more?
- How is my energy and attitude affecting others? Do I convey a high level of energy and enthusiasm?
- Have I been helping others understand the organization's vision and strategy?
- Have I been able to quickly recognize and respond where change is needed? How could I improve?

Remember, once someone gives you feedback, thank them for the gift and then act on that feedback. With a little bit of insight in the right direction, you can become the leader needed for this new era.

About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that helps individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.