

OSELP

Oppenheimer Science and Energy
Leadership Program (OSELP)

Cohort 4 Think-Piece Summary

*The Importance of Leadership Agility at the U.S. DOE
National Laboratories: Lessons Learned During the COVID-
19 Pandemic*

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June 10, 2021

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Introduction

It has been previously established that there is a strong link between the overall effectiveness of a leader and employee engagement and job satisfaction, an organization's talent retention, and business productivity and financial delivery.^{[1][2][3]} A leader's impact on the aforementioned business critical areas were established to be correlated in the pre-Covid timeframe and would expect to have a higher degree of influence on organizational performance during the current Covid-19 state, as indicated by a recent survey published by McKinsey.^[4] Undeniably, it will take psychology and business professionals some time to garner a complete understanding of the events that transpired during the Covid-19 pandemic and what might be the long- and short-term impact on employees and workplaces, as a consequence of leadership actions and behaviors.^[5]

It is also worth noting that superimposed with the 2020-2021 pandemic timeframe, were tumultuous events (demonstrations and riots) occurring around the nation highlighting the need for greater social justice and racial equality. These events could not be ignored by the national laboratory leaders and staff, and further highlighted the need for leadership to help foster a more communicative, open, and inclusive culture at the national labs.

The pandemic has resulted in significant changes for many DOE national laboratory employees, including the necessity to work from home to a significant level (aka. Teleworking), diminished face-to-face interaction with leadership and teammates, and increasing personal pressure to balance needs of work expectations with home demands (aka. educating children). In most cases employees were largely expected to deliver on program milestones without any schedule relief that could be assigned to the pandemic.

As the Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing, the authors believe it is worthwhile to capture a topic that has become hyper-relevant and crucial to the success of the DOE national laboratories, especially during atypical times: *leadership agility*. There are many definitions of leadership agility; therefore, it is necessary to define our interpretation.^{[6][7]}

- *Leadership Agility: The ability to effectively lead, manage, and inspire your team during turbulent times and complex situations.*

The focus of this white paper is to disseminate our learnings and recommendations for the institutional attributes necessary to ensure leadership agility, especially based upon our experiences during the significant events of 2020-2021 across the DOE laboratory complex.

This team believes that by incorporating the best approaches utilized and recommended by current leaders and those proven methods recommended by professionals from industry, government, and academia, we can institute meaningful enhancements to how each of the national laboratories currently operate to drive broad improvements in the performance of the lab leadership. Our hypothesis is that these recommendations, if instituted, will have a long-term and sustained positive impact on each of the labs in terms of employee engagement and job satisfaction, talent retention, recruiting, productivity, and program delivery in spite of the current national emergencies, and will help the labs be prepared to handle any future unanticipated challenges, which will require leaders with the skills, abilities, and character to inspire the employees of the laboratory network to deliver for the nation.

Background

To delve into the topic of leadership agility, the team performed a literature review on the subtopics of leadership under stressful and dynamic situations, leadership and relationships, leadership and inclusivity, and

leadership pipeline development. All of this literature was reviewed and analyzed as to its applicability to leadership under the current Covid-19 pandemic and other dynamic situations. The main takeaways and themes from each of the subtopic literature reviews are detailed in the next subsections.

Second, the team interviewed senior DOE, national lab, and academic leaders to get their perspective and lessons learned from their experiences. The main themes gleaned from these interviews were the following:

- *Communication*: Leaders must communicate often, effectively, simply, and explain the “why” of decision making. This gives employees hope and helps create a “safe” environment when under stress.
- *Decisions*: Leaders must consider the big pictures and not be afraid to make mistakes or change a decision when further information is available. Be sure to be collaborative and seek out input from others including opposing views.
- *Self-Management*: Leaders must understand their abilities and limitations. Maintaining composure, recognizing when you are stressed, and finding trusted confidants can help leaders with self-management.
- *Training*: Training leaders for stressful situations can be difficult to do. The biggest influence are role models and other leaders who show what to do and what not to do. Feedback from peers and mentors, and experience in dealing with atypical situations seem to be the best ways to “train” in general.
- *Succession planning*: Leaders must be intentional about planning for their successor and this successor must embody the leadership characteristics and organization demographics. Always looking for someone who is smarter, better, and different than yourself to be your successor is key to good succession planning.
- *Integrity*: Leaders must “walk the talk” and lead by example because stressful situations can bring out the best and worst in people. A mechanism for leadership feedback can ensure leaders are honest.
- *People and Engagement*: If a leader takes care of the employees, they will take care of the mission. Employees want to feel valued, safe, and know what is expected of them.

Reassuringly, many of the key points noted in our interview with leaders were recognized and highlighted during our review of the open literature from academic and psychology experts.

Finally, the team surveyed the current leadership training offerings, classes, programs, and seminars currently available across the laboratory complex. Although these varied greatly across the complex, one common aspect was that none specifically focused on the institutional attributes needed to ensure leadership agility.

Shared Imperatives for high performance leaders

A 2018 *Harvard Business Review* article shared some startling employee survey results related to the performance of leaders under pressure and how workers and organizations were impacted.^[8] The results suggested that many managers have buckled under the pressure of the situation. Roughly half of the leaders were more close-minded, micromanaging, less willing to listen to others’ perspectives, less inquisitive, and more likely to be upset and argumentative (versus calm) when under pressure situations. Furthermore, roughly a third of the leaders were less transparent and more prone to dishonest behavior in these situations. The obvious question becomes what are the documented best practices, behaviors, and learnings noted in the literature, and obtained through interviews with proven professionals, that can help guide current and future leaders to maintain high performance during prolonged stressful and changing conditions - not unlike the Covid-19 pandemic and the high profile nationwide events highlighting the need for greater social justice and racial equality. In this section we highlight several focus areas that were particularly noteworthy from our research.

Know thyself: The ability of a person to handle a stressful situation relies upon the individual’s aptitude to prepare themselves mentally, physically, and emotionally.^[9] Stressful situations can be categorized by neuroscience concepts as those that are “exteroception” (sensitivity to stimuli from outside of the body) and “interoception” (sensitivity and awareness to stimuli from inside the body).^[10] The ability for a leader to recognize their own physiological state and conditions, is thought to be tied to emotional resilience, which in turn helps the leader adjust and cope with difficult situations.^[11] When looking at how leaders perform under stress, it was found that leaders in the topmost positions of their organizations seem well prepared compared to lower level managers.^[12]

Serve as a model to the team: During difficult times employees will naturally look to their leadership to serve as an example of what is expected. Leaders need to consistently serve as that role model and do, not just say, what they are asking others to do. Failure for a leader to follow the rules all were asked to follow can only lead to a loss of respect from employees, and the converse is true as well.^[13] Leaders' external behavior towards others as demonstrated by impatient, fearful or frustrated expressions or communications will be recognized by their team members, and result in a team's heightened apprehension.^[9] This could in turn result in an increase in the team's stress and reduce their performance. The ability of a leader to demonstrate a calm mind frame so they can step back from the pressure of the moment to respond with a more clear and thoughtful communication to the team, versus an instinctual reaction, is likely to have a calming benefit.

Communicating with the organization: Regular and clear communication to organizations and individuals shows that leaders are maintaining a close understanding of the situation. Effective leaders will share what they know and admit what they don't know. Communication that is direct, frank, honest, but bounded with some level of confidence and optimism, will be more credible, believable, and encouraging to team members, than having a leader display an unsupported extreme level of self-assurance.^{[13][14]} Employees need to hear from leadership at town-hall type activities so they can get the latest understanding of the current situation from their leader, as well as share some of those things that are keeping them up at night. Additionally, during these discussions it is paramount that a leader can regularly articulate the importance of the team's work to provide a higher meaning to employee efforts.

Leadership style: Studies have found that abusive behavior of leaders can result in both stress and burnout for their direct reports. The study showed that using transformational leadership at a higher level resulted in reduced levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion for the employee.^{[15][16]} Utilizing a transformational leadership model in working with and managing direct reports continues to be found to have advantages, and this is especially true over the last year. Also, an empathetic leader is needed, wanted, and perceived as a better leader under stressful situations. Along these lines, a charismatic leadership style is also more effective in dynamic situations.^[17] However, there are caveats to a charismatic leadership style in that extraversion and openness are seen as good, but agreeableness can be seen as a negative.

Decision making and utility of teams: During crisis management, it is key that leaders involve the pause-assess-anticipate-act cycle. After consulting with trusted sources, leaders do need to take decisive action. Depending on the situation, the implementation of a network of teams can be more effective than a top down and strong command and control approach from a small set of leaders.^{[18][19]} In an unanticipated crisis with a high level of uncertainty, leaders must face and respond to challenges that are poorly understood and be empowered with the authority to make decision in specific areas, with the realization that mistakes could occur. Collaboration across different teams should be encouraged, as well as transparency across the network of teams.

Character in a crisis: In routine emergencies, experience may be the most valuable quality for a leader, but in high stress situations, character (or gap in character) will also be elevated through people's actions. Studies have shown some correlation between job pressure and increased unethical behavior by leaders and employees.^[20] A leader must be motivated and have a clear purpose that guides their decision making. As the team has experienced many challenges during prolonged crisis, the value of celebrating small victories and success stories should not be minimized, since these can help to lift spirits for both leadership and all employees and highlight the impact of everyone's efforts, and benefit the entire organization.^[21]

Developing Trusting Relationships with your team and staff

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to increased levels of anxiety, depression, grief, fear, and stress among staff, including among leaders. The shared fear has led some colleagues to become closer, more "intimate," but has increased the need for psychological safety (i.e., absence of interpersonal fear). This fear and anxiety combined with a complete change in work and life routines have resulted in different priorities for employees in the post-pandemic world than before the pandemic.

Leaders should prioritize building trusting relationships, social cohesion, and purpose among their team. An opportunity to build trust is to increase the frequency of one-on-one communications to connect to people on a personal level, ask them how they are doing and how you can help. Leaders should facilitate group communications to give people a sense of social cohesion. Continue to reiterate the mission of the group and

their role in it to ensure the team has a sense of purpose, and ensure roles and responsibilities are clear. Leaders should recognize a bias toward control being a natural response to crisis, such that reaffirming peoples' roles becomes even more critical. Be intentional, scheduling time to work on these things.

Being sensitive to how different employees feel and tailoring your message is an imperative during turbulent times.

- Employees feeling confused: give them facts and clear instructions,
- Employees feeling worn down: give them clarity on long term plans, positive stories, and chances to connect,
- Employees feeling sense of loss: give them a new vision for the future and a chance to grieve.

Trusting relationships between leaders and teams is paramount in any circumstance to produce high performing teams. However, the ability of leaders to build trusting relationships is more readily apparent and critical during turbulent times with complex and fluid situations, such as during the national labs 2020-2021 experiences. Leaders who have not already demonstrated the ability to build trusting relationships with their teams through effective communication, personal connection, and candor in normal times are unlikely to develop this ability during a stressful period. In order to prepare leaders for prolonged dynamic situations and resulting stressful times, during normal times Labs should ensure leaders are prepared to:

- Establish Credibility: Communicate more than they think they need to – transparency, honesty, and reassurance is important to build relationships,
- Build Closeness: Assess each employee's emotional needs and respond to each employee with a high level of emotional intelligence,
- Act with Compassion: Effective leaders are in tune with how their teams are feeling based on what they're experiencing. Leaders must also be able to show emotional vulnerability (when appropriate) to their teams in order for their teams to respond in a reciprocal fashion and to communicate openly.

Inclusion provides the basis for leadership agility and organizational resilience

The 2020-2021 pandemic brought many challenges to the DOE national lab complex; these challenges were amplified by concurrent national discussions on the role of diversity, inclusion, and equity across society, with some focus on training within the labs. The team explored how a culture of inclusion might support leaders in particularly dynamic periods of national crisis. In our literature review and in conversations with leaders, we found inclusive cultural attributes provide a strong base for leadership agility and organizational resilience. Additionally, we find that times of crisis provide an opportunity to practice and strengthen inclusion in workplaces.

McKinsey's research has shown that diversity can help organizations increase innovation, reconsider entrenched ways of thinking, and improve financial performance.^[22] Organizations can take full advantage of the perspectives of a diverse workforce only if leaders and employees enjoy a sense of inclusion. McKinsey defines inclusion as, "the degree to which an individual feels that their authentic selves are welcomed at work, enabling them to contribute in a meaningful and deliberate manner."

Amongst the various approaches to building an inclusive culture, these practices pay off during a crisis:

1. Build more representative teams by setting rising targets for underrepresented groups and tracking performance recruiting and promotion processes. Appoint "bias-watchers," respected leaders who are trained to call out unconscious bias in talent-related discussions. In a crisis, not all employees will have the same experience; a culture of representative teams will assure the diversity of experiences are considered by leadership.
2. Include all employees in conversations about inclusion. Many organizations have "Allies" programs to encourage all employees to help combat microaggressions; such "ally" relationships will be invaluable during times of turmoil.
3. Leaders adopt and model inclusive behaviors such as hosting open and honest conversations about people's unique identities; calling out microaggressions when they see them; and creating opportunities

for connectivity, which can improve retention. These personalization and engagement actions are critical for a basis of trust during a crisis.

4. Commit to education on diversity, inclusion, and bias by attending trainings and reading the latest research, just as leaders would approach any other core responsibility at work. A practice of learning and adapting is the very definition of agility.

During a crisis, a culture of inclusive leadership can address immediate employee needs by building on trust. Leaders can take these four actions to build on existing trust:^[23] Make it credible (listen to your people; communicate regularly); Make it feasible (prioritize timely action rather than waiting for transformative solutions); Make it sustainable (develop a plan to embed changes beyond the crisis); and Make it personal (Find creative ways to put employees in charge of their own journeys. Not everyone's experience is the same, so leaders will need to tailor their response.)

The oft-forgotten irony of crises is that an organization's culture of inclusion can actually be strengthened during a crisis.^[24] The increased rate of change and need for constant communication provides many touchpoints that leaders can utilize for longer-term inclusion gains. Working through a crisis provides a unique platform to emphasize and reinforce the institution's purpose by connecting people to something bigger than themselves and helping them contribute more fully. Building new approaches for collaboration that will persist beyond the immediate, while nurturing curiosity and learning establishes new connectivity and emphasizes a philosophy of community. Finally, assuring that new policies promote equitable treatment of all workers, while creating conditions for workers to speak up and confidently make professional concerns and personal needs known, makes visible an institution's stated goals of inclusion.

Weaving learnings into leadership development, training and succession programs

Succession planning is a critical element of leadership agility. Human capital is more important than ever, with fewer physical boundaries for the future workforce, and will be the primary factor in sustaining competitive advantage. Continuity in leadership is vital in facilitating the development of long-term objectives and even more relied upon during a significant event or crisis. Perhaps most importantly, an enterprise must maintain resilience against unanticipated turnover or events, so that no single person or small group of persons constitute an irreplaceable consolidation of experience or knowledge fundamental to the ongoing interest of the organization.

We studied recommended practices for succession planning using several different avenues. These included researching academic journals and professional society publications, hearing first-person perspectives from senior leaders within the DOE complex (including past and present lab directors), and performing interviews that included a critique of observed practices (both commendable and poor) as well as experiential-based suggestions for improved succession planning outcomes.

First, succession strategies are a requirement for any best-in-class organization and are not optional. This was the unanimous opinion of those interviewed, as it was uniformly endorsed as a best practice for organizational resiliency. Next, the succession planning process should be formal, systemic, systematic, tailored, and experientially-based. It should not be resigned to a once-a-year replacement review cycle for the highest managerial levels of the organization. Instead succession *management* should be employed, not merely being replacement planning,^[26] so that beyond identification of successor candidates, development objectives and timelines with applicable mentoring are established and tracked for all levels of leaders. Basing the readiness of a successor on experiential targets/goals obtained is wholly encouraged and leadership in the midst of a crisis affords a seldom available proving ground for confirming higher leadership potential or further goal development. Finally, a best practice is to weave succession management into regularly occurring strategic planning sessions, as central to the firm's operational continuity as a product or service portfolio.

Recommended Actions

As the national lab complex moves forward in the post-pandemic work environment, likely with highly expanded remote work, each lab should consider how our existing leadership training, D&I perspective, and communication norms need to be consciously adapted to ensure our leadership is agile and prepared for future unexpected events with strong, inclusive and high performing teams. Based upon the research and learnings in

this report, it is imperative that the following elements of leadership agility are in place and emphasized on an institutional basis. In order to achieve these attributes on an institutional basis, we recommend the following actions should be followed.

- *Shared Leadership Imperatives:* The guiding principles behind leadership imperatives tying into leadership agility include knowing your leadership style, communicating effectively, seeking regular and direct feedback, and paying attention to self care. To achieve these principles, the national labs should put the following actions in place.
 1. Organizationally define and expect universal core leadership behaviors for team members. These would clearly capture the needs for behavior-based expectations (the “how part of leadership”), and not just an outcome-based approach to defining a successful leader.
 2. Assess leadership effectiveness through annual 360 degree survey. These anonymous annual surveys might include the following areas: Leader Courage; Integrity and Trust, Communication; Owner Mindset (value creation and program delivery); Protecting People, Community, and Environment; and Respect for People and Team. The results of the survey provide each leader with an opportunity to examine areas needing improvement and those areas that are strong, and further tailor their development plan. Furthermore, at an organizational level, senior leaders will be able to understand the development needs for specific staff and help address areas of common institutional concern across the lab.
- *Trusting Relationships:* Trust is the foundation for most effective and long-term relationships. It is equally important for there to be solid trust between a leader and their staff. The following recommendations help leaders recognize their blind spots pertaining to soft-skills and help the national labs attract and retain talent, while delivering on the missions.
 3. Utilize the Harvard Business Review emotional intelligence assessment to help determine blind spots for both individual leaders and the organization as a whole. This online survey is free and can be located here: <https://hbr.org/2015/06/quiz-yourself-do-you-lead-with-emotional-intelligence>. After the leader completes the survey, a score and report are produced. The leader should reflect on their reported emotional intelligence, but the full benefit can be gained by having the self-perception results compared with someone else’s perspective, via completion of the survey as framed from the other person’s perspective. The leaders would pick a trusting colleague with whom they have an open and honest relationship. After survey completion, the leader has a private discussion with that person to compare the results and discuss potential reasons for incongruence.
 4. Demonstrate trust in workforce by piloting, then implementing, options that provide desired work location flexibility. Over the last 16 months many of the national laboratory employees have been able to demonstrate their ability to effectively deliver on their responsibilities and commitments, in spite of limitations to being onsite daily and taking on the added homelife demands due to the schools being closed, for example. As the national labs resume more normal operations, consideration for flexible work arrangements should be given to staff who can successfully achieve mission objectives irrespective of work location. Furthermore, the ability to have select functions work some part remotely will be seen as an added benefit and could help with talent attraction and retention.
- *Systemically-inclusive Culture:* The guiding principles behind how an inclusive culture ties into leadership agility include developing policies and practices that make inclusion systemic, committing to education on diversity, inclusion, and bias, expecting and modeling inclusive behaviors, building representative and diverse teams, and ensuring diverse voices are heard. In order for the national labs to achieve these guiding principles, the following actions are needed.
 5. Provide and utilize multiple paths for direct feedback to lab leadership. This includes providing means for employees and leaders to provide feedback about anything through surveys, councils, and trusted confidants. All employees should feel their voice is heard.
 6. Always act on credible feedback received and communicate why an action was not taken. This should always be expected. It is not enough to receive the feedback with no action. All should feel their voice is heard and some action is taken, even if that action is an explanation of why no action was taken.
- *Leadership Development Ethos:* The guiding principles about how a leadership development ethos leads to leadership agility are to prevent single points of failure, develop short-term and long-term succession

strategies, and to take advantage of high stress scenarios. The strength of the DOE national lab complex lies with its workforce. In order for the laboratories to be resilient, it is critical that succession management play a central role in the evolution of the science pursued at the labs. A key action that encourages leadership agility is the following.

7. Utilize crisis situations and special projects to identify emerging leaders with desirable core leadership behaviors and provide aspiring talent with leadership opportunities. Never waste a crisis. Succession management is key to supporting the development of all leaders. This includes having a centralized tracking mechanism of clear competencies for each leadership role, not letting hiring practices get in the way of long-term succession strategies, and utilizing performance appraisals to turn into development actions on performance plans.

Summary

In summary, we return to the definition of leadership agility: *The ability to effectively lead, manage, and inspire your team during turbulent times and complex situations*. The success of the DOE national laboratory complex of achieving and delivering on their national and global mission certainly hinges on employing and retaining agile leaders, both now and in the future. As we have learned throughout 2020-2021, the nature of work and the national collective emotion and environment will always have times of instability. The recommendations given herein serve to enhance and provide a pathway for developing and maintaining an agile leadership environment by focusing on shared leadership imperatives, trusting relationships, systemically-inclusive cultures, and leadership development ethos. We believe the items recommended can only result in the national labs maintaining their ability to retain and attract the best talent in the nation so that the Department of Energy's missions can be successfully achieved.

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