



Leading for the long term

Creating a sustainable future

Praesta is an international firm of business coaches. We coach senior leaders including CEOs, main board directors, management team members and other key senior executives. Praesta clients comprise several hundred organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors, including major companies, government departments, private equity owned businesses, leading professional services firms and all areas of financial services.

All Praesta coaches have had senior level business careers – many were Board members, CEOs, partners, or managing directors of major organisations in their first careers. Thorough training, continual professional development and regular supervision are integral to maintaining high standards. As well as one-to-one coaching, Praesta coaches work with teams, conduct board effectiveness reviews and are leaders in working with executive women and job-sharers.

Praesta Insights pull together ideas and experience about topical leadership issues in an accessible and digestible way. We work closely with leaders in different spheres on thought leadership. This publication has been researched and written by Praesta coaches Hilary Douglas and Peter Shaw.

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Introduction

In today's complex world, leaders have to lead through uncertainty more than ever before, and face competing – sometimes contradictory – demands and challenges. Individual leaders, teams and organisations need to recognise their interdependence with other teams and systems. A sense of overall purpose needs to be matched by flexibility on how to get there.

Our research tells us that leaders who make a sustainable difference and stay resilient during challenging times:

- Unite their teams around common goals, whatever the uncertainties of the longer term
- Encourage everyone to focus on the things they must and can do, and to worry less about relative trivia or the things outside of their control
- Invite innovative approaches, and learn from disappointment, as well as celebrating success
- Remain agile in response to changing circumstances
- Encourage collaborative behaviours across organisational barriers and siloes
- Consult widely on how to get the best results from virtual or hybrid working

- Acknowledge people's different emotional and physical needs, and tailor communication to those needs
- Look after their own wellbeing, so they can help others

In our coaching conversations, we have been exploring how leaders can build on this learning, as they adapt to an unpredictable future. We often use metaphors as prompts for thought.

Metaphors that have resonated include:

- **See the wood for the trees**
- **Connect with each link in the chain**
- **Capture the genius of your people**

And, in relation to key behaviours:

- **Stay calm amidst the storm**
- **Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee**
- **Weave the golden thread of trust**

In this Insight publication we develop the thinking behind these metaphors, share some comments from clients, and offer two questions for reflection for each section. At the end of the booklet we collate the 12 questions on a one page prompt sheet which can be used by teams as a self-contained note.



See the wood for the trees

We observe teams meeting frequently to tackle urgent tasks, but not always making space to reflect on where they most need to add value, and how they move from being reactive to proactive. We encourage them to ask themselves

- “What is it that must be done, and can only be done by this leadership group?”, and
- “What are the decisions which must be taken by us, and that others rely on us to take?”

These questions prompt a debate about the urgent versus the important. It can help to try a “pre-mortem” exercise, imagining a future where goals have been missed and reputations damaged. The team explore what is most likely to have caused these problems and what that means for where they must now focus their attention.

Standing in the future, the team may find that missed opportunities were due to a focus on the wrong external factors, or not fully engaging allies and advocates. They may not have spent enough time looking at their challenges from the outside in, and asking how they best work within a wider system. Equally, they may have spent too much time agonising over a difficult decision, at a time when speed was more important than precision.

There may have been an excellent analysis of a problem, and a great

design for delivery, but limited attention to capability-building and people’s wellbeing. It is also possible that team members have become so focussed on their individual challenges that they have neglected the relationships between them, or the importance of managing their energies for the long haul. We are social beings. We need good relationships to help us manage high levels of uncertainty.

It can be hard to find time for the whole team to look ahead together – but it is vital for developing a shared sense of longer-term direction, and for anticipating and managing the biggest risks. If a team cannot meet face to face, finding a virtual alternative is better than waiting.

“Sometimes it’s easier to focus energy on the immediate and not see the important issues beginning to stare you in the face.”

Each team will have their own answer to the question about the things that only they can do, and that cannot be done by others, but these are likely to include:

- Set the strategic direction, and communicate it in a way that everyone can understand
- Monitor the environment, proactively manage the big risks, and be ready to change course if needed

- Ensure that everyone appreciates the wider operational context
- Identify which stakeholder relationships must be managed at senior levels, and which ones can be delegated with appropriate guidance
- Develop and motivate the workforce of the future
- Live within resource constraints
- Provide collective leadership, and model shared values.

We notice that this discussion often leads to a reframing of team priorities and agendas. Teams realise they are so caught up in back to back meetings that all their energies are focused on the immediate and the transactional, with no time for the strategic issues that no one else will pick up. The urgent daily issues still need to be tackled, but they cannot be allowed to dominate, and can often be delegated more than they have been.

Points for reflection

1. What is it that must be done and can only be done by us?
2. What is most likely to stall our momentum, and how do we avoid that happening?

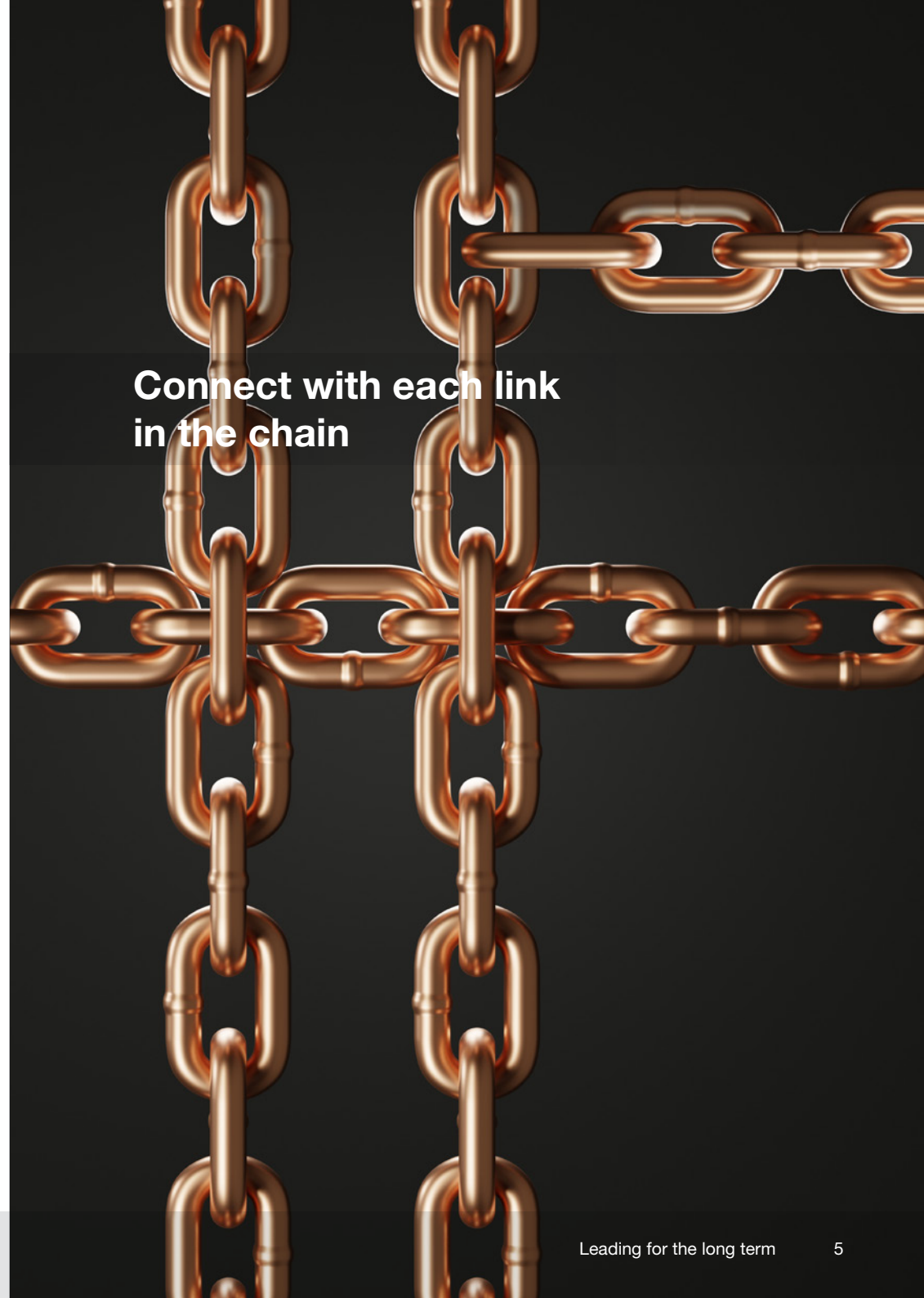
"It is imperative to be able to step back and focus on the things that matter. Otherwise you are doing no more than reacting to the latest crisis."

"I keep reminding myself how important it is to step back and eyeball situations from a distance."

Case Study

A global company recognised that quick action was needed in response to the Covid pandemic. Within short order, staff across the world were working at home with effective technology support. Dialogue with clients moved rapidly and remarkably smoothly into a virtual space. The leadership team knew the focus had to be on adapting quickly to serving clients well, and that this was the key priority to communicate. Priorities that had seemed vital a few weeks before had to wait until this was done.

Connect with each link in the chain



Standing back from a problem reveals a set of interdependencies with others outside of the team – whether inside the same organisation, or across external partners. New ideas cannot succeed without buy-in from a wide range of stakeholders. Products and services won't reach their markets on time without collaboration across the whole supply chain.

Exclusive focus on a problem in one part of the system risks overlooking the consequences for another, equally important, part. An urgent drive to free up hospital beds for Covid patients in March 2020 may have caused infection to spread in care homes before a testing requirement was introduced in April. Initiatives to remove plastic wrappings from food in supermarkets can risk shorter product shelf life and more waste, unless there is full examination of the end-to-end process. Everyone has examples from their own system- or from observing the critical issues that face world leaders.

Conflicting priorities and incentives can make it very challenging to make progress – but the complexity of modern life makes it essential to do effective “joined-up thinking”. Change depends on a whole set of interconnected decisions. The connections may be linear, but often the analogy is like a Rubik's cube, where the partners need to test an approach, evaluate the impacts, adjust and test again.

However difficult it may be, it is part of the leadership's role to:

- Bring teams and partners together to look at the whole system, and how different elements interact
- Build agreement on a shared purpose
- Identify, with input from front line workers, where streamlined or different processes could achieve better results
- Agree how to monitor interdependencies and timelines
- Be open about the barriers to collaboration and explore ways to overcome them
- Identify the key relationships that need attention
- Promote a coaching and enabling culture throughout the system
- Ensure everyone understands the perspective of their partners.

Points for reflection

3. How best do we role model joined up thinking?
4. What is the shift we each need to make in our mindsets and behaviours to enable the whole system to work effectively together?

“Our objective was to have a digital Job Retention Scheme up and running in a 4-5 week window. It was highly agile, and involved contractors, civil servants, special advisers and a huge seven day joint exercise. What was key was extraordinary levels of collaboration, constant checkpoints, and at times the chance to offload and share our experiences.”

“You need to watch a system to see how it operates. It is rarely linear. You have to listen to the language used to understand how the linkages really work. Systems engineering is about understanding and bringing together different interests and dynamics.”

Case Study

The Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership was formed after several national emergencies in 2017, including the Grenfell Tower fire. Local and national organisations recognised they were all trying to help the same people but with the risk of duplication and confusion. The Partnership created a shared voice for working with local and central Government. It now gathers intelligence on emerging needs, provides a channel of support for local organisations, and offers Government bodies a single point of contact for mobilising volunteers. During the pandemic it created five regional hubs to coordinate cross-sector action.



Capture the genius of your people

Successful leaders know they cannot and should not control everything personally. If they tried to be in complete control, they would have no time for the things that only they can do. Successful leaders coach and develop their people to take accountability. They clarify expectations, then resist the urge to micro-manage.

These leaders accept they are not the source of all wisdom. They have the humility to ask people: "What decisions could you take without asking for guidance, if allowed to do so?" or "How would you solve this problem, if it was up to you?"

They notice that people are more likely to try new ways of doing things if:

- the request is framed in a way that makes sense to them
- organisational barriers are removed
- they are given the skills, technology and other resources they need
- they have flexibility in how they work, as long as they produce the results
- it feels safe to experiment, and learn from what goes less well
- they know they can speak up about problems without fear of repercussion
- They feel their leaders are actively listening to them, and taking notice
- there is an appreciation of personal challenges they may be facing, especially if working remotely.

The individual members of any work group or team will each have their personal drivers and motivations. Some will want to show they are ready to perform at the next level; some will want the satisfaction of feeling part of something big and important; some thrive on feeling valued for who they are and what they contribute. Most of them will respond well to being part of a purposeful team or network, and to seeing their leaders living the values that they espouse.

Celebrating achievements, whether big or small, is always important to morale, and easily overlooked with the pressure of the next deadline. A thank you note goes a long way – and a pause to do something visible can go even further. Celebrations can be linked explicitly to the behaviours and relationships that have made success possible.

Some leadership teams may always have worked this way, but for others it is a big cultural shift. It is natural to feel cautious about experimentation when the consequences of failure – or even limited success- may be very public. Yet the risk of not experimenting may be much greater, and even existential.

Points for reflection

5. How best do we free up people to innovate?
6. When can we say we will back whatever solutions you come up with?

"Nourishing our talent helps us to avoid groupthink, achieves better outcomes and enables people to be the best version of themselves."

Case Study

A small group of Apprentices in a national research laboratory decided they could create a low cost ventilator design. They didn't stop to think whether they should do it but set out to secure senior sponsorship. They delivered a successful outcome with completed engineering drawings within two months.

"We asked a team to devise and implement a new survey faster than it had ever been done before. They jumped at the opportunity. They surprised themselves and us by what they put together in record time by drawing on each other's experience."

"Creating an environment of forgiveness has been important – including staff forgiving exec leadership if we launch something quickly and it needs improving."

Stay calm amidst the storm



Every member of the team is on show. Anything they say or do can echo round their organisation within hours, or sometimes minutes. It is so important to stay calm and manage emotional responses – and so difficult when the pressure is on. The team need to know they can rely on each other for support – and how to signal when they need help. They need to look after each others' well being and consciously pace themselves for the long haul.

Leaders need to be radiators, not drains. This is not about blind optimism, which can undermine everyone's energies if promises are not fulfilled. It is about projecting a positive mindset that allows people to see the opportunities in even the toughest situations, and to be confident there will always be a way forward.

A positive mindset is particularly important when things go wrong. People need to know there will be a learning exercise, but not a rush to apportion blame if everyone has acted in good faith. and is committed to improvement. Innovation will not flourish in an environment of recrimination.

The responsibility is on each team member to pace their contributions and focus on what to do now, rather than to escalate tensions. Time for reflection and even silence can enable team members to process what they are hearing and reach a measured outcome which carries everyone's support.

"In order to stay calm, I need some people I can have a rant with. I need to work through my own reactions in a private space so I can project calm purposefulness in public."

"I see it as my responsibility as chair to ensure there is time for reflection on key items, with breaks allowing members to think through the consequences of decisions."

Points for reflection

7. How can we help each other to stay calm and resilient and to move on when things go wrong?
8. What enables us to be radiators of energy and not a drain on people's motivation?

Case Study

A team in a commercial business knew there would be a critical report that would lead to adverse media reaction. They knew they had to prepare carefully and not allow themselves or their staff to be thrown by the criticism. They had a good narrative about positive steps that had subsequently been taken. They had to hold their nerve through a troublesome period and keep their focus on delivering the services to the highest possible standard.

"Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes. That includes you."

- Anne Lamott, author and public speaker

"Whilst working remotely, I've been starting meetings of the wider leadership team 15 minutes early and playing music to get us in the right mood.. I'm now getting requests!"

"I recognise when I am at risk of sucking the energy out of meetings and know that I need to check my mood. When I recognise that my frustration can be contagious, I need to switch into being quietly affirming of what we are seeking to move forward."

"The crazier it gets, the calmer we need to be."



Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee

Agile teams recover quickly when the unexpected happens. In their contingency planning, they have recognised that events can move too fast for formal governance processes to operate fully, and smaller, well-networked groups may need to act on the whole team's behalf. They are able to switch resources quickly to where they are most needed. They develop a culture where people are trusted to use their initiative within a clear framework of values.

Agile teams are quick to spot shifts in client or customer expectations, and the potential need to reinvent themselves. When restaurants were shut during Covid lockdown, and

more people were cooking at home, supermarkets could not always get the size of product that consumers wanted, whilst wholesalers were overstocked with bulk supplies for the catering trade. At least one small restaurant chain carried on buying in bulk, kept on some of their staff to break up large quantities into smaller packages, and offered a delivery service to all the customers on their database.

*"We can't flatten the sea
so we must learn to surf."*

Agile leaders are ready to ask themselves:

- What can we learn from other sectors, even if their business looks very different to ours? Are we prone to "not invented here" thinking?
- What are the trends we should be observing, and what are they telling us?
- Do we have enough diversity of thinking and outlook within our teams?
- Do we have sufficient understanding between us of the digital and other technologies that are now driving decision-making?
- Are there options we have chosen not to consider? Why?

Points for reflection

9. What have we learned from our experience of responding in a crisis?
10. Where might we find the insights to help us reframe our challenges?

*"We are so blinkered by
uncertainties that we
do not readily grasp the
opportunities."*

"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee."

– Muhammad Ali, three times world champion,
on his legendary agility in the boxing ring.

Case Study

A large NHS hospital was struggling in the early days of the Covid pandemic to accelerate staff testing, optimise the allocation of oxygen machines, and predict the possible demand for beds and emergency equipment. A conversation between a doctor and an academic led to collaboration with a group of postgraduate students in industrial engineering – and to a set of solutions which strengthened the hospital's resilience.



Weave the golden thread of trust

Progress on all these fronts requires a high degree of trust between individuals, teams and partner organisations. People need to trust each other enough to put any mistrust on the table – and to give each other the benefit of the doubt when things go wrong. Loss of trust often arises from a series of minor things rather than one big issue. Alert leaders spot what is happening and take time to surface the issues – knowing this will benefit relationships in the longer run.

“Effective trust requires reciprocity, or it can easily break.”

“You have to build trust in someone’s opinions, motives and commitment.. Core to ensuring trust is robust and honest conversations when things go wrong, and a renewed focus on a shared endeavour.”

Leaders reinforce the importance of trust when they:

- Create an atmosphere to talk about the “how” as well as the “what”
- Provide a sense of psychological safety
- Frame questions so as to surface tensions and anxieties
- Listen with intent to understand
- Accept that not everyone is ready to embrace change at the same pace, and that different people or groups may need different types of approach
- Are aware of doubts others might have about them because of past behaviour, and can demonstrate by their behaviours that they have changed.

Points for reflection

11. How do we ensure trusting relationships with the people who are key to our success?
12. When and how best do we surface signs of mistrust and address them?

Case Study

Dennis and Michelle Reina * describe three dimensions of trust:

- trust of character, where there is mutual understanding that people will do what they say they will do, and commitments are kept.
- trust of communication, where people can share information in good faith, and be confident that confidentiality will be respected. It feels safe to admit mistakes. There is an environment of collaboration that enables teams to thrive.
- trust of capability, where people leverage each others' skills and abilities and share new learning. They trust each other to innovate and to know what they are doing.

*"Why trust is critical to team success", Centre for Creative Leadership 2017

"We need to trust each other enough to put mistrust on the table."

"After I felt a colleague had let me down I was wary of their motives. I let this unease detrimentally affect the way I worked with them. I knew I needed to rebuild trust without raking over the previous incident. I suggested we work together on a new project which began to rebuild trust and drew on the best in both of us."

Next steps: Twelve questions for leaders and their leadership teams

See the wood for the trees

1. What is it that must be done and can only be done by us?
2. What is most likely to stall our momentum, and how do we avoid that happening?

Connect with each link in the chain

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Recent collaborations are the book *'The Reluctant Leader: stepping out of the shadows'* (2016), the Praesta Insight *'The Resilient Team'* (2017) and the Praesta Insight *'The Resilient Leader'* (2020).

They also co-authored the Praesta Insight *'Job-sharing: a Model for the Future Workplace'* (2018).

Hilary and Peter draw from their wider experience of leadership roles. Hilary is a Vice Chair on the Board of the British Red Cross. Peter is a Visiting Professor of Leadership Development at Higher Education Institutions in Canada, Australia and the UK and is the Chair of Guildford Cathedral Council.

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