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# HOW TO FUTURE-PROOF YOUR COMPANY

Leadership expert Dr Linda Sharkey asks the all-important question: are you ready for tomorrow?

AS TOLD TO • EMMA WHEATON

**T**he world of work is undergoing a revolution. From game-changing technology to globalisation and seismic demographic shifts, every aspect of business is evolving, and not every company will survive. Co-author of *The Future-proof Workplace* and expert on global leadership development, Dr Linda Sharkey says that while researching for her book it became increasingly apparent that the context and dynamics of the workplace are dramatically changing.

“Leaders and managers are scratching their heads about how to deal with the speed, complexity and technical advances that are inescapable,” she says. “It was a rousing wake-up call that twentieth century approaches were in desperate need of re-tooling or elimination for twenty-first century success.” She shares how to invest in your organisation so it doesn’t get left behind.

## HOW TO STAY COMPETITIVE

Leadership must change. It can no longer be focused on the leader, but the spotlight must be turned onto those they serve. The digital revolution will demand the human revolution, and if you want innovation you must have empowering leaders.

Culture is front and centre. If you have leaders who operate based upon greed or who push people to meet unrealistic quotas, you create a toxic culture. These unhealthy environments dampen creativity while creating fear and are certainly not fast or innovative.

Purpose will be the true organising principle. It is no longer about shareholder value but customer value. What problems are we solving to make life better for everyone who engages with our company? Purpose provides the link to the future and the inspiration to carry on.

Relationships are key. The human factor is essential in the technologically driven environment. What makes us human is our ability to relate to each other, to have empathy. These factors break down politics and silos in organisations. Personal connections and emotional links between team members make employees great and high performing.

Inclusion and belonging in this world of increasing globalisation, demographic shifts and integration in ways we haven’t seen before require a rethink of our diversity efforts. We must face into our non-conscious biases that have held us back.

Technology – artificial intelligence, robotics and data analytics – is changing the very nature of work and what it means for our relationships with work. This is as significant as the Agricultural and Industrial revolutions. We cannot fight it; we must embrace it and figure out how to leverage it for all our greater good.

## THE LEADER YOU NEED TO BE

Businesses need leaders who are other-focused, not self-focused. Let’s be honest: we know what a good leader is but we often don’t model it. Why? The purpose and measure of business has been too frequently identified solely as profit.

Leaders who will survive in the twenty-first century are purpose driven even in times of ambiguity. They make sense out of chaos and help others see a compelling way forward. They act with heart and

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compassion. They are also team builders but not in the traditional sense – they don’t pit teams against each other, but build pods of people to solve a problem or create a new approach.

Leaders are highly perceptive. They know when others don’t understand or agree; they don’t just assume everyone is on board. And they work to understand others’ points of view.

## STRATEGIES OF THE FUTURE

1. Be crystal clear on your values – have three to five guidelines that will focus you, your colleagues and your organisation.
2. Define the behaviours associated with those values and make sure they are demonstrated consistently by your leaders – that they are *lived* in your employees’ and customers’ eyes.
3. Don’t allow ‘bad apples’ just because they deliver results at any cost. This is the recipe for toxic cultures.
4. Regularly test and measure your culture to make sure you are demonstrating the values not only internally but that your customers feel them as well.
5. Learn from the past, but always keep your eye on the future. Learn to let go of the past and help make a great future and help your organisation members do the same.

We must leave ‘command and control’ leadership firmly in the past. That is an artefact of the industrial era and bureaucratic organisations. Performance management and talent assessments to determine your top 20 per cent to the exclusion of others must go. These processes enervate people instead of energise them.

Trying to control people’s use of technology is futile – you need constructive guidelines, not destructive controls. Also, making decisions solely on profit and not based upon values is a thing of the past. ■