

Wider Perspectives 5

Making and taking fresh tracks

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Making and taking fresh tracks

Hardships often prepare ordinary people for extraordinary destinies. CS Lewis

Covid and its ramifications have pressed the re-set button for many facets of our lives and given us plenty of agency around our futures. It has also underlined the importance of having wider perspectives that help us make the best choices.

The unprecedented situation led us to publish a thought-piece series, titled [Wider Perspectives](#)ⁱ, on this drawn-out saga with its distinct acts - akin to a Shakespearean play - with plotline twists, big morality themes and lessons to be learned.

With four acts already played out, we think it's a time to write a denouement. There is something of a final act feel to Covid, even though it is giving us a very long goodbye.

Covid at three

Three years on, Covid has spectacularly revealed the connections and vulnerabilities inherent in our world, suggesting some adaptations are required for us to survive and flourish:

- How to use a burning platform to quickly adapt, witnessed by the speed of vaccine development and movement to remote working
- How to take the systemic perspective – seeing the complex global ecosystem with its multiple connections, including in the health, public policy, social behaviours and work areas
- How to deal with life just happening to us, with its rough justice and a wide spread of Covid outcomes. Hardships are indeed preparing ordinary people for extraordinary destinies

These observations come through *zooming in* to our personal lives and then *zooming out* on this disrupted world in disarray. This process can enhance our critical thinking and widen our perspectives, and therein lies a silver lining.

And nowhere is this truer than around the future and purpose of work, where we have the chance to find and take fresh tracks towards a better future.

Work design

While hybrid-work arrangements are considered the new normal, no-one is claiming to have got it right yet. We have some very tricky balancing acts to master. Starting with home and office, but also digital and in-person communication, informal apprenticeship and structured training, as well as autonomy and conformity. And in finding a sweet spot, organisational context is everything.

Dan Pink's thesis in 'Drive'ⁱⁱⁱ provides some important perspective and new tracks. That the secret to high performance and satisfaction at work is humans need to seek control in our lives; to get better at

something important; and to commit to the service of something larger than ourselves and in so doing finding belonging. The three words capturing this are autonomy, mastery and purpose.

These are the intrinsic motivations that can lead us to a fresh type of office. A *magnetic* place where we build the special social experiences that secure our mutual trust and catalyse a transition from simple teams to Superteamsⁱⁱⁱ. We need these 'magnetic office' to bring us together based on the principle that *we all do better when we all do better*.

The work zeitgeist is changing fast, as millennials become a larger cohort and demand more respect, inclusion and work/life integration. This calls for new organisations that are less hierarchical, more networked and versatile.

And they must provide leadership in various society-reflecting trends, particularly inclusion and diversity, refining organisational purpose and the elevated role of values at work. For this they will need to work hard at finding ways to build the critical social capital and trust required in a more digital world. Some *fresh tracks* have been made and are worth taking.

Purpose and sustainability

Mark Carney's work on purpose and values in 'Value(s)'^{iv} brings perspective here. He refers to the values-flattening problem in which the creep of emphasising financial value and putting a price on everything has blunted societies critical need for the values of solidarity and resilience, fairness and compassion. No-one thinks that money is everything, and Covid made us very conscious of that principle, but too often our behaviours in the market can suggest something different.

The culture of our times is increasingly about data and is summarised neatly in Drucker's principle: 'What gets measured gets managed'. But this is too simplistic, and we need to ensure that purpose and good behaviours show up in the process. The systems-thinking framework that Carney advocates is joined-up in paying full regard to the multiple moving parts that this implies. And it emphasises the intangible infrastructures needed in finance, like culture, collaboration and accountability.

We have a perfect place to apply this thinking in the net-zero climate-change ambitions that are so game-changing in industry, business, finance and across government. For investors this net-zero journey has started out as a big hairy audacious goal with light up-front due diligence but very heavy back-end-loaded future commitments. Fulfilling these commitments will require a joined-up response. The current measurement model must move on from the grip of the benchmark into a new balanced scorecard regime which respects systems-thinking principles. If you want something new, you must stop doing something old.

Measurement

We turn to Ayelet Fishbach's perspectives in 'Get it done'^v for our third area of fresh tracks to take. Her key framing for effective measurement is the triad: clear goals, holistic check-ins, open accountabilities. The clear goals need to be 'SMART' but by a more modern schema than the traditional set^{vi} in that they are systemic, multiple, agile, reflexive and transparent. In this systemic and multiple goals framework, the goals are often soft. The elements of change show up in the agile and reflexive check-ins and transparency shows up in the accountabilities.

Allowing for the holistic picture in all of this is complex. But the alternative of over-simplifying is vulnerable to gaming and misrepresentation (think greenwashing). Mitigating these hazards introduces the need for transparency and accountabilities to be protected, which in turn elevates the importance of strong organisational culture. Cultures that are accurately presented, authentic and widely bought into. This ensures the *doing* is far more powerful than the *saying* or, put another way, the performativity does not overtake the outcome. In practice, it removes the convenient bolthole of keeping to a net-zero pathway by selling fossil fuel stocks, but not moving the climate-change needle.

Covid as a unique catalyst

So what has Covid done for us? We suggest we have not let this crisis go to waste in three areas - work, purpose and measurement – and where pathways to better outcomes have emerged. And it has opened our eyes to leadership becoming less about what leaders achieve themselves and more about the sense of purpose imparted to colleagues and the actions they catalyse in pursuit of this objective. This supports the need for more transformational leadership that inspires colleagues to change expectations, perceptions and motivations to achieve common goals. This inverts the leadership pyramid into a ‘we’ control not an ‘I’ command and flattens it to enable a more flexible, seamless workplace.

Leadership in the post-Covid environment is a lot tougher. It carries new expectations and requires a new form of judgement to navigate uncertainty and complexity. And it has to be *zeitgeist friendly* with a different style that is more in tune, empowering, agile and humanistic. Most of all Covid has reminded us of the power of collaboration and its centrality in building and maintaining organisational social capital. We all do better, when we all do better together.

By Roger Urwin, co-founder of the Thinking Ahead Institute

ⁱ The [Wider Perspectives research](#) has been related to the wider aspects of the Covid period from 2020 to 2023.

ⁱⁱ Drive | Dan Pink

ⁱⁱⁱ A ‘Superteam’ in [TAI research](#) is a team which combines diverse talent and is unleashed by great culture and governance to achieve outstanding results

^{iv} Value(s) | Mark Carney

^v Get it done | Ayelet Fishbach

^{vi} SMART goals have generally been defined as ones that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/management/smart-goal/>