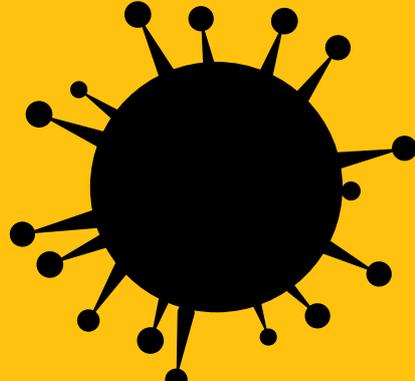
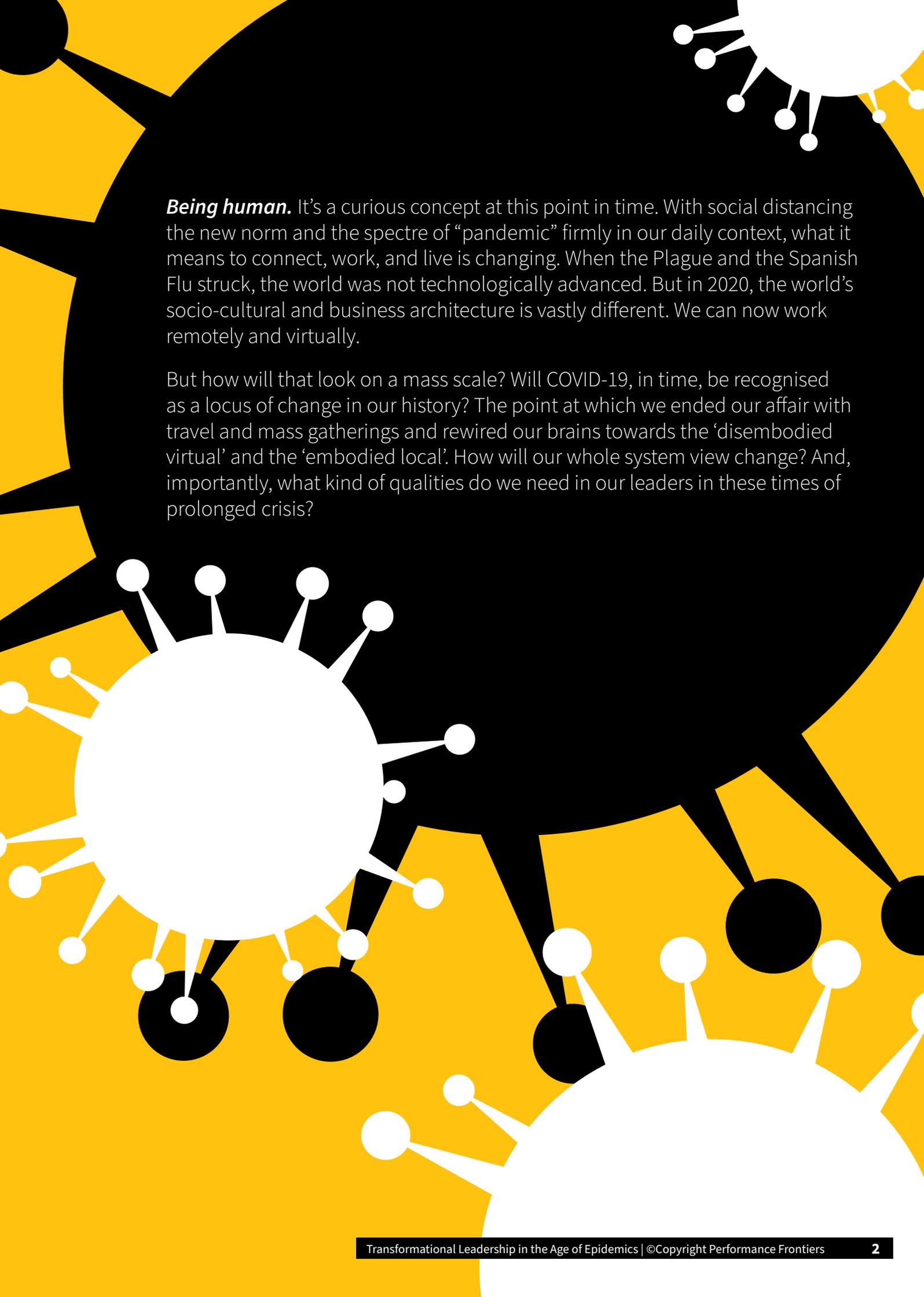


Transformational Leadership in the Age of Epidemics

by Performance Frontiers




The background is a vibrant yellow. A large, thick black circle is positioned in the upper left, partially overlapping the text. Several white, stylized virus particles are scattered across the page. Each virus particle consists of a central white circle with several thin, white, spike-like protrusions extending outwards. Some of these particles are partially obscured by the black circle or other elements. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, with a focus on geometric shapes and high contrast.

Being human. It's a curious concept at this point in time. With social distancing the new norm and the spectre of "pandemic" firmly in our daily context, what it means to connect, work, and live is changing. When the Plague and the Spanish Flu struck, the world was not technologically advanced. But in 2020, the world's socio-cultural and business architecture is vastly different. We can now work remotely and virtually.

But how will that look on a mass scale? Will COVID-19, in time, be recognised as a locus of change in our history? The point at which we ended our affair with travel and mass gatherings and rewired our brains towards the 'disembodied virtual' and the 'embodied local'. How will our whole system view change? And, importantly, what kind of qualities do we need in our leaders in these times of prolonged crisis?



Leading Through COVID-19

COVID-19 is not a blip in the system. In fact, experts believe that we're going to see more epidemics in the future because of the way we interact with our planet. Specifically, by pushing into and clearing remote, wild areas, we are exposing ourselves to new diseases¹.

The long-term solution to more epidemic situations is to support core healthcare functions by investing in infrastructure and disease surveillance.² But to do that, we need leaders with buoyancy and purpose. Leaders who are not afraid to challenge convention, not just within healthcare, but across the network of services and industries that comprise the world's economic, political and socio-cultural ecosystems. Leaders dedicated to transformation.

Transformational Leadership

Leaders today are being called on more and more to see beyond their immediate domain. They are being asked to see their place in the whole picture and to see the fundamental necessity of whole system awareness and eco-system thinking, and from this to understand that every decision made will have a ripple effect.

As Performance Frontiers' CEO, Gretel Bakker, puts it: "we have entered an era that demands leaders who are agile thinkers, who have the organisational intelligence and foresight to pursue a higher purpose, who can influence and impact partnerships and relationships. Leaders who are people-focused, and can create an environment of physical and psychological safety."³

Leading against convention requires imagination and commitment. Take Joan Bavaria, a great "out of the box" thinker and the founder of Socially Responsible Investing, a company worth three trillion dollars in 2008, and CERES (Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies). Bavaria grew her ideas in the hostile, profit-oriented banking climate of the 80s and 90s. She defied traditional methods of operation, preferring to stay aligned to her purpose and committed to living her truth. "The realisation for me was that sometimes to make changes you have to find pressure points that are not always in the rules as defined by the establishment that's in place."⁴

Or the Mod Pizza co-founders Ally and Scott Svenson, the "enlightened capitalists"⁵ who committed to building a company whose metrics had a weather eye on profit margins but even closer scrutiny on sustainable practices and human centred management. They wanted to build a company that made a positive social impact and recognised that the corporate versus not-for-profit binary was no longer applicable in a VUCA⁶ world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous).



Or Cynthia Carroll the CEO Anglo American PLC, a mining giant with a poor safety record that no one expected she could impact. Holding to her vision for “zero harm”⁷, she took the bold step of closing down the Rustenburg platinum mine for employee retraining. That was the beginning of a shift within the entire mining industry to establish universal safety standards.

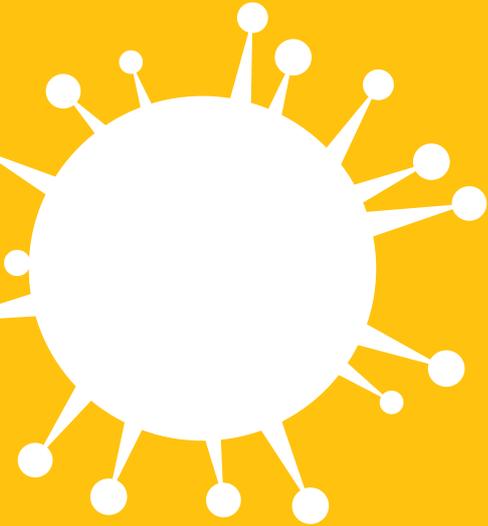
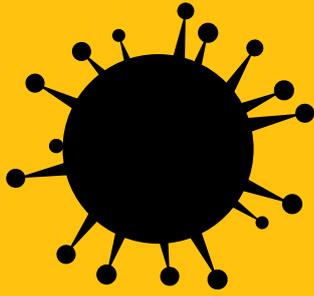
These transformational leaders were all deeply purpose-driven. Yet each was capable of great humility, and of understanding that they were part of a bigger whole – an ecosystem. They knew they didn’t have all the answers, but needed to listen to adapt. They realised instinctively that caring for people would unlock a willingness to change. They committed to courageous action, looking within themselves at what they needed to embrace, strengthen, or let go of, to lead change with the emerging need.

Building Brave New Leaders

Rather than hope leaders like this will emerge in these VUCA times, we can grow them. Raise them. Enable them. Our brave new world needs brave new leaders who can “navigate multiple futures at one time, make frank and fearless decisions, and leverage multiple intelligences.”⁸

The good news is that as we become more virtual and local, our mindsets are primed to adapt. Buoyancy can be tapped, if we do the work now.

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