

LEADERSHIP

RETAIL LEADERSHIP AT A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY...AND OPPORTUNITY

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Retail leaders around the world have faced unprecedented pressures, incredibly difficult decisions and choices to ensure they protected the business, served their customers and looked after the welfare and safety of all employees. What have been the lessons learned and what does it mean to be a retail leader looking ahead into 2021? We asked Sally Elliott, Co-Leader, Global Retail Practice at Spencer Stuart for her views.

At times, 2020 has felt like a slowly unravelling disaster movie. With no playbook to draw on, leaders have had to look deep within themselves to find the answers.

This spring, the only certainty of retail life was that it was about to be bent totally out of shape. Leaders would need to make unprecedented decisions, quickly - so quickly that decisions made in the morning could be implemented in the afternoon.

Driving critical responses to the crisis that conveyed both urgency and reassurance demanded pitch-perfect communication. Cut-through had to be massive, and yet amid the tumult many organisations accelerated change and innovation, especially in digital, by shifting plans from the 'long-term' strategy column to a new 'today' column.

Workloads and work rates ballooned, sometimes because of redundancies and furloughs among colleagues. Some parts of the retail sector were marooned on the wrong side of seemingly arbitrary 'non-essential' classifications. Adding to the human and organisational costs, expensive stop-start lockdowns were rarely in sync across jurisdictions.

Leaders able to keep people buoyant and motivated were at an innate advantage. Those who demonstrated humility and genuine empathy will be remembered among their workforces long after the pandemic has ended.

HAVE A CLEAR VISION FOR 2021

Day-to-day issues clamour for attention, but it's essential to keep the long term in sight. Pursuing sustainable growth will take exceptionally creative and agile thinking that zeros in on purpose, vision and strategy. Transparent and authentic communication will be key.

Clear-eyed leadership is necessary when articulating goals and setting the decision-making agenda. Rapid assessments on the impact of accelerated structural trends will need to be made, such as the effect online growth will have on the role of physical stores, or whether capabilities exist to support the move to omnichannel.

It won't be easy: decisions may have to be made with imperfect information, and priorities constantly reviewed. The most effective cultures will be those with open, agile leaders who trust colleagues to pursue opportunities within a coherently expressed agenda.

ALIGN YOUR TEAMS

High-performing teams thrive on the trust that fires co-operation. Empowered colleagues are energised colleagues. The pandemic has shown that an overly directive leadership style is unlikely to be productive, whereas the leader's job is to set the tone, align teams behind a purposeful vision, empower them to take decisions, and ensure that colleagues collaborate rather than compete with each other. This particular transition into a new year, as change priorities crystallise, could be a fruitful time to ensure the best people are ready and in the right roles.

Diversity is one of the proven stimulators of innovation and creative thinking. When it is knitted inextricably into an inclusive cultural fabric, teams and colleagues spark ideas and pathways that benefit the business. **Starbucks** has signalled it wanted more progress with diversity, and is to link executive bonuses to a 2025 target of at least 30% of its corporate workforce being Black, indigenous or people of colour.





Working from home will continue to present some barriers to collaboration and innovation, so leaders must continually seek richer ways to make remote working less...remote. Flexible working has many benefits, but it shouldn't detract from the power of in-person gatherings.

In the US, **Walmart's** global CTO, Suresh Kumar, has told 10,000 tech employees that working from home is now the norm and that henceforth office space is for 'collaboration, to sync up and strengthen camaraderie'.

ENERGISE THE ORGANISATION

The pandemic has shown how purposeful and energetic leadership can inspire people to achieve extraordinary results. Leaders will need to continue to invest energy in communications in order to sustain high levels of engagement. They will have to tread a fine line between acknowledging uncertainty and conveying confidence and hope.

To maintain their own vitality, leaders will need to work on their resilience, taking care of themselves to avoid burnout. This is essential if they are to take full advantage of the opportunities to adapt and reimagine that will inevitably arise out of adversity. The winners will be those who can rise above the stress of maintaining operations to embrace risk and opportunity.

Measuring and staying in tune with energy (including your own) signals emotional maturity. Empathetic leaders will continue to help colleagues take time to recharge, even when stepping away seems instinctively wrong. In the UK, **Marks & Spencer** encourages employees to take up benefits such as free counselling and online CBT.

CEOs will not have all the answers. What matters right now is that they are humble enough to say so. Their challenge in 2021 will be to set a clear direction, align the organisation behind it and motivate people to work together towards a common goal. They shoulder great responsibility and are in a privileged position to make a world of difference.

