



INNOVATION MOVEMENT: LEADERSHIP NOW

Senior UN Leaders to Drive Organizational Change after the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The Innovation Movement: Co-created with senior managers from UNOG, UNHCR, ILO and ITU, the movement engages senior leaders in innovation work, aims to break down silos between and within organizations, and critically assesses the value-adding potential and challenges of innovation in UN agencies.

In March 2020, the world realized the extent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Overnight, most countries were put on lockdown. People had to adapt to working from home, and at the same time take care of personal challenges. While the whole world was affected, those aiming to contribute to sustainable development through their organizational mission were most challenged – as the divide between rich and poor expanded and doubts were raised about international cooperation.

The pressures are increasing. Organizations are counting on Leadership Now.

This shift questioned underlying assumptions about the world of work in International Organizations, about team collaboration, and about priorities. It also created an unprecedented environment where decisions needed to be taken swiftly, often without following the usual pathways. Hierarchy broke down and extraordinary levels of collaboration emerged. Innovation was supposed to empower International Organizations to address the already burgeoning challenges of our world. But how can we innovate in a global crisis? As Nan Buzard, Head of Innovation at ICRC told us in early March, “Today’s challenging times provide us with a fantastic innovation opportunity.”

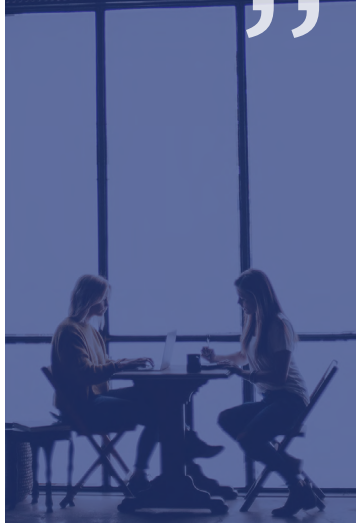
Leadership was tested. The meaning of innovation was reframed. New practices emerged.

Coincidentally, during this time, twenty-two senior leaders of four large International Organizations were piloting the first ever “Innovation Movement” in Geneva – a program that aimed to break down silos across organizations and enable participants to foster innovation in their teams and organizations.

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Some organizations are seeing an accelerated cut of red tape, simply because working digitally has cut down processes, and accelerated process digitization.

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The Movement brought together cross-functional teams to work on cross-organizational initiatives. Despite vast organizational differences, the crisis showed everyone that leaders were facing similar challenges, that opportunities were emerging, and that the shared experiences of the group could be used as a learning opportunity. Participants of the Innovation Movement came together in their teams to answer:



What are important concerns or opportunities in the COVID-19 crisis in your work area?



What are your ideas to address these?



What are your messages and questions to the other participants of the Innovation Movement?

What follows are the emerging insights from these discussions. The insights paint a vivid picture of the questions that senior leaders are asking themselves, as well as depicting the specific gaps that have been exposed in organizations. And finally, it clearly shows the positives that have emerged from this time and gives room to thinking about how the encouraging elements can be retained.

Challenges for Senior Leaders

As in other sectors, senior leaders' challenges could be classified either as personal or professional.

Personal challenges related to the realities of working from home, including social distancing and limited mobility, while having to also manage often complicated family situations both of oneself as well as of team members often dispersed in International duty stations. This also closely aligned with the health and welfare concerns leaders felt both for oneself, family, and team at work. The overall emotional toll was high.

PERSONAL CHALLENGES DURING CRISIS

Work From Home
Realities



Social Distancing
and Limited Mobility



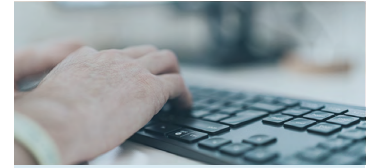
Health and Welfare
Concerns



HIGH EMOTIONAL TOLL

Professionally, senior leaders struggled with concerns regarding technology, funding, and organizational strategy. Regarding technology, top management was thrown from a world of face-to-face meetings to pure virtual conferences and collaborations. Many senior managers were struggling with these new technology tools while the junior colleagues were able to catch on quickly. In general, remote

communication was challenging to master and perfect. Financial concerns were raised about the impact of the economic crisis caused by shut down supply chains, factories, and trade. The implications for the International Organizations included fears of reduced funding and managing the expectations of member states and donors. Budgets were not spent as allocated and lead to concerns about future fundraising.



“The speed with which things are changing makes our flagship innovation initiatives look like they’re moving at a glacier pace. Though I would call what we’re going through improvisation more than innovation.”

Finally, within the organization, leaders were trying to understand the notion of improvisation versus innovation while at the same time dealing with stagnation as important strategic decisions were being postponed.

SENIOR LEADERSHIP CONCERNS DURING CRISIS



TECHNOLOGY

- Divide in technology uptake between generations within the organization
- Remote communication challenging to master



FUNDING

- Expectations of members and donors
- The cost of Covid-19 responses may impact member states ability to pay statutory contributions and provide voluntary funding



STRATEGY

- Understanding the difference between innovation and improvisation
- Important strategic conversations are being postponed

Ideas and Opportunities for Leadership Now

Ideas and opportunities to combat these challenges were numerous and often overlapping. These highlighted an openness of all stakeholders to collaborate and act jointly. The ideas could be aggregated into three main themes:

- Opportunities of developing more agile teams
- Opportunities for rethinking knowledge sharing and management processes
- Opportunities for new ways of innovating and working virtually

OPPORTUNITIES AND IDEAS ARISING OUT OF CRISIS



- Test and pilot agile teams to build on capacity shown during crisis
- Recognizing importance of secure ICT
- Inclusivity increasing



- Opportunity to optimize internal processes now
- Room for less centralized and more autonomous organizations
- Using scenario planning to get teams to think about new possibilities



- Use new funding sources to develop Covid related projects
- Adapt to new forms of service delivery
- Remote and flexible working arrangement to modernize UN

One opportunity is to really look seriously at our addiction for face-2-face workshops, training and meetings. Clearly, a lot must be done virtually going forward because it can but also because we need to be exemplary in reducing our carbon footprint.

COVID crisis demonstrates that organizations with greater staff autonomy, flatter hierarchies and faster approval processes are more effective.



As the crisis evolved and teams adapted to working faster, flatter, and more autonomously, leaders saw that not only were these teams as productive as before, but also often more effective. It showed that organizations have the capacity for agility. And it gave rise to ideas that fully agile team structures should be tested. Ensuring that teams have robust communication platforms and secure Information Systems will be imperative as meetings continue to be inclusive, allowing people from country offices to participate in decision making.

Another clear area for opportunities appeared in the organizational decision-making processes and structures. The importance of rethinking knowledge sharing and management became clear, and gave rise to a vision for further optimized and decentralized internal processes. The idea was to increasingly

In a way, the pandemic has made our activities more inclusive. Some could rarely participate in our convening due to lack of travel budget. Now that all of our events, workshops and trainings are virtual, we almost always have one participant from each country.

use scenario planning to get teams to think about new possibilities as not all members of team were in the same place emotionally – enabling teams to let go, feel good, look ahead and innovate.

Finally, the crisis revealed that the ways to innovate were expanding – with opportunities to use new funding streams to develop Covid related projects. Other organizations were adapting to new forms of service delivery, sometimes in collaboration with new external partners. And innovating in the flexibility of work by using remote, virtual, flexible working arrangements had the opportunity to modernize the ways of working in the UN and to make the UN a more attractive employer for competent younger colleagues.

Key Concerns for the Future from Senior Leaders:

- How to retain positives from this time and keep momentum of positive change?
- How to expand new ways of work into “robust” new ways of work?
- How to lead and coordinate remotely to make sure no one is left behind?
- How to manage priorities and juggle competing demands?
- Will we see a net positive, value based innovation ecosystem post-Covid? In which areas?



There is a danger that our back-log of pre-Covid work will overwhelm us and new initiatives will be put on hold. How will you avoid this?

The Slippery Slope: We talk about things getting ‘back to normal’ but that is not what we actually want. How will you ensure that the innovative elements of COVID-19 working are not gradually phased out?

It’s become clear that in ‘crisis innovation mode,’ normal rules do not apply. This is both a constraint and an enabler for what can be possible.

Leaders are driving the emergence of new organizations.

Leadership Now will involve courage to move beyond the challenges and into a new world where organizations are inclusive, allowing for self-managing, agile and remote teams; where virtual presence is prioritized and where the capabilities of leaders at all levels of the organization are developed - allowing them to meet their full potential regarding use of technology, productivity, and team building.

"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." - Albert Einstein

Building a network of teams and changing the culture of the organization takes time and thus might not be quick enough for rapid response in light of COVID-19 crisis; how to balance short and long-term responses?

How to embrace Leadership Now

The key take-away from these insights is that the future of leadership in the UN will be a balancing act between often competing values. Leadership Now is about driving home the notion that while the team may be remote, it is still working together on shared goals; that while team members will vary in terms of skillsets and capabilities, each is valuable to the team; and that while the organization's mission will remain, how we achieve that mission is up to us.



Be open to new ways of working but enforce organizational values

Leaders recognized that virtual, agile teams are productive and inclusive in the globally dispersed setting such as the UN's. Retaining the flexible ways of working while maintaining the historical values of the organization through strong communication and role-modeling will unify the team around shared values while creating an environment of confidence to enable further innovation.



Leverage the capabilities of your team

Emotional intelligence in leaders to recognize team members' skills beyond their original job description is crucial now. Leaders can note for example who on the team could help others catchup with new technology tools or who could act as emotional glue to enable greater cohesion even in virtual scenarios – and enable those individuals to develop those skills further through resources, time, or acknowledgement. Allowing departure from the specific job description in a structured, transparent setting will give independence to the team to pursue passions while creating a stronger unit.



Allow time for reflection and re-evaluate the positives

Now, more than ever, leaders should be allocating time for reflecting on the situation and recognizing that we are in a time of flux or transition. Leaders will be called upon to show open-mindedness and flexibility to change, while staying true to the mission of the organization.

The i2i Hub seeks to act as a catalyst for innovation in International Organizations by:

- connecting innovators from different organizations, including private and public sector spurring and disseminating ideas to allow organizations to create greater impact
- being a place for Eye-to-Eye (i2i) exchange of knowledge
- providing systematic research and findings to bring value to our partners

