

WHITE PAPER

**LEADING THROUGH
UNCERTAINTY: THE
COVID EXECUTIVE
OFFICER**

NOVEMBER 2020

MEET THE NEW CEO: THE “COVID EXECUTIVE OFFICER”

Since March, companies and their employees have been riding a rollercoaster of uncertainty amidst an evolving public health crisis and volatile economic conditions. Through this uncertainty, the next generation of CEOs is rising to the challenge. These are the leaders at your company who can adapt to uncertainty, lead with a blend of



pragmatic action and emotional steadiness, and make tough business decisions. Here's how to spot these leaders, invest in their growth, and cultivate these talents in yourself.

ADAPT TO UNCERTAINTY

Imagine a continuum of leaders: on one end are leaders who are overwhelmed by the rapid pace of change and cannot decide on a path forward. On the other end are rigid and inflexible leaders, unwilling to change course no matter what. In the middle are effective CEOs, leading with vision and agility.

Effective CEOs are realistic about what's possible and aren't afraid to lean into the uncertainty.

These leadership styles are evident in return-to-work decision-making. Some companies may have initially set a return date for June, pushed it back to September, and are now targeting January or June 2021. Inflexible leaders who insist, “Everyone needs to be here,” are putting people in a position where they must risk their health for financial security. These leaders are going to lose talent and become less relevant over time. On the flip side, leaders who can't make any decision leave their team in limbo, furthering instability and undermining organizational confidence. They're going to lose talent, too.

Effective CEOs are realistic about what's possible and aren't afraid to lean into the uncertainty. They may have partially reopened offices to provide employees who cannot

work from home an alternative location, but they are not mandating a full return. They know that for employees to do their best work, they need an environment that prioritizes their well-being. These leaders are listening to employees who are at high-risk for COVID complications and providing reasonable accommodations.

EMBRACE PRAGMATIC ACTION

One common refrain I hear in 2020 is that “planning is impossible.” I get it, many of our business plans went out the window in March. We've had to adapt our business models to meet changing consumer behavior and evolving safety protocols. We don't know what future laws will look like either.

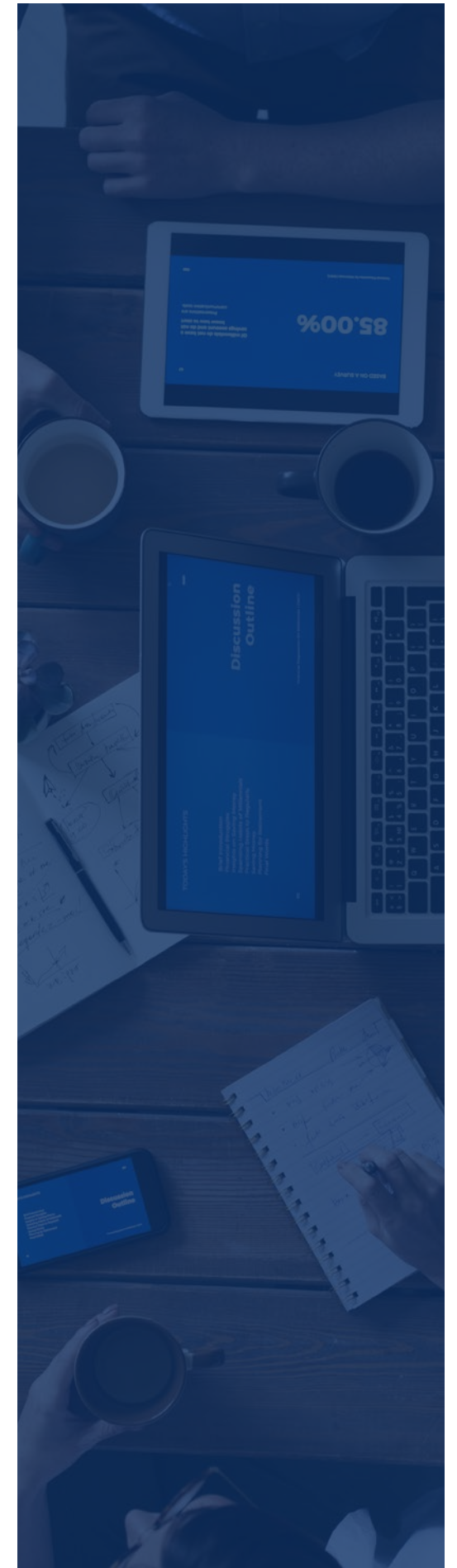


When will Congress pass a second round of economic relief legislation?



What will liability shields look like to protect businesses from workers suing them if they contract COVID while in the workplace?

Effective CEOs don't let fear, uncertainty, or doubt drive their decision-making. They don't stand still, waiting for final answers on strategic direction. Instead, they embrace pragmatic action: focusing on delivering value to clients and partners, placing intelligent bets, and operating in focused sprints with 30-, 60-, and 90-day goals. This approach gets down to basics and keeps businesses moving forward.



LEAD WITH EMOTIONAL STEADINESS

I define emotional steadiness as a calmness in the storm and a willingness to be transparent in communications. Uncertainty can cause managers to say less – or nothing at all – because they aren't sure what to say, and that's a mistake.

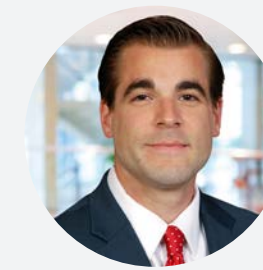


Keep the communication lines open and let employees know they can speak candidly with you about any concerns they're facing. Weekly one-on-one meetings are a key touch point for assessing how each employee is doing, whether they're on track to meet current goals, and how you can support their success.

MAKING TOUGH BUSINESS DECISIONS

You can be doing all the right things as a leader – checking in with employees, letting them know how great they're doing, or sending a DoorDash certificate for them to order lunch – but the state of the world right now means you'll still run into tough situations. By embracing pragmatic action and emotional steadiness, you'll be well positioned to lead your team through our current uncertain moment.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Sanborn serves as a Managing Director for McDermott + Bull with a focus on the aerospace and defense, industrial, automotive, and CPG sectors. As a former Navy Officer, Mark's experience leading in a range of unique environments brings a dynamic and valuable approach to his engagements. His clients have included a range of public, private, and international companies, such as AMETEK, Snap-On Tools, RUAG International, SpaceX, FOX Factory, and HBD Industries. His ability to build lasting partnerships with his clients is deeply rooted in his knowledge of company lifecycles, high-performing teams, diverse human capital, and growth.

Prior to McDermott + Bull, Mark served as a Senior Partner with Lucas Group Executive Search and Orion Talent, another national search firm. Prior to his civilian career, Mark was commissioned as a Surface Warfare Officer in the U.S. Navy onboard the USS Germantown LSD-42 and USS Antietam CG-54 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

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