



Brands  
in *Motion*

# RETHINKING THE PURPOSE AND MEANING OF LEADERSHIP

How introspection and determination are unlocking new ways to lead



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“TELL ME MORE”

# OVERVIEW

Leaders have traditionally been celebrated for their boldness and confidence, for pursuing their vision with relentless focus, and for never showing doubt or uncertainty. To be vulnerable was to be weak.

This has changed.

The profound upheavals of the past year have prompted deep introspection in leaders about their role in a changed world. A full 86% of leaders say they've become more introspective during this time — even as external crises have raged. By looking within, leaders are examining their own consciences and convictions with new levels of honesty and vulnerability. More than half say they have deepened their awareness of their personal fears, limitations, defenses or impulses, and they are working to identify gaps between their intentions and actions.

From this introspection comes a new mindset, new behaviors, and new ways to lead in 2021. Each of these is critically linked to the ways businesses and organizations show up and impact the world around them — from tuning in and acting on employee concerns and aspirations, to the need for leaders to go beyond traditional constituencies to engage a wider community of stakeholders than ever before.

After a year of profound upheavals, **86%** of leaders have become more introspective.

**71%** of leaders say articulating personal core values is more important than it was a year ago.

**69%** say stakeholder engagement is one of the most important leadership behaviors for 2021.



**Leaders want to know what they don't know, and are prepared to take on the complexity of our time, pairing clear-eyed understanding of the challenges with a firm resolve to make an impact.**



This research delves into some of the attributes, behaviors and “how-tos” that have emerged as leaders navigate new waters.

01

## Giving voice to personal values.

**71%** say articulating personal core values is more important than it was a year ago. It is central to their evolving mindset in approaching the new environment.

02

## “Always-on” self-reflection.

Self-reflection is traditionally a personal luxury, a moment to step away and focus inward. Today’s environment requires a new muscle, a more dynamic and constant state of self-awareness. How do leaders go about it? Leaders demonstrated a **three-part approach** to activate a more constant state of introspection: seeking self-awareness in realtime, reflecting on their beliefs, and acknowledging their own actions — how these reverberate throughout, and beyond, their organization.

03

## Listen, learn, engage.

**69%** say stakeholder engagement is one of the most important leadership behaviors for 2021, and **74%** say being collaborative with stakeholders is more important to them than it was a year ago. The starting point: listening. **71%** are putting more focus on learning and engagement with women, Black and Indigenous people and People of Color in employee and community settings.

04

## A “determined” mindset, leaning into change.

Moving forward in 2021, leaders expressed a mix of positive and negative emotions — anxiety and sadness, as well as optimism and hopefulness. But the **most common response: “determined.”** They want to know what they don’t know and are prepared to take on the complexity of our time, pairing clear-eyed understanding of challenges with a firm resolve to make an impact.

# Rethinking the Purpose and Meaning of **LEADERSHIP**

## How introspection and determination are unlocking new ways to lead

Profound upheaval has touched all our lives this year. A global health emergency has brought profound and sweeping change. Compounding political and social events destabilized communities and, particularly in the US, the struggle for justice for Black Americans reached a new peak. Much has been written about the societal events and transformation of our lives — how we work, attend school, receive medical care and connect with the people we care about.

Less has been said about a shift that is gathering force among those whose task is to lead their organizations through these turbulent waters and find the way forward in a transformed world.

A year ago, our conception of business leadership centered around attributes like decisiveness, stoicism, expertise, fearlessness and certainty. Leaders were expected to have all the answers. To be vulnerable was to be weak.

This has changed. The day-to-day impact of the events of 2020 on their organizations, their communities and their loved ones has led business leaders around the world to reconsider their priorities and what it means to be a good leader in a time of crisis.

**89%**

**of leaders believe purpose is becoming as important as financial results.**

**A year ago, our conception of business leadership centered around attributes like decisiveness, stoicism, expertise, fearlessness and certainty. Leaders were expected to have all the answers. To be vulnerable was to be weak.**

**This has changed.**

In January, WE Communications surveyed over 300 C-suite executives, senior-level managers, and key decision-makers in the United States, the UK and Singapore to gauge the depth of this change. We discovered that “leadership” — how it is defined, how it is lived — is also in the midst of significant transformation:

**89%** of leaders believe purpose is becoming as important as financial results.

**89%** say engaging with issues that affect their employees is a moral obligation.

**86%** say they’ve become more introspective.

**78%** believe they must lead with greater empathy.

**71%** say articulating their personal values has become more important.

**69%** believe learning from their employees, customers and communities is critical in the coming year.

**More than half** report a deeper awareness of their fears, limitations, defenses and impulses.

Through this research, we have uncovered the emergence of new ways to think, act and lead. In this report, we explore these new behaviors and how they are changing the way businesses and organizations influence — and are influenced — by the employees they depend on, and the communities and customers they serve.

## THE LEADERS

WE surveyed 304 C-Suite leaders and decision-makers that prioritize purpose leadership in:

The U.S., U.K. and Singapore

A mix of for-profit, nonprofit and government organizations

Companies with 100+ employees and \$50 million or more



A Deeper

# LOOK WITHIN


We have traditionally celebrated leaders for their boldness and confidence, for pursuing their vision with relentless focus, and for never showing doubt or uncertainty.

But this façade is cracking under the strain of COVID-19, and the economic and social upheaval that we have all been living through. In its place something much more personal is beginning to emerge — an approach to leadership that is rooted in real-time self-reflection, self-awareness and honesty.

It begins with a new emphasis on introspection. Nearly nine out of 10 of the leaders WE surveyed reported that the dislocation of the past year has led them to take time to think more deeply about what motivates them as they seek greater self-knowledge of their values and where they find meaning.

**Nearly 9 out of 10 of the leaders WE surveyed reported that the dislocation of the past year has led them to take the time to think more deeply about what motivates them as they seek greater self-knowledge of what they value and where they find meaning.**

With this turn toward introspection, business leaders are looking more closely at their own behavior and the impact it has on their organizations. Most leaders we surveyed told us they have gained a better understanding of their own fears, impulses, defenses and limitations. Nearly two-thirds are acknowledging new ways that their actions reverberate through their organizations.



As leaders come to terms with their own human vulnerability, they are becoming more open to the vulnerability of others. They're more willing to acknowledge and address the gaps in their own experience by broadening the world of people they engage with and listen to. According to our survey, **78%** of leaders believe that leading with empathy is more important than it was a year ago, and **74%** are more committed to working collaboratively.

**More than half of leaders** report a deeper awareness of their fears, limitations, defenses and impulses.

This more connected and human approach is accompanied by a growing awareness that purpose is critical, and alignment between personal beliefs and company brand and values is foundational to successful leadership. According to our research, **89%** of respondents say customer demands that brands have a positive impact on society will continue to grow. **71%** believe that to meet these demands, it has become more important in the past year to define and articulate their own core beliefs and elevate their own voices.

How do CEOs and senior decision-makers feel about embracing these new ways of understanding what it means to lead? When asked to describe their emotional frame of mind, they expressed a mix of positive and negative emotions — anxiety and sadness, combined with optimism and hope. But they chose one feeling more than any other: “determined.” Clearly, they are gearing up for the complexity and ambiguity of our uncertain time as they move forward to tackle the challenges that lie ahead with sensitivity, openness and resolve.

**89%**

say customer demands that brands have a positive impact on society will continue to grow.





# REACHING OUT

## to Others

COVID-19, and related economic uncertainty and concurrent social unrest, has connected us to our common humanity and interdependence. Although the impacts of these crises haven't been equitable, they have unlocked a deeper understanding of our responsibilities to one another.

For business leaders, the impact of economic and social stress is front and center every day as it plays out in the lives of their employees. For more than a year, frontline employees have confronted grave health and safety hazards. People who commuted to offices every day now work from home. In the US, Black and Indigenous employees and employees of color have experienced the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on their families and their communities, and searing pain and violence due to racism. Parents have struggled to navigate these challenges while home-schooling their kids. Economic uncertainty has employees at all levels worried about their jobs and their futures.

Given all this, it's not surprising that leaders are extremely concerned about their employees, rating "employee well-being" a higher priority than "economic outlook." But the research also indicates a deeper shift in the ways CEOs and senior managers are listening to their employees, and their willingness to take a hard, honest look at their own behaviors and biases. According to our survey, **56%** of leaders are working to develop a deeper understanding of how their actions affect others in "real time," not just retrospectively.

**71%**

of leaders in the US and UK report engaging with women and communities of color is a top priority in 2021.

**56%**

of leaders are working to develop a deeper understanding of how their actions affect others in real time — not just retrospectively.

**It's not enough just to listen to employees' concerns — leaders must learn how to internalize what they are hearing so they can anticipate how their actions and decisions might impact employees in negative ways.**

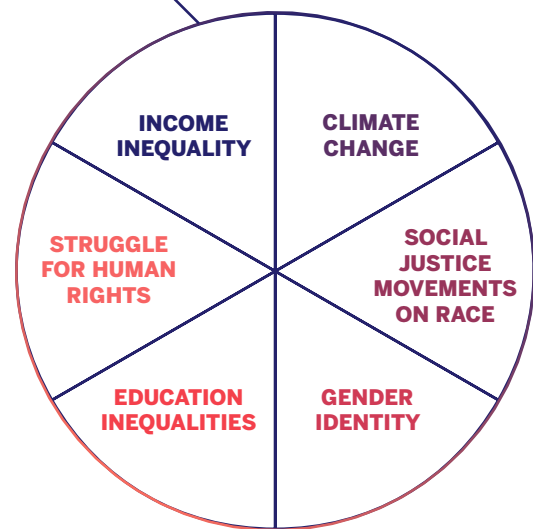
To put it another way, today's business leaders are recognizing that it's not enough just to listen to their employees' concerns. They must learn how to internalize what they are hearing so they can anticipate how their actions and decisions might impact employees in negative ways.

This can be a challenge for leaders whose instincts lean toward certainty and who are not accustomed to being questioned. However, our data shows that they are embracing new levels of openness and humility, and are more willing to engage in difficult conversations and listen without defensiveness. There is a growing recognition that to make a situation right, they must first acknowledge that there has been a wrong — a wrong for which they may share responsibility.

This new sensitivity extends to customers and communities, as COVID-19 and events of 2020 brought into sharp relief the unequal impacts of COVID-19, and inherent inequities built into our culture and economy. This has led many leaders to acknowledge systemic discrimination with greater urgency and commitment. Particularly, we see evidence of this shift among US and UK leaders, 71% of whom report that engaging with women and communities of color is a top priority in 2021.

**Leaders also report that a broader circle of influences are playing a more significant role in their thinking than ever before.** They have been influenced by social and economic issues including income inequality, gender identity, climate change, education inequalities, social justice movements on race and the struggle for human rights.

To engage deeply with such a broad spectrum of distinct and disparate voices who bring vital —but sometimes conflicting— priorities can be overwhelming. Therefore, an inside-out approach that begins with a commitment to self-reflection, self-awareness and honesty is crucial. Meaningful engagement becomes possible when leaders are clear about their own core values and priorities — only then can they absorb feedback while staying true to their beliefs.





# TAKING ACTION


## to Foster Connection and Change

The real question, of course, is as CEOs and decision-makers internalize this new understanding of leadership, how are they externalizing when leading their organizations?

Our data points to a new commitment to drive positive change through sustained action. It's no longer enough to simply write a check. In 2021, leaders believe donating money is one of the least effective ways to advance the issues they believe in and support the communities they serve.

Instead, they ranked their ability to facilitate dialogue across divided groups as the most important step they can take to foster positive change in society. This reflects a growing belief that by connecting and empowering employees and community members, ensuring that everyone is heard, leaders can be part of the process of unlocking the ideas, insights and wisdom that will be required to build a stronger, more equitable society and economy.

**Donating money is one of the least effective ways to advance the issues they believe in and support the communities they serve. Leaders ranked their ability to facilitate dialogue across divided groups as the most important step they can take to foster positive change in society.**



Our research also found a widespread desire to play a bigger role in addressing the challenges of the digital divide, which have become much starker during COVID-19, as schools switched to remote learning and remote work thrived. In 2021, top priorities include investing in technology initiatives, collaborating with educational institutions, job retraining and hiring from underserved groups.

**LEADERS' TOP PRIORITIES:**

Investing in technology initiatives

Collaborating with educational institutions

Job retraining

Hiring from underserved groups



# “TELL ME MORE”

Ultimately, what is most notable in this survey is how it highlights the emergence of a new mindset among the world’s business leaders. This mindset has been forged in the crucible of disruption, uncertainty and tragedy. In response, business leaders have looked within, discovered a renewed sense of purpose, a new appreciation for listening and sensitivity, and a new determination to work for change through sustained and open engagement.

As a result, today’s leaders are letting go of old assumptions about the primacy of their own certainty and experience. Through introspection, we see instead that leaders now have a deeper desire to know what they don’t know, and are ready to take on the complexity of our time with firm resolve to create a world that is more fair and just.

For business leaders in 2021, the phrase of the year is “tell me more.” Leaders who continually return to this mantra will ensure they engage in more meaningful and impactful ways.

Leaders now have a deeper desire to know what they don’t know and are **ready to take on the complexity** of our time with a firm resolve to create a world that is more fair and just.

# **WE** | Brands in ***Motion***

WE/YouGov  
Survey fielded January 2021  
304 purpose leaders  
US/UK/Singapore

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