



Leading in Difficult Times: How Leaders Can Support Themselves

by Sabine Clappaert

Over the past month, we are increasingly asked by companies to support their leaders in leading their teams as we head into a second Covid-19 wave. Many leaders did quite well during the first wave, concentrating on staying positive, encouraging and focusing their teams on new ways of working and taking care of their people. But as we head into the second Covid-19 wave, and in many countries another round of work-from-home-without-an-end-date-in-sight, leaders in our workshops are increasingly voicing the toll this second lock-down is taking on them.

“I want to stay positively focused for my team, but it’s not as easy as during the first wave,” a leader told us recently. *“It feels like I have to drag my team forward without having all the answers or knowing how this will all work out, and I feel that I have to dig deep into my own reserves to do so,”* he added.

The question we are asked most often is: “How do I protect my own energy and wellbeing and still lead effectively?”

Holding Space for Yourself

In our leadership workshops, we open with the quote *“To lead others, you must first be able to lead yourself”*. Leading ourselves refers to knowing who we are and what we stand for – our beliefs and values and how these drive our behaviour – and taking responsibility for owning all of it. Leading ourselves also asks us to ‘hold space’ for ourselves (a term that was popularised by Heather Plett in a 2015 [post](#) that has been viewed over three million times since): being able to sit with ourselves and look into our own hearts with curiosity, compassion, understanding and forgiveness for whatever shows up there; be it anger, weariness, frustration or fear. While we may instinctively see this practice as something arbitrary, it is in fact the first fundamental act of generosity and commitment we can make to ensure that we are at our best when we support others.

So what can we do – concretely – to hold space for ourselves as leaders over the coming months?

“What if, instead of fixating on the things we don’t like about ourselves, we focused on the things we love about ourselves?”



1. ACCEPT AND APPRECIATE WHO YOU ARE TODAY

How often do we hear leaders say “I don’t expect anything from others that I don’t expect of myself”? Frequently, those who are the most demanding of their colleagues are even more demanding of themselves.

Brené Brown advises, “Talk to yourself like you would to someone you love”. Instead of focusing on what should have gone better, appreciate the small wins, the positive momentum and the progress. Intentionally add positive thoughts and self-talk to your day, and question every self-critical thought with the simple question: “Is that really true?”



2. LISTEN TO YOURSELF

Awareness is the first step in change. If you are not aware of what exactly is happening inside of you, you cannot do anything about it. As a first step, regularly carve out time to listen to your mind and body and observe what is happening there without judgement. (The key here being ‘without judgement’!)

Do this regularly – also in the middle of your working day – and not just when you’re exhausted and frayed.



3. BECOME CLEAR ON WHAT YOU NEED TO BE AT YOUR BEST

Take time to explore what your own core needs are that support your wellness and keep you in balance. Perhaps it is going for a walk or spending 30 minutes to play with your kids when they get home from school, or calling a friend to talk about a shared hobby or interest.

Whatever it is, make a conscious decision to decouple from work when you need it.



4. BE GRATEFUL

Research has shown that expressing gratitude improves our mental, physical and relational wellbeing. Practicing gratitude helps rewire the brain and body to think and feel more positively.

Every evening, write up a post-it note with three things that you are grateful for about yourself and your accomplishments, no matter how small. Start a gratitude jar and add your daily notes to the jar.

At the end of the week, take a moment to review the notes and be grateful for who you are and what you’ve accomplished!



5. PRACTICE SAYING THANK YOU

Deflecting compliments is a way of reinforcing the idea that you don’t deserve them.

Practice simply saying “Thank you” when you are given a compliment by someone else, instead of rushing to dismiss or downplay it.



6. KNOW AND RESPECT YOUR OWN BOUNDARIES

Setting boundaries is vulnerable and brave work. It is about having the courage to love ourselves, even when we risk disappointing others.

In Brené Brown’s research on the topic, she learned that the primary reasons people hesitate to set boundaries were because “I don’t want to make people angry, disappoint others, or make them stop liking me,” and “I don’t know how to set boundaries without sounding selfish or unlikeable.”

Brown uses the acronym “B.I.G” to define her boundaries in this [video](#): “What boundaries (B) need to be in place for me to stay in my integrity (I) and make the most generous (G) assumptions about you?”

“If your compassion doesn’t include yourself, it is incomplete.”



7. ASK FOR HELP

There are a variety of reasons leaders are reluctant to seek out help, most of which are related to our sense of pride and vulnerability.

As leaders we often feel as if we should know everything... that's why we are the leader, right? But no leader gets bonus points for struggling. Strong, self-confident leaders are not afraid to ask for help, and will do so instead of struggling on.

Give yourself permission to ask for help when you need it. It is a gift to yourself that reaffirms that you are worthy, that you can and will support yourself in times of need.



8. BE AUTHENTIC

People often think they need to change or mould themselves into an idealised version of leadership; yet being a great leader does not require adopting a new persona.

There is great strength and resourcefulness in being able to lead as our authentic selves, as discussed in the book [Discovering Your True North](#)¹. Leading from a place of authenticity also protects us from things such as imposter syndrome or burnout. But what is leading authentically?

Being an authentic leader doesn't mean revealing inappropriate personal details, talking about yourself incessantly or telling people how you feel all the time. Instead, it is about knowing yourself – your unique character, values, strengths, and shortcomings; being able to make sincere connections with all kinds of people and playing to your own strengths.

In authentic leadership, personal disclosure always serves a greater purpose. Therefore, when talking about yourself, your values or life experiences, ask yourself: *“Is this information about me relevant to the task at hand? Does it help the person grow, or does it contribute to this person's understanding of my decision?”*



9. DON'T GO IT ALONE

Leaders need honest feedback and unbiased information more than anyone in the organisation and yet are the most starved of it. On the one hand, hierarchy and power imbalance mean employees often don't feel safe enough to voice their opinions; and on the other hand, widely held beliefs such as “it's lonely at the top” reinforce an individualistic mindset and only lead to internalising challenges, worries and obstacles. Yet as leaders in a VUCA world, we cannot know everything (and we don't know what we don't know).

No leader should have to go it alone. (And truthfully, we never accomplish anything of importance without people helping us along the way).

Find yourself a leadership buddy, coach or mentor with whom you can talk safely and openly about your leadership challenges. It allows you to see yourself, your challenges and the world from a more informed, objective, and comprehensive point of view.

Paying it forward: free monthly Safe Space | Brave Space Leadership coaching circle

These are challenging times for us all. At FTI Consulting, we believe in our duty to pay it forward by contributing to the wellbeing of leaders as they navigate these uncharted waters.

Starting Thursday, 29 November, we will host ‘Safe Space | Brave Space’ – a free monthly leadership coaching circle in which we explore some of the leadership challenges you are facing. The first session takes place from 16:00-17:00 (CET) and is **limited to eight participants**.

 Sessions will take place on the following dates²:

- Thursday, 29 November at 16:00-17:00
- Thursday, 17 December at 16:00-17:00
- Thursday, 21 January 2021 at 16:00-17:00

To register, please contact
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¹ <https://www.billgeorge.org/true-north/>

² all times are CET



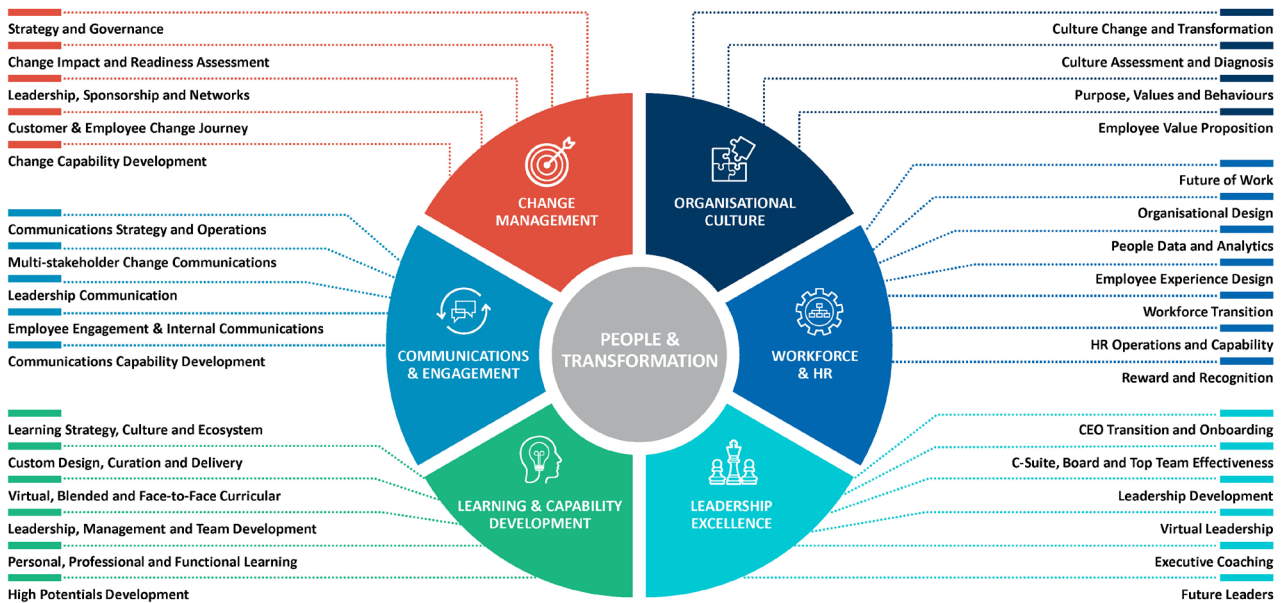
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sabine Clappaert is a Senior Director in the People & Transformation practice in Brussels. She grew up on three continents and went to seven different schools. You could say change is in her blood. Sabine is a Prosci® Certified Change Facilitator, and is a certified Barrett’s Cultural Transformation Practitioner, as well as being a certified Team Coach.

ABOUT THE PEOPLE & TRANSFORMATION PRACTICE

We work alongside clients to design, implement and embed impactful people-focussed transformation. We support people, teams and organisations to adapt against a backdrop of disruption and displacement of operating models.

Our expertise lies in workforce transformation, organisational design, restructuring, change management, leadership enablement and employee development as well as culture transformation and internal communication.



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