RESHAPING HEALTHCARE LEADERSHIP:
Lasting Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Bob Clarke – *Chairman*, Furst Group & NuBrick Partners and Tim Frischmon – *Principal*, Furst Group
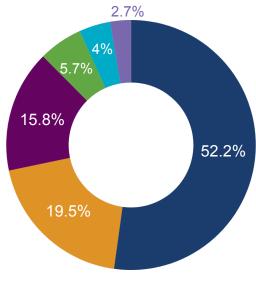
As we remember the COVID-19 pandemic, it's a time for deep reflection. We reached out to thousands of healthcare executives, inviting them to share the leadership lessons they learned during that unprecedented crisis. What emerged from their responses was a distinct blueprint for the future of healthcare leadership and the cultivation of resilient teams.

WHAT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TAUGHT US ABOUT LEADERSHIP

While many may have expected the insights to center solely around improving technology and emergency preparedness, the results reflected the following standout themes:

- Agile Leadership
- Communication and Trust
- Emotional Intelligence and Team Building

This report provides an overview of our survey results related to these themes and the role these critical leadership competencies will play in reshaping the healthcare leadership paradigm.

- 52.2% Agile Leadership
- 19.5% Communication and Trust
- 15.8% Emotional Intelligence and Team Building
- 5.7% Personal Growth
- 4% Strategic Vision and Goal Orientation
- 2.7% Operational Efficiency

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Healthcare leadership has been greatly impacted by COVID-19. Respondents' strong focus on agile leadership across sectors emphasizes the significance of resilience during such adversities.

Agile leaders encourage innovation, view failures as learning opportunities, and adjust their approach based on barriers, obstacles, and challenges that arise. In the ever-evolving landscape of the healthcare industry, where technological advancements, consumer and patient expectations, and regulatory requirements constantly reshape the terrain, agile leadership has emerged as a critical competency. Leadership lessons from the pandemic revealed organizations that embraced agility were better equipped to navigate the complexities of this sector, ensuring the delivery of high-quality care, enhancing patient outcomes and consumer experiences, and fostering innovation amid uncertainty.

Here are four traits of an agile leader:

1. **Navigating Complexity** – Agile leaders adapt swiftly to changing healthcare policies, ensuring that their organizations remain compliant while also seeking innovative ways to deliver superior solutions amid regulatory challenges. These challenges include:

   - Payer/provider relationships
   - Increased demand for patient and member satisfaction
   - Regulatory policies and reimbursement; staffing shortages
   - Rapid expansion of Medicare Advantage and Medicaid programs

2. **Rapidly Adapting to Technological Advancements** – Agile leaders facilitate the seamless integration of technology, AI (Artificial Intelligence), and data analytics into existing processes and systems, ensuring that their organization can deliver services efficiently while staying at the forefront of innovation.

3. **Empowering Healthcare Professionals** – Agile leaders empower others and foster a collaborative and transparent work environment. By involving their teams in decision-making processes and acknowledging their expertise, agile leaders boost morale, job satisfaction, and overall productivity

4. **Embracing Change and Resilience** – Agile leaders are adept at leading their teams through change. They instill a sense of resilience within their organizations, enabling them to bounce back stronger after setbacks and challenges.

Agile leadership is more than a management philosophy; it's a crucial mindset for success. By embracing agile methodologies, healthcare leaders can navigate challenges, harness technology, improve consumer experiences and patient outcomes, and build resilient, people-centered healthcare systems and solutions. As the industry evolves, agile leadership ensures that organizations that can adapt and innovate will continue to thrive and achieve sustainable forward momentum.

Survey Responses: Reflections on Agile Leadership

"I am self-aware, innovative, and I easily adapt to change. I did not maximize these strengths before 2020." **~ Tommye Austin, Senior Vice President Patient Care Systems and Chief Nurse Executive – BJC**

"The pandemic has been pivotal in my leadership experience. It has taught me that ANYTHING is possible and that despite setbacks, we need to think creatively and practically. I have learned that I am calm under adversity and that I am able to successfully lead my team under challenging situations. It has also been a great reminder to me that life is about much more than work; it's fleeting and fragile – these are things we quickly forget." **~ Gaurov Dayal, CEO – Axia Women's Health**

"Stay focused on the most important elements of patient care. Put the patient at the center of our conversations and business approaches. Leadership is essential and important to create a balanced strategy to deal with the immediate and the ongoing long-term needs of our organizations." **~ Corwin Harper, CEO – Ochsner LSU Health**

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"I learned that the best results, in a crisis situation as well as day-to-day, come when all stakeholders are given a voice. I also learned that decision-making does not need to be perfect – decide and move on, fail fast, and correct course." **~ Michelle Hood, EVP/COO – American Hospital Association (AHA)**

"Agility was a key competence during the pandemic. Decisions were being made daily and sometimes pivoted from the decisions from the day before. Clear communication with transparency while being agile truly helped navigate this journey." **~ Shibu Varghese, SVP, People, Culture & Infrastructure/CHRO – MD Anderson Cancer Center**

"Not a new learning, but a reinforced learning. How we nurture and grow future leaders through good times and challenging times, always relying on the strength and capabilities of the team, creates the resilience and creativity needed to perform in new and extremely difficult situations." **~ Kimberly Comer Mulqueen, Board Chair – Breast Cancer Prevention Partners**

"Resilience, flexibility, the importance of relationships, and being adaptable. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the financial situations of health systems have suffered immensely, so to continue in a mission forward way, [we must] be supremely patient-focused, innovative, and value-oriented. Think like a start-up and be prepared to stop doing what doesn't work, and leave no stones unturned." **~ Vandna Chaudhari, Administrator – UW Medicine**

THEME 2: COMMUNICATION AND TRUST

In healthcare, communication is not merely about conveying information; it is about building bridges between diverse stakeholders such as medical professionals, patients or clients, administrative staff, and external partners. Respondent data supports this by stressing the importance of instilling trust, leveraging remote communication tools effectively, and setting clear expectations.

Communication Builds Trust

The symbiotic relationship between communication and trust forms the backbone of effective leadership and creates a foundation of psychological safety. By understanding the profound impact of psychological safety on productivity, collaboration, innovation, problem-solving, and overall engagement, leaders can accelerate team performance.

What is Psychological Safety for Healthcare Professionals?

Ultimately, a psychologically safe environment for healthcare professionals fosters peak performance, team member well-being, favorable quality and safety outcomes for the communities you serve, and so much more. In line with psychological safety, consistent, honest communication and trust play a crucial role for teams. In times of chaos, this method of collaboration is essential, and it relies on interdependence and trust.

Here are the five principles of psychological safety in teams:

1. **Encouraging Open Communication:** Leaders who create psychologically safe environments find that team members feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, ideas, and concerns openly. This open communication leads to more meaningful discussions, sharing of diverse perspectives, and innovative problem-solving.

2. **Fostering Trust:** When team members know they won't be ridiculed or penalized for expressing their opinions, trust within the team flourishes. Leaders who build trust create strong working relationships and psychologically safe environments, which are catalysts for building and maintaining that trust.

3. **Promoting Learning and Growth:** In an organization where it's safe to admit mistakes and voice opinions and concerns, team members are more likely to take risks, collaborate, and try new approaches. Because failures are instead seen as opportunities to learn, leaders can foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

4. **Enhancing Team Collaboration:** When individuals feel safe to contribute without fear of being shut down, they are more likely to collaborate, share information, and work together effectively toward common goals.

5. **Enhancing Performance:** Research shows that teams with high psychological safety outperform their counterparts. Cultivating high-functioning teams is one of the most sustainable and impactful competitive advantages for any organization.

A strong focus on building healthy communication and trust is fundamental to the development of effective teams. Throughout the survey responses, healthcare executives confirm that leaders play a critical role in fostering psychological safety and team cohesion.

People-first organizations that prioritize psychological safety create a culture where every team member can thrive, leading to improved outcomes, innovation, and overall team success even in the most dynamic and challenging of times.

Survey Responses: Communication and Trust

"Flexibility is the new name of the game. Trust is paramount. Extend it as liberally as possible. If you find yourself being skeptical, discover why and address it in particular versus withholding trust as a general mindset. The need for authentic community in creating a sense of belonging—to know and be known—within the context of work, despite all of our technological advances, has never been greater. As the war for scarce talent resources wages on, experience and environment will emerge as differentiators." **~ Janet Smith-Hill, CHRO – SSM Health**

"I draw my energy and passion from personally interacting with colleagues and team members. The pandemic significantly impacted the way we interact with each other. It takes greater effort and creativity to make virtual interactions meaningful and have a purpose. Just when you think you are doing enough - do more! I learned that planning and more deliberate actions are needed to deeply impact colleague engagement." **~ Christopher Ciano, former President – Aetna Medicare, Aetna/CVS**

"I have found it absolutely necessary to hold more 1:1s with our frontline workers, not just my directs, so people feel individually seen and listened to and that their individual issue(s) will be addressed. I have also learned the importance of acknowledging the challenges of leading during difficult times openly and having people see that I rely on the team's support to succeed at work." **~ Cheryl Pegus, Managing Director – Morgan Health**

"Logic, reason, and research are not sufficient to motivate behavior, even with a scientifically trained workforce. Instead, leaders must instill trust throughout the organization, leader-to-leader, leader-to-employee, and employee-to-employee. And this culture of trust should (ideally) be solidified long before a leader needs to rely upon it." **~ Corbette Doyle, Board Advisor - Bridge My Return & Havarti Risk Services; Former Senior Lecturer – Vanderbilt University**

The value & importance of ongoing (almost constant) communication. This helped generate trust that we/ leadership were being strategic & thoughtful; it also helped prevent employees from "filling in the blanks" with their own assumptions. Additionally, my credibility as a leader was enhanced when I clearly differentiated between science/facts vs my interpretation/opinion about the facts. This was especially important when I discussed the COVID vaccination." **~ Dr. Archelle Georgiou, Chair - Children's Minnesota & KSTP Health Expert – KSTP-TV**

"The last 4 years have taught me how critical relationships are to building a company, both among our colleagues and with customers. As we navigated Zoom and remote communications, I learned to be more deliberate about creating interpersonal connections. Connections I took for granted when we were in person." **~ Carolyn Magill, CEO – Aetion**

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Leading with empathy and compassion was a strong, recurring theme in the survey, with respondents highlighting increased emotional intelligence and team building as key to leading their teams through the toughest moments. The concept of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) has been around since 1995, when researcher Daniel Goleman introduced it to the world. The idea that "an ability to identify and manage emotions greatly increases our chances of success" quickly took off and has influenced how people think about emotions and human behavior ever since.

Leaders with high emotional intelligence are generally more attuned to the needs of their team, better at managing stress and cultivating conflicts, and adept at creating a positive and productive workplace culture that values teamwork and authenticity. These qualities contribute significantly to their effectiveness as leaders. Respondents highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence in healthcare leadership. In sum, leaders with high EQ are often more effective in their roles, create better teams, and contribute to the development of healthier organizational cultures.

Here are three behaviors of emotionally intelligent leaders:

1. **Self-Awareness & Self-Regulation:** Leaders with high EQ have a deep understanding of their own emotions, strengths, weaknesses, and motives. This self-awareness helps them manage their behavior and reactions, build stronger relationships, and lead others more effectively. Because they can control their emotions and impulses, they are able to remain calm and composed even in challenging situations.

2. **Empathy:** Leaders who are able to understand the emotions and perspectives of others excel at connecting and collaborating, fostering trust and mutual respect. This is also a cornerstone of developing psychologically safe cultures where teams thrive.

3. **Motivate & Inspire:** Leaders who develop strong emotional intelligence tend to motivate themselves and can inspire and motivate others. They excel at creating a clear vision and setting challenging goals while remaining committed to achieving them.

Additionally, the leadership lessons learned during the pandemic underscore the need for EQ in healthcare organizations. Executives must not only manage their own stress but also be attuned to their team's stress levels. This involves recognizing triggers that can negatively impact communication and manifest as flight, fight, or freeze responses.

Regular check-ins are essential, especially during challenging times. Leaders need to acknowledge their own stress levels and encourage open discussions about stress among team members. Nurturing deeper interpersonal connections, leading with empathy, and providing opportunities for rest and recovery can lower job anxiety and foster resilience in the face of adversity.

Survey Responses: EQ and Team Building

"Perseverance, compassion and understanding."
~ Cheryl Fried, Former President & CEO – Blue Ridge Hospice

"I have learned how to leverage technology and various employee engagement tools and techniques as an enabler to allow my team to show up where they are and be flexible with work arrangements without productivity loss. Additionally, I developed a deeper understanding, empathy, patience, and connectedness with employees who had/have responsibilities for home, schooling, or dealing with the loss of a loved one as a result of the pandemic. Also, I have a heightened sense of using the company's mission, values, and voice of the customer to drive key decisions." **~ Stephen Harris, President – Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois**
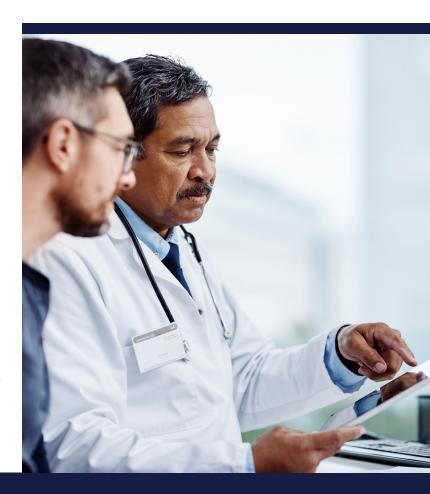
"I have learned so much about who I am as a leader and who I want to be as a leader. I've learned more than just endurance and selflessness; I try to lead every day with optimism. And look for ways to grow trust with my employees and colleagues. I meditate every day and instill a sense of calmness. I learned that during the pandemic, in a sea full of chaos, your team is looking directly at you and how you are going to react in uncertain situations. Leading with a sense of calmness when under pressure helped us to focus and get critical work done." **~ Carrie Harris-Muller, SVP, Chief Population Health Officer – OhioHealth**

"I've learned so much – about the importance of resiliency and flexibility (needing to pivot quickly as modes of work changed and priorities changed seemingly overnight and on an ongoing basis as the length of the pandemic set in). Most of all, I learned to be a more patient and understanding leader, recognizing that others were also experiencing so many unknowns both in and outside of the workplace, and it was important to take more time to appreciate the context under which they were operating in terms of setting expectations and communicating about developments at work." **~ Deb Oberman, SVP – Help at Home**

"The importance of being a compassionate and empathetic leader. I believe it has been necessary over the past four years to show compassion to all team members/employees. And by doing so, our results have never been better. Team members are willing to go the extra mile when needed, knowing just how much you care about them. I have always had compassion for others but less ability to put it into practice and what it meant for someone's day-to-day job. Showing my true self and the compassion that I have for others has allowed me to show my authentic self and allowed us to turn around our results and our employee engagement." **~ Amy Ronneberg, CEO – National Marrow Donor Program**

"Trust in team members and vulnerability to make decisions has become more prevalent given the remote working environments and fast-moving trends we have seen in the past 4 years. Changes in employer/employee relationships have impacted how we attract talent and retain strong leaders. I also believe that we are more aware of the fragility of our healthcare system and the importance of efficiencies and patient throughput to meet demands. The necessity to ensure people work at the top of their license and maximize their value becomes more important when resources are limited." **~ John Johannessen, Senior Executive Officer – AdventHeath**

"That 'servant-leadership' was not simply thinking 'less-about-yourself' and was more 'thinking less of myself' instead. This was a small but powerful paradigm in the thinking of how leadership is delivered. The other important aspect was a concentration on how to hold more powerful and impactful meetings. This required a concentration on the purpose of the meeting, the pre-meeting, and how to properly close a meeting for maximum effectiveness." **~ Mark Mixer, CEO – HealthOne Alliance & Chair - The HRA Council**

Overall, respondents expressed positive sentiments about leadership lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. They echoed confidence that these experiences accelerated personal and team development while also highlighting skill and competency gaps that may have existed prior.

Evolving leadership skills and competencies center around the key themes outlined above:

- Agile Leadership
- Communication and Trust
- Emotional Intelligence & Team Building

As healthcare executive recruitment and leadership consulting experts, we continue to observe strong trends toward hiring executives with leadership strength in these areas. Developing these critical competencies will increase psychological safety in your culture and accelerate executive team performance. Building stronger teams means attracting and retaining leaders who can adapt quickly to ever-shifting dynamics while building trust and connection through authentic, compassionate communication.

For a deeper dive into the survey, we've developed a three-part series where we explore each of these key themes in detail and share strategies to help you further develop your teams.

Join the conversation in part one for a peek into our holistic approach to building agile leadership. There, you will uncover what has worked for the respondents and additional tools to equip you and your team with resilience to future-proof your healthcare organization. mpi

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in direct quotes are solely those of the respondents and not necessarily those of their respective organizations, Furst Group, or NuBrick Partners.

Bob Clarke
Chairman
Furst Group & NuBrick Partners
Phone: (800) 642-9940
bclarke@furstgroup.com

Tim Frischmon
Principal
Furst Group
Phone: (800) 642-9940
tfrischmon@furstgroup.com

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