



Developing and Retaining Key Leadership Talent Post-Pandemic

About the Author



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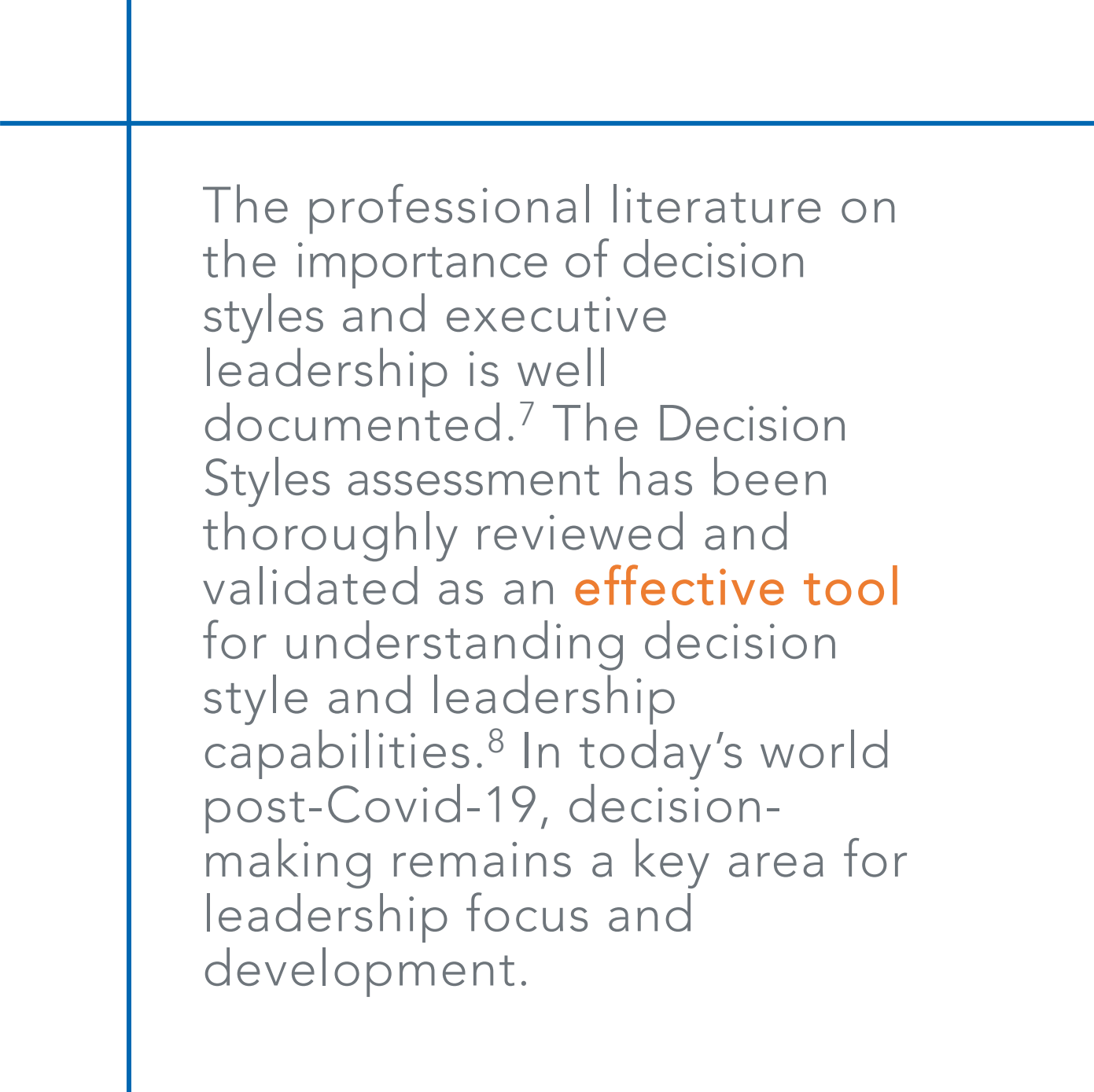
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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on how business is conducted today including the development and retention of talent. In many ways, it has caused a paradigm shift.¹ Because of the dramatic effects of the pandemic, workers remained at home and reframed their view of work and their place in it. They liked spending more time with family and the familiar surroundings of home without the pressure of morning traffic and the often-cold surroundings of the workplace. Working from home (WFH) had become the norm.²

The results of the Great Resignation and the new WFH pattern had leaders scrambling for retaining their current staff as well as finding individuals to fill gaps in management and skilled positions.³ Yes, things are improving; however, as the global recruiting firm Korn Ferry states, finding and retaining key talent remains troublesome.⁴ According to the global management consulting firm McKinsey, people want a sense of purpose and meaning in their work.⁵ As a result, today's business leaders in every industry find themselves in a sobering state of affairs due to a talent and leadership gap. The complex tasks related to managing staff remotely, especially in a global enterprise, are creating significant demands and in some cases a real crisis for businesses that have not prepared for these changes.

So, what are responsible leaders to do? In a comprehensive review by Harvard Business Review topics from managing the overall business, managing remote teams, and leading through the crisis are addressed.⁶ Each is of particular importance and needs focused leadership attention. One critical area of particular importance that remains is decision-making. Given the challenges post Covid-19, the new paradigm shift, and the great resignation, making sound decisions remains foundational to navigating through these new waters and the maintenance of a healthy organizational culture, engaged staff, and bottom-line profitability are critical.



The professional literature on the importance of decision styles and executive leadership is well documented.⁷ The Decision Styles assessment has been thoroughly reviewed and validated as an **effective tool** for understanding decision style and leadership capabilities.⁸ In today's world post-Covid-19, decision-making remains a key area for leadership focus and development.

Four Key Elements of Decision-Making

Four Key Elements

So, what are the elements of sound decision-making? There are four key elements of effective decision making and depending upon the situation, all are key and essential.



Decisive

Leaders utilize this decision style when the situation requires a direct, efficient, fast, and firm decision. This style is very action-focused, task-oriented, and not relationship-oriented. There is little dialogue at this stage and actions are made quickly with focus.

Flexible

Leaders utilize this style when speed and adaptability are required. They make decisions quickly and change course just as quickly to keep abreast of immediate, shifting situations. Listening is a key skill when using this style as the leader is highly consultative and responsive to the situation. This style is very focused on the relationship.



Hierarchic

Leaders using this style are highly analytical and strategically focused on the immediate task. They are experts in their fields and expect their decisions, once taken, to be final and to stand the test of time. They utilize complexity in making the final decision and are often highly intellectual. This is a task-focused style.



Integrative

Leaders using this style are open, participative, collaborative, and patient with others. They are very team-oriented and look for alternate viewpoints. They appreciate idea exchange and encourage involvement from the team when solving complex problems.



Case Study

Case Study

The Senior Vice President of Sales of a medium-sized, global company was feeling out of touch with her regional directors due to the pandemic. She was particularly concerned about how they were making decisions during this global crisis. So, she decided to do a deeper dive into their overall leadership capabilities and decision styles. Her team was located in Asia, South America, Europe, and the U.S. Her office was located in the U.S. Working collaboratively with the executive coach, we designed a developmental review process utilizing the assessment StyleView to determine each sales leader's decision style and then created a development plan for each that would enhance their strengths and develop their gaps for leadership and decision making. The review process was conducted over a three-month period.

Each sales leader received the StyleView assessment online. Once completed, a Zoom call was established with the executive coach to debrief the findings and answer any questions for the leader. Particular emphasis was placed on translating the findings contextually. In other words, relating the leader's decision style to their current local sales challenges and team dynamics. Once the debrief was completed, each sales leader received a development plan with their actual scores across each of the assessment dimensions. So, if they were low for instance in the Decisive dimension, the plan provided actions to improve their Decisive decision making. The plan provided actions across all four dimensions. Each sales leader was encouraged to share their plan with the Senior Vice President of Sales and work collaboratively on their plan.

These findings provided the Senior Vice President with valuable information regarding the decision and leadership styles of each key member of her team and created a dialogue for future development. She now had a better understanding of her team's strengths and needs, which had a dramatic effect on her capacity to remotely assist each member in their regions.

The Senior Vice President in our case study realized that her sales team was operating in a highly competitive environment with a wide array of challenges affecting sales such as operations, customer preference, and R&D in a global landscape that required levels of analyzing problems from multiple perspectives. She needed to understand the strengths of her team and their capacity to be flexible and open to change and the challenges they faced. She also needed to know their capacity to act with autonomy and independence given the challenges of the pandemic. Given the challenges of Covid-19, getting together on a regular basis was no longer an option. Understanding what “made them tick” as decision-makers and leaders was key in maintaining high levels of sales and business momentum during this crisis.

An organization does not need to operate globally or be functioning within the difficulties presented by a pandemic to require its leaders to be agile, continuous

learners. The need for agility depends on the level of complexity that each leader must face each day.

Understanding and organizational complexity demand that leaders must be open to the challenges and opportunities of the day, listen to those around them, learn from new input, and respond with a fresh perspective.

Leaders who understand this adjust their decision style to the situation that is required at that moment. In some cases, they need to make a quick decision while in others, a collaborative team approach is needed. This ability to adjust builds strong teams and cultures. Staff is attracted to leaders who can adjust their styles and engagement goes up. Consequently, these leaders can surround themselves with curious minds who examine problems from multiple perspectives before making final decisions. In 2001, Jim Collins stated that effective Level 5 leaders demonstrated high levels of humility and an awareness of their environment that is not based on their egos but on the greater good inside and outside the organizations they serve. These Level 5 leaders obviously had high levels of learning agility.⁹ Leaders who utilize all decision styles are acting in a Level 5 fashion.

Developing and retaining key talent requires a leader who learns. All learning leaders have a clear understanding of themselves and what makes them tick, and they display this self-awareness authentically and openly with others each day. If they know something, they say it. If they don't, they ask questions until they do. Learning leaders understand themselves; they make sound decisions and understand the importance of culture. When you have a leader who is a learner in your group or, more importantly, one who is responsible for leading the entire organization, you have someone who is in tune with what is important to the team, whether it is in skill-building, values, engagement, or growth. This leader knows when to make decisions quickly or when thought and collaboration are needed. They know because they are in the learning mode every day, mindful of the situation, and build the culture accordingly.

This initiative demands that the leaders spend the time and energy to explore and reflect on the experiences that have brought them both successes and failures, and then they must develop an honest understanding of who they are as individuals and leaders of others.

They need to look in the mirror and admit what they see. As the case study indicates, this leader understood the importance of understanding the decision styles of her team, without the benefit of day-to-day contact, which provided her with contextual clarity in each region of responsibility. It was the understanding of what made each of her team members tick that provided her with reassurance and confidence that the right decisions were being made in the changing world of competitive sales. It is this discovery process that all leaders should engage in on a regular basis personally and with their teams. Learning leaders understand the importance of the assessment process. They undergo a type of mini-review through feedback each day and through reflection gained from the experience. They know through humility that opening the door to learning is their best shot at success.



Much of this process is self-directed and driven by the internal motivation of the leader.

Learning can be a messy business with many ups and downs, obstacles, and vulnerabilities along the way, which is often the reason leaders do not venture into the assessment realm. Self-introspection requires humility and an internal drive to learn from feedback and experience, and it can be painful. Some leaders prefer not to know the unfavorable information, and, consequently, they rely on shields, barriers, and defense mechanisms to avoid the adverse reports. The learning initiative has no pathway to run with such leaders. This type of leadership can be devastating to the culture and those in it. In many ways, the pandemic resulted in leaders losing touch with their teams and the business suffered. The Senior Vice President understood this fundamental point and again looked to break through this challenge by bringing a level of clarity to how her team made decisions day-to-day and kept the team and business momentum going in the right direction.

Summary

Summary

The pandemic has taught a great deal about leadership and how to maintain team engagement and productivity during a time of crisis. As has been shown by the case study, when working in a virtual world, it is important to have a clear understanding of what makes each team member tick and their style of making decisions each day. When leaders feel they are out of touch with their team, anything can happen. When anything can happen, often negativity reigns, and the team and the business suffer. The Senior Vice President of Sales understood this and acted. She had a number of potential choices to make and chose to focus on decision-making, a wise choice given the implications and consequences of how decisions affect the business each day.

She engaged with an outside expert to determine the decision-making styles of each team member with development plans and the payoff was very positive for her and the team members. The outcome of this engagement was a better understanding of decisions being made in each region (context) and a higher level of dialogue engagement with the team. This all being done during the pandemic crisis is particularly noteworthy. Her decision to act and not allow the crisis to be in control said a great deal about her leadership, however, it also set sales on a path that also strengthened the sales culture. So, when the next crisis occurs the leader and team were ready to respond appropriately. A mindset of learning and not defensiveness was established that had long-term effects. That is good leadership.



In summary, the cost of not acting is high and can reach into the millions, depending on the organization.¹⁰ In addition to the financial burden, the consequences of a “wait and see approach” can elevate the costs even higher as it affects the team morale, operations, and future strategy. Therefore, thoughtful leadership together with development is essential to the overall success of the organization.

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