



OLIVIA

# LEADING AFTER A SHIPWRECK

Rethinking our  
organizational model

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On February 26, 2020, a 61-year-old man tested positive for COVID-19 in São Paulo, Brazil. It was the first confirmed case in Latin America. As a society, we were sailing at cruising speed, without a care in the world, when something suddenly shifted — and we found ourselves swimming in the middle of the sea, with only scattered flotsam at hand to build a raft that could return us to dry land.

The coronavirus hit us like a tsunami and it took some time — and a lot of being trashed up and down the metaphorical beach — for us to be able to see the sand at our feet. In 2020, we surveyed 160 leaders in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Spain, Peru, and Uruguay. We conducted our investigation in three stages and sought to understand the following: What challenges were organizations and leaders facing during the pandemic? What insights might allow us to make sense of their experiences? And what answers might let us pick up the pieces and start rebuilding?

Before analyzing our investigation, we have to understand that our respondents, like everyone else in the world, were hostages of the pandemic and its social, political, individual, and environmental consequences. Their perspectives cannot be interpreted outside our historical context. And neither can their fears, their certainties, and their points of view.

A natural disaster on the scale of COVID-19 makes no distinctions between kings and beggars. We cannot even begin to fathom the effect the pandemic will have on our personal outlooks. Only with time will we gain the necessary clarity and hindsight, and build a narrative that can organize what's happened since the outbreak of the disease.

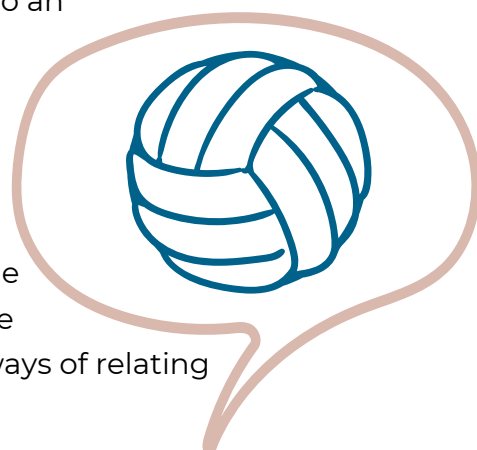
It was Foucault who developed the concept of discontinuity in history. He defined it as a series of turning points that reveal the limitations of the processes that define us. In this sense, COVID-19 is perhaps the most radical turning point of our current era. It has given us a new perspective on our beliefs and has altered how we think about the world and what we do in it. A new order has come into view. And though it's not here yet, it will eventually present us with many new questions and doubts.

To Foucault, order is a process that involves establishing the parameters that fix into place a prevailing system of classification: a space of identities, likenesses, analogies, and even differences.

## SPEAKING WITH WILSON

As in the film *Cast Away* (Robert Zemeckis, 2001), we were shipwrecked by an unexpected event that forced us to reacquaint ourselves with our competences and flaws. It proved just how interconnected we are with our very essence. Old paradigms have begun to crack beyond repair and we will need to rebuild classifications and identities in a post-pandemic era. And to do this, we'll need to ask more and newer questions.

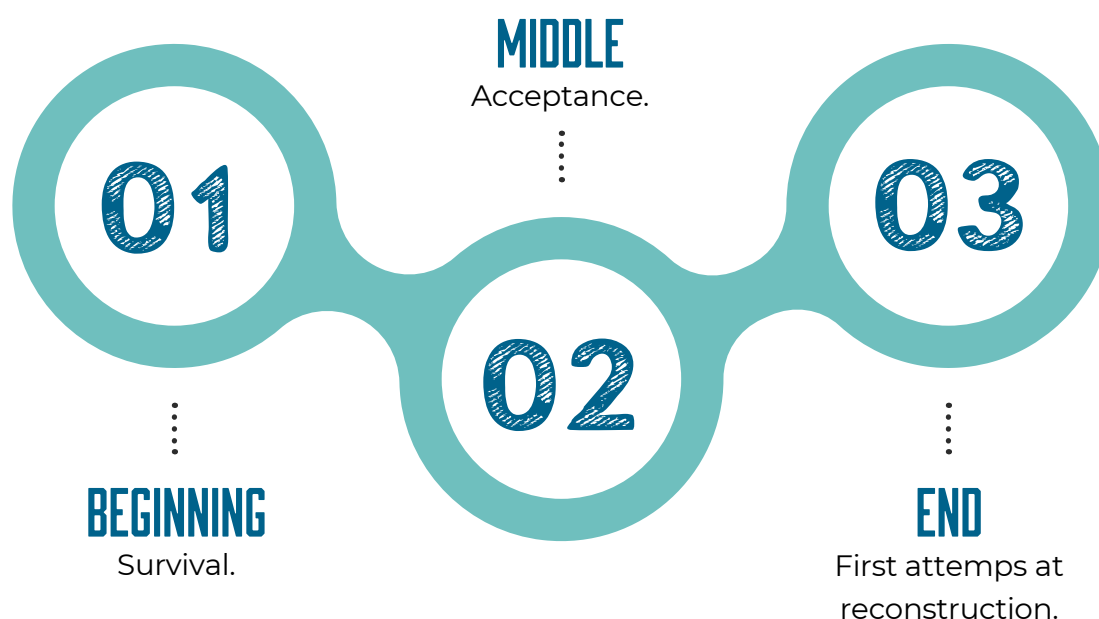
It's time for us to sit down and chat with our own personal Wilsons. (For those who haven't seen the movie, Wilson is an inanimate volleyball that the protagonist, while stranded on an island, transforms into an imaginary friend and confidante.) We need to be introspective and look at the challenges ahead with fresh eyes. We need to leave behind the musty narratives that are now failing us and ask ourselves what we require in order to establish new types of connections that allow us to survive and rebuild over the ruins of the old paradigms. And in doing so, create more sophisticated, more intelligent, and more sustainable ways of relating to our context.



Wilson, in this analogy, represents the old axioms that once helped us survive in times of need. Yet today, these axioms are not enough. It's easy to live on an island with Wilson. But if we want to move past the conceptual poverty of our pandemic moment, if we want to leave the island behind and return to our continents on the back of a new status quo, then we need more than a volleyball to talk to.

At this point, leaders should understand the importance of their relationships with others, even if they once took these relationships for granted. What happens if there are other shipwrecked people? Leaders will have to depart their islands, find these individuals, and guide them back to dry land. And they must do this, not from a position of power, but rather as trusted facilitators, who can expand the potential of their organizations and drive new narratives and solutions that give meaning to the scars endured along the way.

What follows is an analysis of the surveys we conducted in 2020. They were carried out in **three stages**:

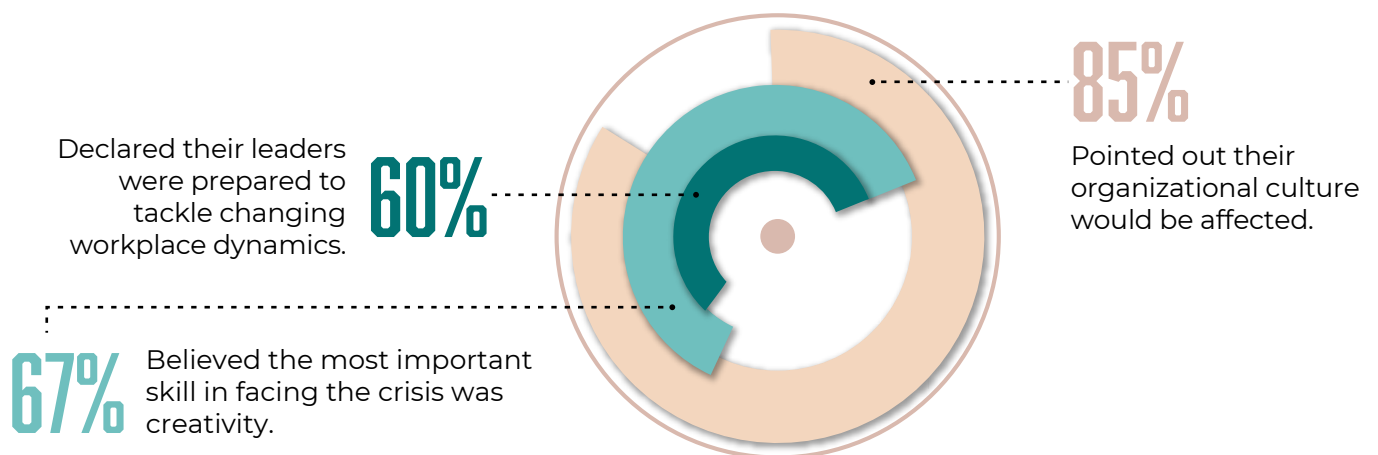


## THE SHIP LOG

Our initial survey was conducted in May 2020. 60% of respondents (27% of these being from top management and 22% from middle management) declared their leaders were ready to face the changing nature of work. However, 85% pointed out their organizational culture would be shaken up by such transformations.

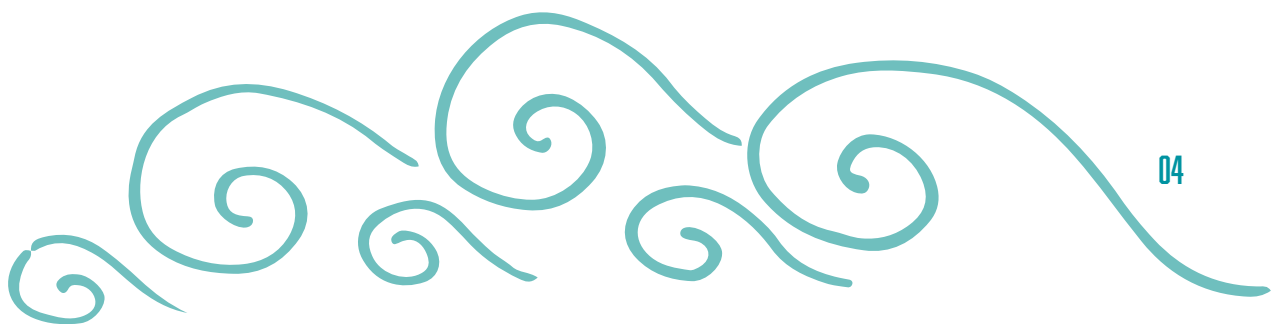
Meanwhile, 66% admitted to not knowing how such changes would alter the behavior of their collaborators, while 72% were likewise clueless regarding the future behavior of their customers and clients. In short, they were as prepared as they could be given the circumstances. They had swum their way back to dry land, evincing their competences. But they were unsure as to how the pandemic would affect their businesses and their main partners on the road to growth: that is, their collaborators, providers, and clients or customers.

## FIRST STAGE: SURVIVAL



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Faced with the challenge of having to survive on an island surrounded by a hostile ocean, 67% responded the most important skill in this new reality would be creativity. (Executives had to be more creative than ever before.) To adapt to this newfound environment, most opted to create new products and services as an immediate response that allowed them to stay afloat. At the same time, they opened new communication channels to better approach clients and customers, understand how they had been affected by the pandemic, and so forecast the social and economic climate with as much precision as possible.



## SHOULD WE SURVIVE ON THE ISLAND OR LIVE OUTSIDE OF IT?

In August, Olivia carried out a second survey, this time focused on organizational culture. The goal was to chart what had happened in the three months since the initial survey. This second time around, 63% of respondents believed the pandemic would accelerate their transformation, while 33% said it would alter its very direction. 53% were certain their culture was aligned with the ongoing situation and only needed reinforcement.

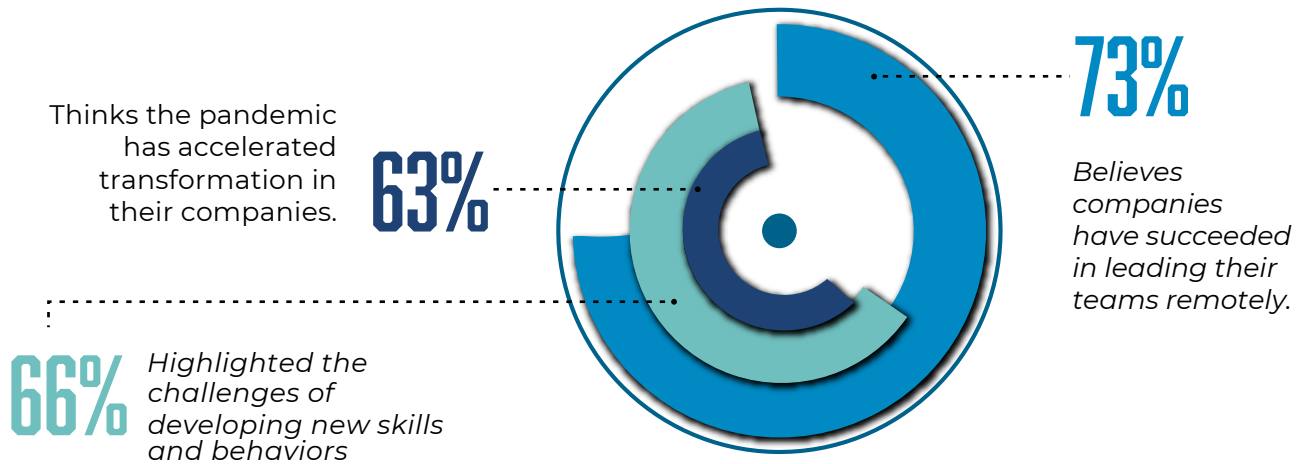
These claims of cultural alignment were interesting. After all, back in May, few respondents could anticipate what impact the situation would have not only on their collaborators, clients, and customers, but also on their families and on individuals, who make up the core of the social body. In Foucaultian terms, it was difficult to determine what configuration of new and competing parameters would end up decoding a new order. Our respondents had banded together with other castaways by using their pre-pandemic know-how, even as they expected the open sea to greet them with new challenges and unanswerable questions.

For the foreseeable future, measuring the pandemic's true impact on society will continue to prove difficult. And so will knowing what classificatory logic might help us understand the world moving forward. That's why we must approach the problem while being fully cognizant that we're in the midst of an ongoing transformation. In moments of such profound uncertainty, it's more important than ever to be asking the right questions.

In August's survey, 73% of respondents thought their companies had productively led their teams remotely. Nevertheless, when asked about the difficulties ahead and about what their organizations should focus on developing, 68% identified remote leadership of virtual teams as a priority.

## SECOND STAGE: ACCEPTANCE

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Meanwhile, 66% highlighted the challenges of developing new skills and behaviors for remote work. As for the main difficulties individuals were facing in this context, 57% singled out the need to keep their teams engaged, while 58% stressed the urgency of acquiring remote team management skills.

It's time for leaders to sit down, talk with their Wilsons, and facilitate critical self-reflection within their organizations, enabling every team member to offer up their own critical assessment, however disruptive or uncomfortable.

The modern leader creates experiential journeys that enhance the results of everyone's efforts. They generate a climate of cooperation and empower synergies within and without their organization. In a more dynamic and complex world, with increasingly liquid societies, it's vital to question preexisting structures and erect new leadership models that allow companies to manage and adapt to change.

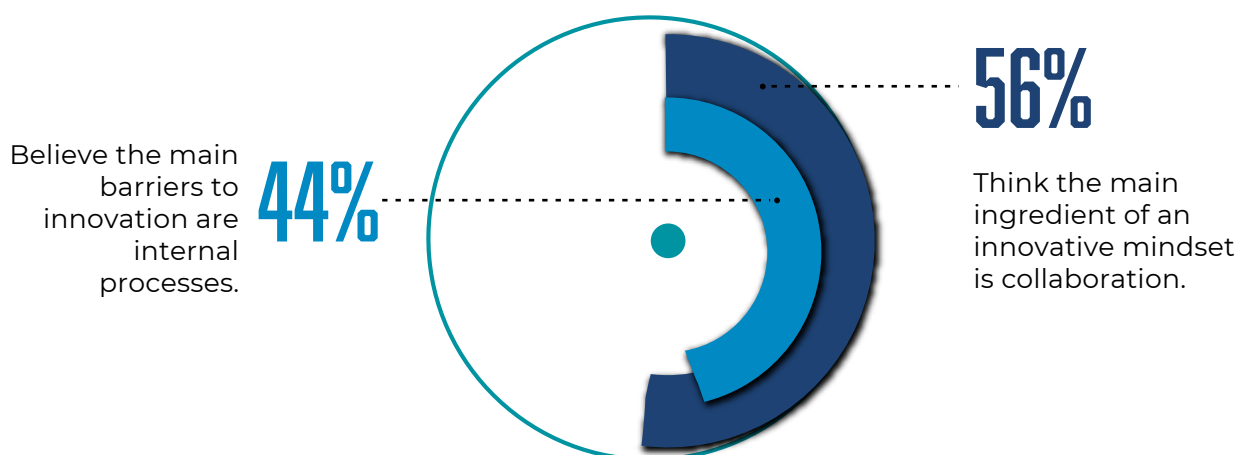
We will not be able to build new paradigms by sitting next to Wilson. We need to move and leave our islands behind. We need to find other castaways and enlist a strong crew that knows all members are equally important for survival under the upcoming paradigm.

## HOW CAN WE TRAVEL TOGETHER?

The third stage in our investigation, which focused on innovation, was completed in December.

In this case, 64% of respondents confirmed their organizations had areas devoted to innovation, while 72% said their organizations had clear innovation strategies. Nevertheless, 44% stated that internal processes were actually the main barriers blocking innovation. 48% — the same people who complained about internal processes — said innovation in their companies was top-down, even as their organizations continued betting and focusing on new products and services.

### THIRD STAGE: INNOVATION



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Thing is: can we even talk of innovation when there are no processes in place that enable bottom-up innovation? Is innovation really the responsibility of leaders? What does a top-down model imply for an organization? Why do companies continue focusing on new products and services when they haven't grasped their impact on consumers or collaborators? Are we still tethered to old paradigms or are we finally setting the stage for something new?



A common problem with the top-down model is that, unless a leader stands at the summit of an organization, they will likely be unable to enact any widespread change to that organization's values. They might even find it difficult to change employees' values. Cultural transformations are often complex due to misalignments between top and middle management, and the distance between decision makers and the rest of the company.

In our December survey, 56% claimed that the main ingredient of an innovative mindset is not creativity — as had been the dominant choice back in May — but rather collaboration. Respondents to the first survey had believed creativity to be more important because, at the time, they could not guess what the future had in store for them. And most were probably too focused on survival to really innovate. During the ensuing year, however, they realized that, no matter how creative a solution, it won't matter if the company behind it isn't ready to respond to an ever-more turbulent sea. And besides: great ideas often come from varied teams of people and not brilliant individual minds.

This third survey also revealed how, with time, respondents had begun to realize that their new pandemic reality was not temporary. And that, therefore, they had to change how they worked and collaborated, finding new and sustainable work systems for the months and years ahead. In doing so, they looked to leadership as the protagonist and driving force of change. Leaders, in this context, became interfaces, allowing businesses, organizational cultures, and work teams to connect, in a reality that is ever more entwined with the digital world.

We could say the role of leaders has changed forever. Captains can no longer lead from the comfort of their cabins. They must climb the lookout towers and peer ahead with their own eyes. Only there can they guide their crews to keep everyone safe on a turbulent sea. Only there can they become strategists, gazing at their organizations from up high and pointing out what issues are being ignored. And only there can they empower others' work, as they view the movements of all collaborators from above, figuring out what's best for each crewmember and leading everyone back to dry land, except now with the conceptual tools necessary to recodify their brave new world.

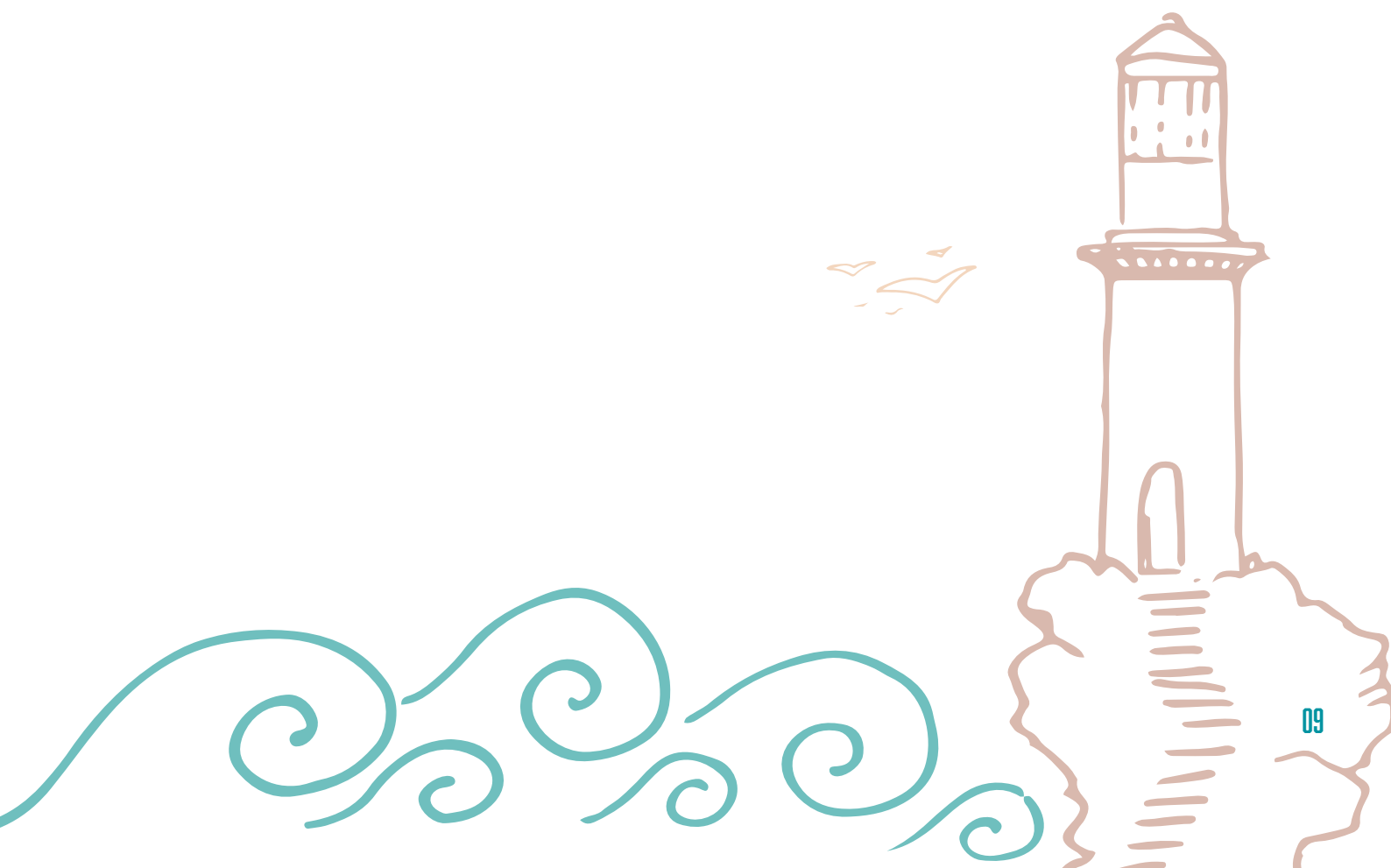


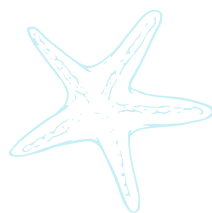
## SETTING THE STAGE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Teams that were used to walking on dry land suddenly found themselves on an unknown landscape, in a place where their trusty tools no longer functioned. When we're constantly bombarded from different directions by variables that impact our personal and professional lives, we cannot act or think in a linear fashion. In such cases, there is no single plan or objective; there are, instead, many plans and many objectives. Daily crises become the new normal.

Nevertheless, as we said at the beginning of this article, the pandemic doesn't pick favorites. Kings and beggars are equal in front of it. The sense of stability we used to feel was just that: a sensation, a feeling. It cannot explain our context now.

That's why Jamais Cascio — futurist and investigator for the Institute for the Future — ideated BANI, a concept that might serve to explain the situations that organizations are now finding themselves in. BANI means "Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible." And this acronym can help us propose questions that are appropriate to the current context.





## SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?

To face a BANI world, our structure needs to be sufficiently flexible and interconnected to deal with the complications ahead. Cascio believes our context stands at the crossroads between the global pandemic, political crises, and environmental disasters. Leaders, as bastions of their organizational cultures, are looking over teams that are mutating more rapidly. And they will have to generate — through empathy and an attentive ear — new logical structures that can inspire their teams to adapt to the systemic logic that reigns in today's business world.

In this virtual and pandemic era, we have seen the challenges of change from up close. And we understand, more than ever, how our mental health — and the health of our group — depends on how we balance the increasing need for multitasking. From a professional point of view, working from home has shown us the importance of communication when managing teams under a lot of pressure. Leaders must become more liquid and adapt to a progressively more uncertain environment.

The most effective teams will be those that can manage their potential and use it to respond to the unprecedented questions posed by their context. Within such teams, leaders should be looking ahead for even newer questions, going past the limits of their organizations and seeking voices that can bring fresh ideas and trace surprising itineraries on this new map we're charting together.

The context demands new skills. And leaders, now turned into guides, must rein in the prevailing uncertainty and bring their teams together, making sure every crewmember can put his or her capabilities at the ship's service. Leaders must come down from their lookout towers and become liquid. They must know themselves, their own inner Wilsons, and their collaborators. They must be fluid and use their position as leaders, along with the information they have access to, in order to enable improvisation. Only a leader who has endured the shipwrecks of 2020 knows the real value of teams that function by combining individual and group strengths.



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