



What COVID-19 Taught Me

Federica Taccogna

Senior Managing Director – FTI Consulting

Introduction



Nothing I studied, read or experienced prepared me for the impact of COVID-19 on our lives.

When it hit, we all had to invent a way of being and dealing with it. Personally, and from a business point of view.

When it all started, I had extremely diverse teams spread across countries that I had to safely repatriate, reassure about the future, maintain operative and motivate to keep delivering.

I had clients with critical business needs that needed to be fulfilled. These needs included fighting crime, and the option to pause did not exist. We had to create new ways of existing in business and delivering.

Whilst it has been a shock, I cannot help feeling, though, that the experience is teaching me a lot about leadership and beyond it.

This is my very personal take on it...

I hope you enjoy the read, Federica.

Life Lessons

Telling When The Time Had Come For That Difficult Decision

I did not want it. I did not want our lives to change. The threat of strong limitations to civil liberties and personal freedom scared me. But there was no time or space for my personal weaknesses.

I knew that pulling resources back from client sites and countries would have meant disruption, potentially loss of revenue. And with different governments taking different measures, it was difficult to predict what would have happened, when, and where.

Judging that right time was an exercise in self-control and self-management. Recent events have reminded me of the importance of these qualities.

Finding Answers To Questions We Had Never Asked Before

For example, a Portuguese national who is employed by a UK firm and regularly resides in the UK but has a family in Portugal and is 'posted' on a long-term project in Sweden. Which rules and needs take priority? Those of the employer? Or the personal desire to see family? Do I ask them to work from the UK? Or do I give in to the request to travel home? What if then the borders of one country re-open and not that of the other, and I cannot send them back to the client?

This is just one example of the many unprecedented questions we all had to face. Finding answers required a fine balance between listening to concerns, keeping focus on the end goal and thinking creatively.

As we negotiated those last plane tickets out of the countries in which we were and navigated the quarantine rules so that no-one remained stuck in a place that would cause inconvenience, we talked a lot, and acted fast. It worked for us.

Crystal Ball Gazing

Leading, to me, means telling my teams 'come follow me, the road is safe in this direction'. Kind of tricky at a time when even I did not know what the road look like. Like most of us, I had never been on this path. I had to muster a credible image of certainty, and open up the road, where one did not exist.

For example, when countries started to go into lockdown, my teams were conducting critical regulatory work that required them to be other than in the UK, and to be with physically with clients every day. My clients asked me whether we would be able to continue to provide support, despite the need to retreat into our houses. I said yes.

And then, in no time and almost out of nothing, we created the IT infrastructure that allowed us to

conduct regulatory visits and investigations entirely remotely, across jurisdictions and despite the less than state of the art technology of some organisations. I smiled as I watched it happened, as the suggestion of even simpler digitalisation of the process had been in 'normal' times dismissed as utopian.

It taught me that inspiring others comes from within, from measured confidence, rather than from actual control over every aspect of the situation. From levelheadedness not boastfulness.

He Who Does Not Trust Enough, Will Not Be Trusted

And so, I said, 'we go' and they went. I said, 'we will make it' and they made it happen. I am lucky to have the trust of my teams. I have discovered a pride for them that is much more profound than I ever knew.

I choose to believe that the reason why I have their trust is because they have mine.

What happened also shows how powerful our resolve is when the effort is truly concerted. In normal times, despite our claims for teamwork, the temptation to disagree and to make our slightly divergent (but not that much!) opinions heard is often irresistible. This way of working has taught me how much of the 'it is impossible' is a mental barrier rather than a real one.

Keeping The Situation From Worsening

For some reasons, an imperative was clear in my mind since the beginning – keep it going. Work gives us a sense of purpose, worth and security. This is more important than ever at a time when everything around us changes at an unprecedented pace. And it is my personal view that we have a duty to keep the economy alive, to protect our collective futures.

I made a point to keep everyone busy, even busier than earlier. The time saved on travel, quickly became a time to get to those business development activities we always put in the backburner, to get to know clients better, to offer additional or alternative services.

Managing performance, and underperformance, remotely is not easy. The challenges of giving negative, albeit constructive, feedback on a video call are obvious. We had to embrace them, though, in the interest of keep the machine moving.

“Overall, it took caring. And it made me realise not only how much I care about my team, but also how much my team members care for one another.”

Keeping Connected

Teams (And Skype, and Zoom...)

My work has always been global, and I am not new to it happening over the phone. I have somehow perceived this forced virtual connection has somehow deeper than the 'older' virtual way.

There is no substitute for travelling, experiencing cultures, meeting people in the flesh. This forced virtual way however has shown me how much being present to the task, supporting our teams and clients, talking to them, laughing with them, means. No matter the medium.

I am not the only person to have said they felt that relationships seemed to have become deeper in a strange, unexpected way, with physical distance.

I have also found it that we all, collectively, cut through the unnecessary much more easily these days. We go straight to the point. And we more readily praise one another. I have always been an advocate of the approach – I now feel less of an outlier in supporting it.

Role of Gender

Does It Have Anything To Do With My Gender?

So, what do I conclude? COVID-19 took me by surprise, but I was not unprepared for it.

A recent [Forbes article](#) suggests that the leadership skills being proven as most successful in COVID-19 times are those most typically associated with female leaders – ‘collaboration, creativity, resourcefulness, being proactive, preventing crises or keeping them from getting worse, communicating, listening, strategic planning, authenticity, building trust, transparency, managing ambiguity, relationship-building, self-control, teamwork, focus on facts, responsibility’. (‘What’s The Surprising Leadership Lesson In The COVID-19 Crisis?’ Joan Michelson, ForbesWomen)

I have seen many successful men display these qualities, too. These are genderless talents. In normal times, however, they are sometimes pointed out as weaknesses, or as secondary skills to have. These anomalous times show us that it is perfectly fine, and even desirable, to have them.

Successful leadership happens even without these skills. But I am glad I had them available to me at this particular point in time.

And I therefore look back with gratitude to those struggles that built them and at the fact I had to work hard to get to where I am (not necessarily because I am a woman but because it is the process) because it meant developing resilience and creativity but also compassion.

As I reflect on it, however... one of my clients praised me for the assertiveness and determination with which I led a group of senior but rather indecisive individuals through some critical decisions in these times. I am surprised not to see the qualities mentioned in the list of ‘female’ leadership traits.

If I look at the young female talent in my teams, though, I am comforted. There is incredible diversity in them – from blunt and assertive to gregarious and nurturing. It is pleasing and refreshing to see that there isn’t a single female leadership model to which we all feel the need to conform. Or a male one. **As I watch my team perform every day, I am reminded that talent does not care for gender.**

Final Comments

Role Models

On day one of this strange new world, we decided to set up daily video calls in the morning. Then, each team quickly decided to set up their own set of calls with their client contacts. We then realised we needed 1:1s, management meetings, marketing meetings, group chats, side chats. In no time an entirely virtual world appeared around us and we molded to it.

At some point, one of my more junior team members told me they were grateful for the 'visual exposure' they

were receiving to the ways in which I and others operate. They told them they were learning more effectively from it.

I have been reminded, through this, that role models matter. That the younger generations look up to us and what we do shapes what they will do.

Uncharacteristically for me (is COVID-19 piercing through my extreme desire for privacy?) I need to share a personal feeling...

Staying Positive and a Personal Note...

One of the most ignored warnings as we climb the corporate ladder is that there is solitude at the top. I have felt that more than ever in this new way of working. Whilst I am being overcommunicated with, and my days are busier and longer than ever, I feel it. Everyone around me wants from me decisions, answers, direction, support, comfort. I have a duty to give certainty and I do it with enthusiasm, because I have chosen this path. The truth, however, is that it is incredibly draining.

I have always been of the opinion that mental wellbeing means various things to each of us. And these are all equally valid and worthy of respect. To me, it means staying positive. Through this, there has been for me a beacon of positivity and an incredibly solid rock. There for me, whilst facing the same. A welcome respite of cynicism, a safe space in which to distract myself with stochastic models and a glass of whiskey at the end of a long day. To the amazing man in my life, thank you. You make me **fearless**.