

# A COVID-19 Transformation of Leadership and Talent

JULY 02, 2021

By **Corey Matthews**



The supply management world has changed. It had to. It was already under pressure due to the need for better stakeholder relationships, team-member engagement and growing societal and workplace fervor around equity, equality, justice and inclusion.

Such reports as the *Deloitte Global CPO Survey 2019* made clear how most procurement organizations had work to do to in areas like stakeholder influencing and customer satisfaction.

Then came the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which caused massive supply disruption and workplace and workforce changes, among other challenges. Supply management leaders and their teams were in a constant state of scrambling. The pandemic was the ultimate supply chain stress test — and it laid bare what it takes to be a high-performing practitioner and leader.

What does it take? I asked several CPOs and a digital-solution chief product officer how the pandemic has impacted their views of high-potential talent as well as their own leadership effectiveness. The responses were heartening.

## **Financial Services CPO**

“I define high-potential talent as individuals who (1) have a track record of delivering outstanding results consistently throughout their career, no matter the job, and (2) demonstrate high learning agility — the ability to quickly learn the best ways to do things and bring others with them.

“The pandemic influenced me to be more focused on people development and communicating recognition. When sitting in a home office, working in front of a screen all day, it becomes easy to focus on operational issues. Thus, I have become very intentional to schedule times where we — my leadership team and myself — recognize (and show appreciation) to our talent for their great work or behaviors, so that they feel valued for their contribution.

“Also, I put in an expanded personal development and coaching program for my leaders so that they continue to grow in self-awareness and interpersonal communication, to be better communicators and mentors for their own teams.”

### **Media and Entertainment CPO**

“The pandemic highlighted the importance of team-member agility: The circumstances the team members faced required them to quickly make decisions and respond in a very dynamic environment.

“It also has presented an opportunity for team members with strong communication skills and interpersonal relationships to fully leverage the value of connectivity to their team members, stakeholders and suppliers during the pandemic. Their ability to relay a consistent message and drive a common purpose was instrumental in keeping the organization focused on achieving business goals and objectives in a different and sometimes stressful home environment.

“Additionally, the pandemic emphasized the need for innovation and provided some the reason to challenge the status quo. While we always strive for continuous improvement, the trap can be to make small incremental changes or take the less risky path. Turbulence caused by the pandemic triggered the need to reinvent the way work is done.

“The pandemic also brought into sharper focus the importance of leveraging team members’ strengths and giving them business-critical challenges. It was rewarding to see how they responded to those challenges — and the growth and learning that occurred as a result. Lastly, sharing personal stories of the challenges I faced during the pandemic helped me realize how leading with vulnerability can build trust within the organization.”

### **Technology CPO**

“The most talented procurement individuals always demonstrate a good balance between the technical skills required for the basics of the job and the softer skills required to build strong relationships in the organization. (In addition), there is a third

attribute — resiliency — as individuals have needed to accommodate many changes and extreme uncertainty, both personally and professionally.

“Though I have always personally tried to keep some separation between work and home life, remote work has tended to blur the two. As an unforeseen but positive consequence, seeing colleagues at home, and getting to see their children, pets and other aspects of their daily lives, has created a different and richer interaction with them.”

### **Commercial Real Estate CPO**

“We have fortunately been way out in front of the pandemic. ... Fortuitously, in late 2019, we had a team in place to address employee engagement, targeting many areas on the ‘soft and fuzzy’ side — professional and personal well-being, how we care for each other, building internal relationships, and working with our learning and development team on training to improve how procurement staff works with each other, other colleagues and suppliers.

“At the time, it felt very touchy-feely, but it was spot on (for the) pandemic. ... It was pure luck we endorsed the team objectives as proposed, and it has made a huge difference in our cohesiveness, validation of our stated goals of individual empowerment and inclusion, and overall team performance.”

### **Other Comments**

“In developing people, I look at three things: Can they communicate and are they clear with their thought process? Do they have analytical skills? Are they hungry — can they decide what they want to accomplish and ensure it aligns with our strategic goals? The pandemic has made us look at these traits more closely.

“As a leader, I’m giving people flexibility to make sure there’s a line between home and work. I also call people to say hi and don’t even ask about work. I’m also sharing (experiences) from my personal life, such as lost friends and family due to COVID-19. The pandemic has taught us to be human first, and my boss sets an example of this, too.” — X2P solution chief product officer

The pandemic has resulted in “(1) more time spent with direct reports and extended staff, (2) more listening to what they need and providing support and clearing barriers and (3) expanded staff meetings, so more people learn about what we are doing and feel included and pass that down to their staff and peers.” — Hospitality CPO

For many leaders, as these comments show, the pandemic has been the impetus for enhancing their leadership styles, including being more engaged with their employees. It also has brought out the need for resiliency and agility — and the importance of teamwork and relationships.

### **About the Author**

Corey Matthews is founder and CEO of VerticalReach Consulting Group, an executive search and executive coaching firm focused on supply management. He is also past President of ISM—Dallas and a former member of Institute for Supply Management's Chapter Advisory Council.