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Equipping leaders to sustain performance

There is a massive opportunity to create a healthier work/life balance for people whilst unlocking motivation and discretionary effort.

The global pandemic has accelerated an already rising trend towards at-home working. Covid restrictions make virtual working the only choice for a lot of knowledge workers and any return to in-person working will likely be in a very different form. Here at Sionic we have both surveyed knowledge workers and worked with clients as they address the continued challenges of sustaining people and organisation performance in one of the most challenging of recent times.

In this article we set out what leaders need to do to meet today’s virtual demands of them. We explore how to lead sustained performance in a new world of work which reaches beyond this pandemic to a time when a mix of at-home and some in-person is the new norm.

You will read about the **performance equation** and a **framework of leadership levers** and in so doing join an emerging community who want to “**radically accelerate a different style of inspirational leadership in the financial services sector with people at its heart**”.

The starting point for our recommendations is based on our own survey of knowledge workers which explored:

- How well people have adapted to at-home working.
- What impact at-home working has on work-life balance and motivation.
- What impact no in-person working has on people and performance.

Our survey concluded:

- Significant gains from at-home working in terms of better work life balance which links closely to increased motivation for many.
- Many tasks can be done just as easily at-home with good collaboration tools.

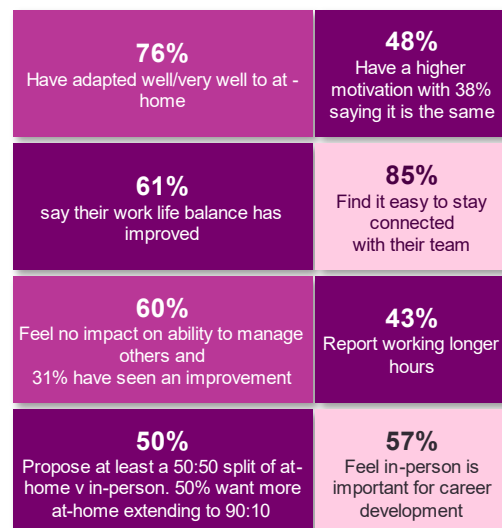


Fig 1: Sionic Survey highlights

- In-person working is seen as important for career development conversations, networking outside of immediate team, unexpected connections, conflict resolution, listening to others and longer-term wellbeing.

We built on our survey findings and discussion forums to strengthen the link between leadership style and sustained performance leading to the development of our **performance equation**.

How to lead sustained performance

Leading sustained performance needs to focus on maximising the benefits of at-home working, acknowledging that some of these benefits have more recently been disrupted. People are exhausted juggling other priorities while also working at home; compounded by the void of no in-person working.

What is called for is inspirational leaders who do the critical things differently that positively impact people. This starts with reprioritising your time. Most leaders spend a disproportionate amount of time on the “science of leadership” focusing on commercials, operational metrics and budgets, which is what they tend to be measured against. Creating a new world of healthier and sustainable performance, demands a greater focus on the “art of leadership”, the human capabilities, team needs, pastoral care and different ways of working.

A simple way for leaders to think about what to focus on is to look at how their efforts are impacting the performance equation (see Fig 2).

The equation has four components which guide leadership style, approach and main considerations to sustain the performance of people:

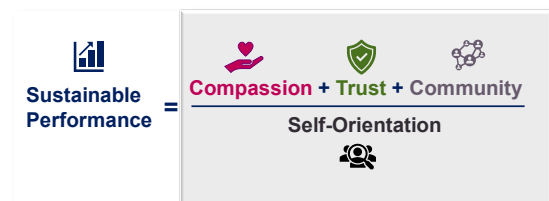


Fig 2: Performance Equation

- Compassion: Being a compassionate leader who proactively explores and understands the physical, emotional or spiritual support people need given their individual circumstances and priorities.
- Trust: Providing the necessary autonomy for, and belief in, people to deliver the expected outcomes, in whatever manner suits them, i.e., fitting around their personal circumstances.
- Community: Connecting people to extended support networks, develop and share ideas, and reinforce a sense of belonging.
- Self-Orientation: Balancing putting others first while maintaining your own energy and capability to be there for others remembering that “Leadership is not about you. At the heart of good leadership is the belief that you can achieve anything if you are prepared to let others take the credit”.

Being leaders who sustain performance

Experience with many clients reinforces our view that inspirational leaders can pull on 5 levers to impact this performance equation and have the desired impact on people that flows through to sustained performance (see Fig 3). While we discuss these levers in sequence they should be seen as dynamic and iterative:

- Lever 1: Agree Purpose
- Lever 2: Equip Others
- Lever 3: Build Connections
- Lever 4: Be Curious
- Lever 5: Keep Adapting



Fig 3: Leadership Levers to Deliver Sustained Performance

Lever 1: Agree Purpose

This covers being clear on your own purpose as a leader to be there for your people and to provide clarity over business goals and imperatives. Such clarity and connectedness can relieve uncertainty and serves to direct and focus the efforts of people juggling multiple priorities helping them to stop starting and start finishing.

What we see work well is leaders who:

- Are compassionate leaders who really listen to and understand what employees are thinking and feeling.
- Act in service of their teams, from approving expense submissions for equipment such as monitors, desk chairs, microphones to ensuring a support network is available for all.
- Trust people and teams with the autonomy to make purpose and goal drive decisions.
- Adapt and restate purpose and goals, communicate clearly and set priorities according to employee's capabilities and capacity.
- Use tools to create a backlog of what needs to be achieved and clear visibility of allocation and status of work packages.
- Balance current day realism with the 'bounded optimism' about the future.

Lever 2: Equip Others

This is the focus on equipping people to lead themselves. This is especially important as people are weary from the extended pandemic restrictions. However, many have been thriving and those who have not need to be supported so they develop the capability and resilience to also thrive. This starts with compassionate leadership which is integral to your new purpose as a leader. It means acting with compassion

and demonstrating an openness to human vulnerability, acknowledging that it is OK to not be OK.

As a leader you need to develop an ability to be compassionate and set up channels that make you accessible. This can include virtual catch ups with everyone on a regular basis, a virtual open-door policy and virtual team get togethers that encourage bonding and openness. To help people lead their own success provide training across four key areas:

- Resilience centred around the regulation of emotions, so people are better able to be their best at work.
- Dynamic mindfulness to help with connecting to the present moment during the workday; taking breaks to reduce screen time and maintaining a healthy work life balance.
- Focused attention to maintain performance levels by managing distractions.
- Wellbeing centred around developing autonomy which is a fundamental component of psychological and mental wellness.

Lever 3: Build Connections

Leaders have a pivotal role to play in building connections. At-home working has left a void in human interaction and the social and employment networking that flows from office face-to-face contact. The naturally reserved can become less visible in meetings, less able to contribute and as a result feel less valued. However even the more outgoing who may find virtual meetings easier to engage with, are still missing the interaction of in-person working.

To encourage the more reserved, leaders should adopt a 'collaborative intelligence' approach in meetings to equalize contribution and value. The technique ensures everyone is listened to, understood, and that ideas are not rejected out of hand, but 'plussed' by the whole team.

Creating 'community collisions' will bridge the void of face-to-face, replicating those 'water cooler' unplanned meetings. These are short, agenda-less, intermittent meetings at set times during the week to randomly connect people. They build and maintain networks and support people's need for social interaction.

Investing in or sponsoring 'communities of practice' bringing together people with similar work-related interests, will facilitate the sharing of knowledge and new practices and will serve to build organisational strength and resilience. Linking participation and input to these communities to a reward and recognition programme will further encourage discretionary effort and help sustain and grow the community.

Lever 4: Be Curious

This is where again compassionate leadership is key to leaders thinking how best to guide people to be the best they can and thinking about kick starting new ways of at-home working.

Leaders often fail to JUST STOP & THINK what is happening with their teams, other connected teams in the organisation, and themselves. There can often be a natural tension between what you want out of your people and what they need from you, so it is important to explore and understand this by tuning in at 5 levels:

- Level 1: Curious about your own experiences, your energy and capacity to act in service to your people. This is where mindfulness can be very valuable and there are many ideas for mindfulness work forums.
- Level 2: Curious about your own leadership style to ensure you are developing compassion and displaying trust which are both essential to meeting the needs of people in a new working environment.
- Level 3: Curious about work relations with fellow leaders and others, sharing good practices, forging connections and fostering mutual support.
- Level 4: Curious about the people you are leading and what motivates and drives them, as well as what prevents them from working at their best.
- Level 5: Curious about how people are working together and identifying appropriate and suitable ways of working that are mutually beneficial.

Being a curious leader will drive up your insight and understanding of these different elements, building a foundation for you to act in service to you people and help to remove any constraints and barriers to them leading themselves.

Lever 5: Keep Adapting

As a leader you can immediately impact the sustained performance of your people working at-home following actions suggested under levers 1-4. To go a step further and capitalise on this performance you should seize the moment and re-imagine a future which is the best mix of at-home and in-person working and harvest a rich seam of benefits.

It is often too easy to put in place standards, processes, ways of working and leave them to run indefinitely. Organisations are living systems that continually evolve, so it is very important for leaders to constantly review how all elements (people, processes, structures, cultures, assets and leadership – especially the people) of the system are operating. To move at the pace required in the emerging world, you need to:

- Create the psychological safety that people need to share concerns, ideas and improvements. Encourage people to bring news that we do not necessarily want to hear but once in the open can be addressed with significant benefits.

- Encourage innovation and new processes or ways of working to evolve to accommodate the demands of the emerging world. Running virtual change labs to ideate around major challenges and running experiments to test some of the new ideas that emerge will result in an organisation that is adapting for the better. Borrowing techniques from the agile movement, such as retrospectives, will also help leaders to better understand the impact of changes and ‘course-correct’, not forgetting to share learnings across the leadership community.

Conclusion

More than ever, leaders have a great opportunity to equip themselves and significantly impact the lives of their people through compassion, trust and community. Providing pastoral care whilst devising new ways of working will support and motivate your people as you either continue the ‘at-home’ default for knowledge workers or transition into a hybrid world of remote/in office.

Refocusing on the “art of leadership” and using the five new leavers to generate your own canvas of priorities (see Fig 4) will leave you creating the new normal whilst other less impactful leaders wait for it to be created.

Anyone responsible for people can be a leader and create a new world in which a healthy work-life balance for your people can comfortably co-exist with high and sustained levels of performance. Why would you ever want to return to the ‘old normal’?



Fig 4: Leadership Canvas

If you would like assistance on any of the issues covered in, or raised by this paper, please contact us.

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Meet the expert

Deborah Challinor, Partner Learning & Development

I specialise in working with clients to continually challenge and develop high performing organisations. I translate strategy into practical implementation plans and drive change through focusing on the climate, skills and behaviours the organisation needs to transition. I combine managing change with a highly pragmatic approach to delivering coaching, leadership and expert programmes to help businesses unlock how their talent can shape the future. Currently, I am developing an enhanced organisation performance assessment model to target the critical components that support success. I am also driving forward helping banks address gender diversity; specifically, empowering women to overcome perceived barriers to advancement.



deborah.challinor@sionic.com