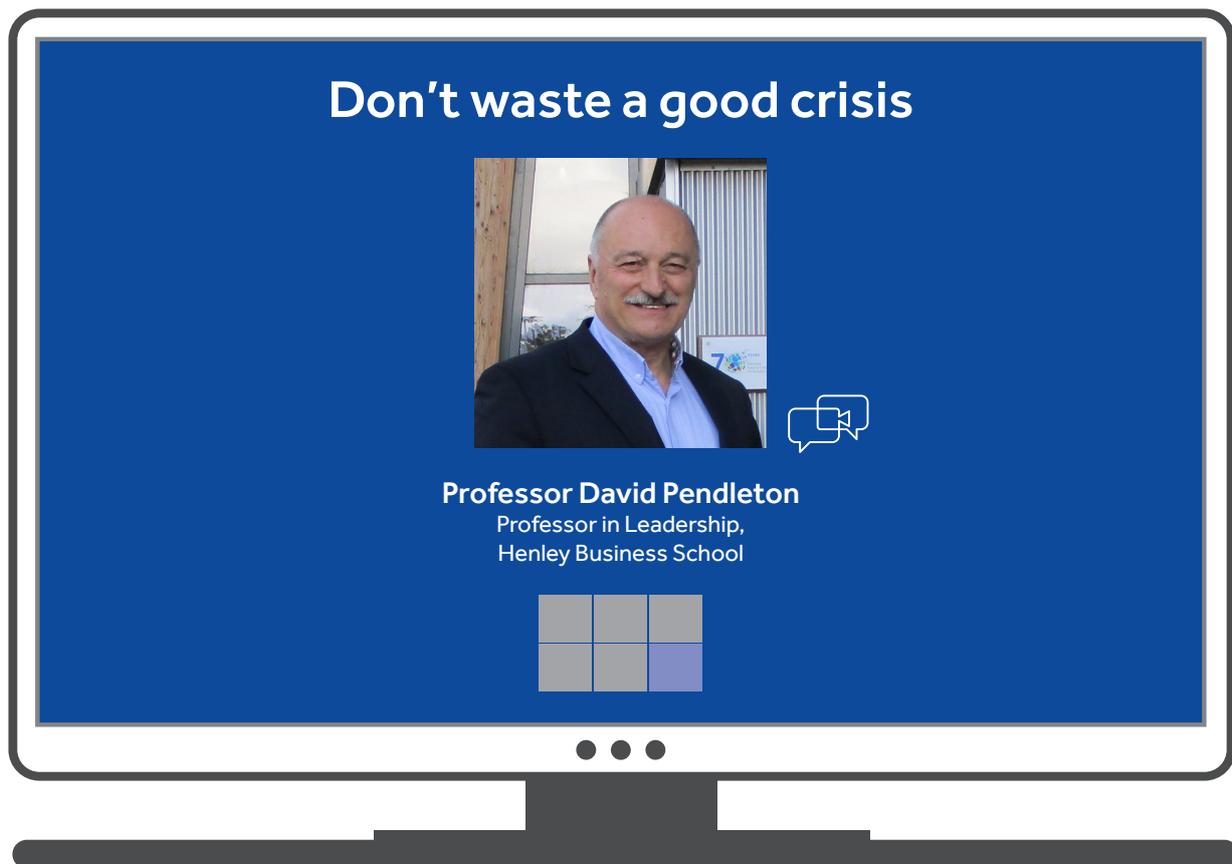


# RETURN TO THE WORLD OF WORK: Action Research Series

Learning and insights from sessions held with organisations  
and businesses during May to July 2020



To look at the issue of leadership responses to the 2020 COVID-19 crisis, Henley Executive Education brought together groups of executives from different organisations via videocall sessions. This session was introduced and facilitated by Henley's Professor David Pendleton. The resulting conversations, together with recent research, are presented here as insights, feedback from the organisations, and recommendations.



Where business comes to life

# Crises as an opportunity for change

David Pendleton set the scene by describing crises as part of the rich tapestry of organisational life. Crises come and go. They are inevitable, they are unpredictable. They cause a great deal of anxiety and anguish to people and real damage to the fabric of organisations. Yet crises also bring with them extraordinary opportunities to create lasting and positive change.

## 1

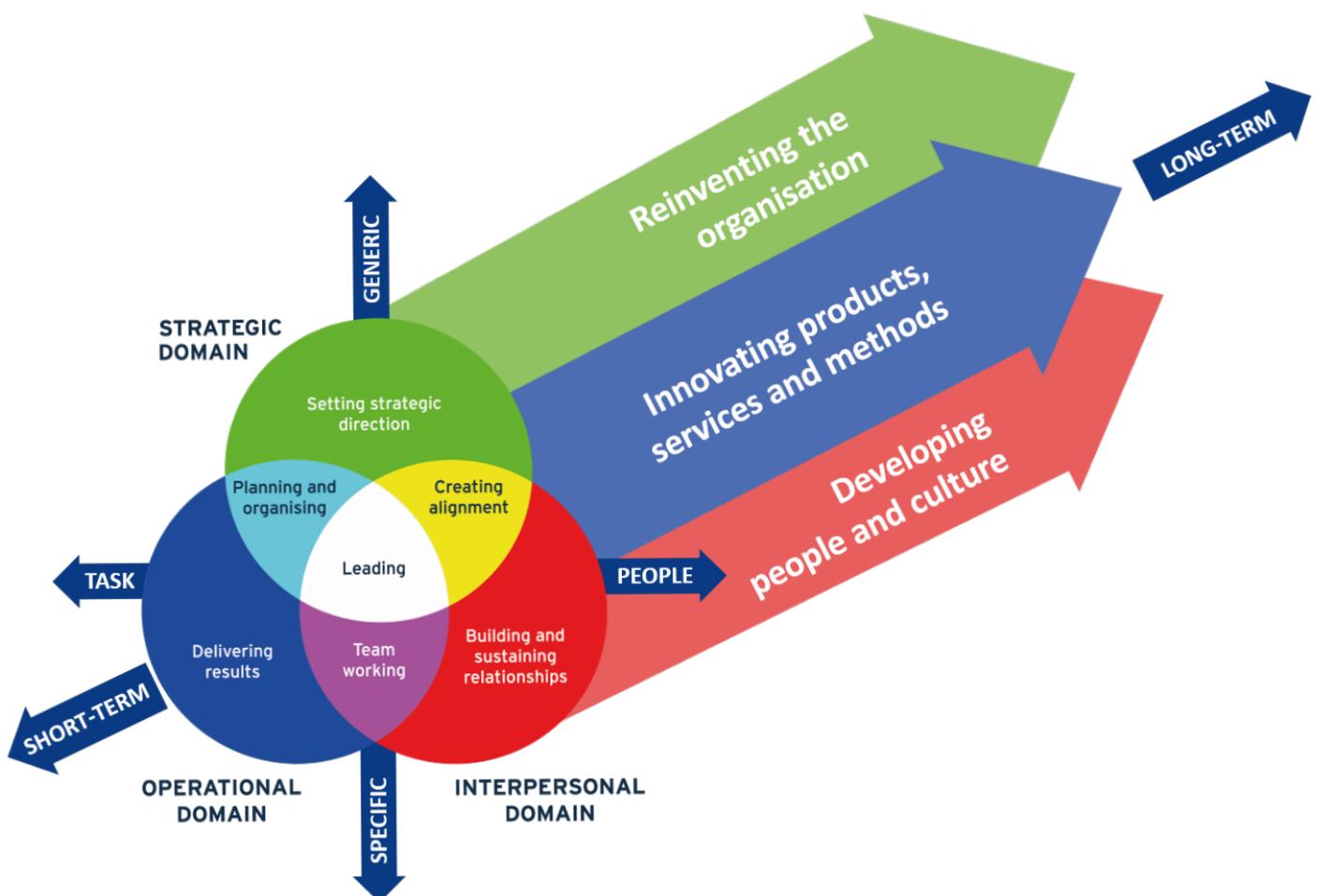
### Leadership through time

Leadership also comes into its own in times of change. The current crisis highlights the importance of the tasks of leadership, which are summarised in Figure 1. The strategic, operational and interpersonal domains all need to be led effectively at any time but, in the longer-term, three new tasks come into clearer view and achieve greater significance.

These are:

- 1 Reinventing the organisation
- 2 Innovating products, services and methods
- 3 Developing our people and culture

Figure 1 Leadership through time



## 2

### Approaches to leading change

Participant discussions looked at different characteristic responses, noting that while a few groups resist change, others welcome it and most are happy to experiment. This makes it possible to pilot and refine plans for change with individuals and groups who are likely to be enthusiastic from the start.

#### Failure as a consideration

Failure, in the context of experimentation, is not trying something new and finding it does not work. Rather, failure involves stubbornly clinging to the status quo. Failure is not exploring new ideas.

In addition, good, creative new ideas are to be welcomed from wherever they emerge, which is not inevitably from senior management – their job is to create the conditions for others to be creative.

## 3

### What is happening now?

Within the discussions, several participants reported that they had welcomed the enforced changes that lockdown brought. While almost all had had to make adjustments, few people seemed daunted by the changes to their working lives. The group identified the following changes and benefits, with many people suggesting that these should be incorporated into whatever becomes the 'new normal' (see Figure 2).

*Figure 2 Changes and benefits of lockdown working*

#### Changes

- Working from home
- Using remote conferencing technology
- Forming virtual teams

#### Benefits

- Creates choices about how the boundary between home and work operates
- Reduces carbon footprints
- Technology democratises the workplace
- Saves time

## Reported learning points from participants

- 1 There is no longer a clamour for a 'return to work'** – people have got used to home working and whilst they want to see colleagues in person, they also want to retain some of the freedoms of working from home.
- 2 The rise of the introvert** – home-working and working alone favour the introvert, who could now become a stronger voice without all the 'noise' of extroverts around them.
- 3 Trust** – people are often working harder and longer from home, not less. This requires more self-discipline than being 'in the office' and stronger/clearer boundaries and management. It also requires management to trust employees and for that trust to be felt/demonstrated in order to create a positive/productive culture.

## Summary

- Crises cause a great deal of anxiety to people and damage to organisations, yet they also bring with them extraordinary opportunities for lasting and positive change.
- What makes the difference in realising positive outcomes is our responses to the changes forced upon us, our resilience and our creativity.
- These are matters of leadership, and with good leadership some of the most positive changes in organisations have occurred as a response to a major crisis.

## Conclusions: Making experimentation work for positive change

Feedback from the groups demonstrated that the bonds holding the status quo in place have been weakened, if not shattered by COVID-19; 'we have already moved and are starting from a new place'. This is an opportunity to create movement in an organisation, where that may have been much more difficult before.

### From this starting point, organisations need to:

- use language carefully, eschewing terms like 'returning' or 'getting back to normal'
- adopt the language of discovery, exploration, reinvention and reinvigoration
- make change feel normal, positive and exciting
- fully adopt this different mindset and manage clients' expectations accordingly

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