



Seven crucial skills in times of business transformation

by Sabine Clappaert

The fact that the world of work is changing radically and irreversible since the outbreak of COVID-19 has been repeated ad infinitum and the digital business revolution has reached even the most traditional sectors, forcing organisations to rethink everything from their business models to organisational structures. But how can we best help shape and drive the transformations the world demands of businesses today? What type of leadership is needed and what skills should we be looking for to help us thrive?

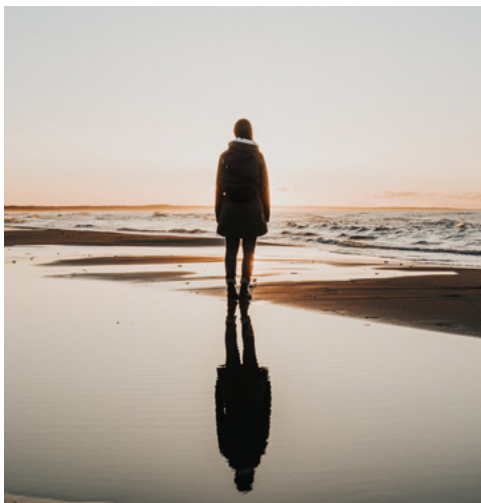
Many thought leaders including the [WEF](#) have been predicting the increased importance of ‘social, creative and communication competencies’ for several years. But which of these ‘soft skills’ are most useful when leading a business transformation? And which should we be on the lookout for when recruiting during a transition?

At FTI Consulting’s People & Transformation practice, we’re working with many companies that are going through some form of transformation due to COVID-19. Here are the top soft skills we’ve observed in those people and teams that thrive in these uncharted waters:



1. Self-reflection

In times of crisis, it is a natural reflex for leaders to think “Well, I’ll just go faster”. But that is mistaking activity for productivity. Instead of constant acceleration, strategic leadership and true productivity require periods of restraint and reflection. Successful leaders carve out a daily slot for self-reflection. They don’t view this as idle time, but as a focused, active process in which they reflect on important questions to bring new insights or to become more self-aware, get better at how they lead or prioritise what they focus on. (A quiet walk contemplating one of the questions below would certainly not be lost time.)





2. Asking provocative questions

The ability (and courage) to ask provocative questions to which we don't yet know the answer – also called '[Leading with questions](#)' – is a vital skill to help identify and explore possibilities which may not be immediately obvious. It requires curiosity and an open, collaborative mindset to explore the ideas of others. Provocative questions include:

- Are we solving the right problem?
- What stands between us and our goal today?
- What's at stake if we don't do this?
- What would success look like?



3. Growth mindset

Carol Dweck famously coined the concepts of 'fixed' and '[growth](#)' mindsets. The belief that one's talents, skills and abilities can be developed is fundamental in our pandemic world. Without it, people will keep hankering for a pre-COVID reality which many agree will never return. The ability to change our perspective, think laterally and adapt our behaviour helps us stay resilient and companies competitive. (An excellent example of a growth mindset in action is the [innovative breathing aids](#) being developed by the Mercedes-AMG Formula One team. This project finds its seeds in the growth mindset and creative thinking of employees.)

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4. Critical thinking and analysis

Being able to think clearly and rationally and objectively evaluate information from many different sources in order to make informed decisions is a vital skill in these times of fake news and disinformation. Asking the right questions, observing, analysing and interpreting information objectively while also having the awareness and courage to debate and argue with your own assumptions is not only necessary, but extremely valuable. It can help open up new avenues of thinking and avoid the pitfalls or blind spots associated with [groupthink](#).



5. The ability to 'read the room'

“Reading the room” is a skill described by researcher [Daniel Goleman](#). It refers to a mix of emotional and social awareness that includes empathy, an open mindset and deep listening skills that help us be in tune with the feelings of others and help us to recognise and understand the power relationships, emotional currents, networks and dynamics in an organisation.





6. Systems thinking

One of the core concepts of [systems thinking](#) is interconnectedness. It is the mindset and ability to think and learn about challenges as ‘systems’ of inter-related components, which consist of a scope, parts and relationships, in order to make connections and patterns clear. Taking a systems view on an issue shifts the way we see the world, from a linear, structured “mechanical” worldview to a dynamic, interconnected web of relationships and feedback loops. COVID-19 made it crystal clear to businesses across the globe that value generation today can no longer be captured in rigid, linear processes and should be explored and tapped into in networked relationships. Looking at business challenges as systems therefore helps us identify patterns, causes and relationships, and in the process establish successful networks that benefit all parties involved.



7. Connecting, sharing & social influencing skills

According to Harvard University’s [David Deming](#), the modern workplace, in which people move between roles and projects, closely resembles pre-school classrooms, where we first learnt skills such as empathy and cooperation. The ability to make connections and identify synergies, to bring people with complimentary skills and experience together in order to generate new ideas is closely related to systems thinking. It helps us connect the dots and leads to break-through thinking and innovation.

Are these the only soft skills we need to successfully charter transformations in these challenging times? Probably not. The World Economic Forum lists several others, including service orientation and the ability to coordinate with others. What it does show us is that both as leaders and as employees, we need to explore parts of ourselves which we may not have brought to work before. We should broaden our view of the skills we bring to our roles to include (and grow!) some of those listed above.



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