Leadership in a fast-accelerating digital world

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BRADLEY HOWARD (BH): Hello, everyone. I'm Bradley Howard and you're listening to the latest episode of Tech Reimagined, a podcast where we're picking the brains of the most influential experts in their industries, to help answer some of the big questions around the technology that we use. Today, we're diving into an extremely interesting topic, discussing leadership in today's fast paced digital acceleration world. With his massive experience in all the relevant industries, our guest today is Brian McBride. Hello, Brian. Would you like to introduce yourself?

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BRIAN MCBRIDE, CHAIRMAN – TRAINLINE (BM): Sure. Thanks, Bradley. Yeah, I'm Brian McBride and my current roles are chairing Trainline, the company went public a couple of years ago, on which many of you buy your train tickets when you're back traveling into town on the train. I'm on the board of a big asset management company called Standard Life Aberdeen, and I'm on the board of a Swedish investment company called Kennebec. It's a technology investor, they've got investments in companies like Babylon here in the UK and Zalando, the online fashion player. So I get to see a European dimension too. I'm also on the board of a Scottish Equity Partners and I'm the Senior Executive Independent Non-executive on the board of the Ministry of Defense. So I get to see tech from quite a few angles. Prior to these, I was a chairing ASOS, I was chief exec of Amazon in the UK for six years. I was with Dell, I was with IBM, I was running T-Mobile. So I've always had bits and bytes running through my work for the past 25 years.

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BH: It sounds like you also always had quite a busy career as well.

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BM: Yes, indeed.

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BH: Let's start off with the first question. So, have you got any examples that you can share with us around digital acceleration as a response to the pandemic?

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BM: Well, I think what we've seen, certainly over the past year or so, is that people have changed their shopping habits and their behaviours and are using online much more. I think you've seen that across the generations. I've seen, you know, my 92 year old father in law is quite comfortable doing things online that he wouldn't have done before. People are doing online shopping. And I think people are putting, really, the mobile at the centre of what they do, whether it's buying your train tickets, checking in for a flight, if you're able to take one these days, or getting an Uber or whatever. So what we've seen is that the massive acceleration of a trend that was already there, this move from offline activity to online activity. I think these have been the most profound change, and I think there will be these changes for good, we're not going to reset back to where the model was 18 or 24 months ago.

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BH: And what can you tell us about some of the leaders of some of the businesses that you mentioned before, how they've responded and what kind of behaviours do they have?

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BM: What I've seen in the companies that I'm involved in, and also I've been on a number of, seminars and meetings with our chairs and Chief Execs and things, you know, I think everyone, got the same kind of shock when Boris first announced that we're to stay or and not go to work. And it's like, what's going to happen to our company? I think people scrambled very, very quickly. Just the basic stuff at the start. What technology do we need to be able to have board meetings, Exec meetings and just as importantly, to keep communicating with the staff? So everyone got, kitted out with stuff for working from home with, but just trying to learn Zoom, and Teams and, Google Meets and all of the different vehicles out there. They're all pretty similar but the buttons are in a different place, and I think we all we all kind of got there eventually. Many of us still forget to take ourselves off mute, et cetera, but that was a scramble and that happened pretty quickly, I think, just the way around meetings has changed as well.

You know, you can't have six hour meetings over Teams or Zoom, it's just too brain busting. Many of the boards I'm on, you know, the boards are meeting a bit more frequently, but shorter, you make sure the segments are shorter. Again, just make sure that your casting your eye around to make sure that everyone's going to get a chance to communicate. So I think the behaviour of getting in touch has been quite important, and then, of course, reaching out to your teams, whether it's a supervisor or a team leader in or reaching out to a small number, or how does the Chief Exec, talk to the whole company. So, again, getting into - and these are skills that not everyone had before that they've had to learn. But I think it's worked remarkably well, business has kept going, and I know that obviously, if you're in hospitality, or there are certain sectors, you know, airlines have been really, really badly hammered. But in the main, shopping, retailing and many business-to-business sectors have managed to cope very well with this. Actually, I think they've found that it's been very efficient in many ways. I know that certainly with some of our big tech teams, they find themselves more productive because they don't have to go to all of these huddles and stand ups and the constant interruptions from the Chief Exec wanting a new button or a new feature.

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BH: Or asking about the latest sales reports, etc. So what does a great leader look like in today's world compared to a couple of years ago? Because we've always wanted our leaders to be great communicators. What's changed?

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BM: There are some things that have changed and some things that haven't. I mean, leadership has always been about trying to unify people towards a common goal. It's about achieving goals that can't be achieved by one person working alone. The results of a well led group is going to be much more than the sum of the parts, and you know, there's lots of books about leadership. Of course, many of them come from retired generals or military people where leading is more pronounced, more obvious, but business leadership is really, really important. You need leaders who are very much the strategic, forward looking people who are inspiring people, engaging them, aligning them, influencing them. You also need managers, and they're more about executing efficiently, planning, organizing, budgeting, so you need both. Very often good managers become great leaders. It's not necessarily - so they're complimentary.

What I observe is that, when I was back in IBM, 30 years ago, leadership there was quite different to what I see around me now at Amazon and at Google and some of these great companies. When I was at IBM, it was very hierarchical, leadership was all about position. It was all about the hierarchy. That doesn't really happen in the modern world today. What you find is that companies like Amazon have what they call leadership principles. So actually, when we were recruiting or hiring people, we would look for characteristics that we believe that leaders needed to have and

look for those in the candidates that we were interviewing. And I think what you'll find today is that, the modern leaders are very, very different, much more consensual. They're not hierarchical. They're probably quite well educated. They're very used to dealing with ambiguity and they operate at pace. you really do have to move very quickly in this world and not be afraid to try stuff out, not be afraid if it doesn't work, and just kinda rub it out and start again. So if I talk about some of the things that I saw Amazon, they had a very rigorous hiring process for three or four or five people, were looking for four different skills, so you come at the candidate from four or five different angles. Some of the things that they talked about, insisting on high standards, leaders have got relentlessly high standards and they expect the same from their teams.

Leaders are right a lot of the time, they garner respect from their teams, from their peers, because their judgment is good, and they're vocally self-critical. Leaders don't believe that they or their team walk on water. They loudly and often, visibly, voice problems, failures, inside their own team, and they'll fix them. What leaders do is they think big, they create and they communicate a bold direction that inspires results. They think differently. They take risks. They challenge others to do the same, and they champion visionary ideas and then they hire and develop the best. I think this is the most important and most difficult aspect of leadership management. You've got to be constantly on the lookout for talent and they hire and develop visionaries who can execute great ideas privately. So bring in people who's going to raise the performance bar with every hire, people who will recognise, teach, coach exceptional talent. I remember a great phrase that I had the guy from Cisco use at a conference I was at in California once. Americans characterize people - as a sporting metaphor, they talk about A players, B players and C players. A players are the stars, the people you really want in your team. B players are the kind of, OK, we need a few of those in the organisation, and C people are really mediocre, you really don't want them around. What this guy said was that A players hire A players, and B players hire C players.

I think that's very, very true. If you're an a player, you want somebody even better than you on your team. You want to have people smarter than your own. B players hire somebody , not even as average as them, they don't want any challenge at all. So hirings an important part of it. Then it's about those other characteristics in leadership, very much around trust, trust in every aspect of life is really, really important. If people don't trust the leader, that leader won't be around for very long. You've got a backbone. You've got to disagree and commit. You've got conviction, you're tenacious, and eventually, if it doesn't go your way, you get behind it, you make sure that you brief it back to the team and you commit wholly to whatever decision the organisation's come up with. And then finally, you've got to deliver results. If you've got all of the other characteristics, but you can't actually get the business to grow or achieve its goals, there's probably no point in being there. So those are some of the thoughts about leadership. Another phrase I like is, the six most important words of leadership are, "I admit I made a mistake". So a little bit of humility helps there.

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BH: That was so insightful. Thank you so much for that. We obviously work in a much more flexible world now, working from home, our hours have changed significantly. How do you think the role of leadership has changed in this new flexible world?

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BM: Leadership is harder in this world. It's relatively easy if you're in an office, walking about, talking to colleagues, doing one-to-ones, having team meetings, strategy sessions, communicating. I'm not saying it's easy, but there's a kind of cadence and a routine about it that good leaders slip into naturally. When you're dealing with people, and you're both remote, you don't have the same relationship. You don't have the same bond, I don't think. You've obviously got to still have a very small talk and genuinely wonder how people's families are doing, etc. But,,

it feels a slightly artificial context, and sometimes you're having to give people difficult messages or deliver appraisals, etc. So I think it's harder for managers and for leaders, this remote world. But they've got to work really, really hard at it. I think everyone's been finding out, you know, different features within Zoom and Teams where you can have team meetings, you can have two different sessions going on. So I think it's back to what I said before, which is that everyone's been scrambling to learn about how to use this technology. I think what's going to happen is that you'll find that people will go back to the office. They may not all go back five days a week, 10 hours a day. So leaders and managers have got to figure out, do we make sure that all of the marketing people are choosing Wednesdays so that we can still have our stand ups? Do we want all of the tech team or the data team to be around? So all of this will have to figure itself out. But I think what you're going to find is that leaders and managers will be working harder about how to kind of make this new way of working work well.

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BH: How can people self-train to learn some of the skills which you've outlined today? What did you do during your career? Did you read lots of the management textbooks in the airport bookshop? Or how else did you work?

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BH: A great thing you can do is learn from your boss, because you learn one of two things. You learn how to do something or you learn how not to do something. But you're going to learn either way, and hopefully you learn more of the positive than the negative. But you will get learnings from every boss that you have because he or she will show you a way of doing things or a way of not doing things. So I think observation is really, really important because you can see in the live sense, what works and what doesn't, and you can see which they may not see the impact of a leader or a manager's behaviour or style on a team. When they walk out that room, you can see whether the team is dejected or elated.

You can see how to try and create that feeling at the end of a session. So I think observations are really important. There's a little bit of training as well. I think you have to be trained, things like interpersonal skills and being self-aware. There is training and there's courses, and again, nowadays it's a lot easier to access to that stuff because you can just do it while you're having a walk, listening to a podcast for half an hour rather than go off to a training course in some college for three or four weeks. So self-help, self-teaching is really, really important as well. I mean, leadership and leadership principles, many of them are timeless, they are classical. There's a guy who I commend to people and he's been around for years, a guy called John Adair. John Adair studied at Cambridge and then he joined the Scots Guards, I think. Then they went off down to the Middle East and led a Bedouin tribe or a Bedouin regiment, a remarkable guy. He came back and decided he didn't want to progress through the army rank, and he became a leadership coach at the Royal Military Academy. He's become one of the gurus, internationally. He wrote some books back in the mid-90s, how to grow great leaders and effective leadership and some of the things that he comes out with, are again about influence versus control.

You want to be influential in a company, and that's quite different from control. Influence is a behaviour. It doesn't come from your position, and so reading some of his stuff , you can read the synopsis online. Jim Collins, you know, Good To Great, there's lots of leadership books out there. I think this is an area where you do actually have to do a bit reading, you have to invest a bit of time in it. But what I would say is that if you think about yourself, again, be self-aware, think about the people around you, you will find great leadership in all walks of life. People who are running netball teams, football teams, scout groups, leading a church group. In all walks of life there are

examples of great leaders. Those people don't necessarily characterise themselves as leaders, they may not have a supervisory job in a company, but they've got the behaviours of great leaders and you'll see it all around you.

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BH: I couldn't agree more again with you. Finally, one last question. We've got a new influx of work experience, students starting at Endava actually today. We've got one in the virtual studio at the moment. What's your advice to new graduates and people going through school at the moment?

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BH: First of all, I think it's really important to get a job. I know people want to go off traveling and that's all part of the life experience. But I do think you've got to get into the world of work quite quickly and understand what it's all about, and actually, the world of work is not about what degree you bring to the party or what your position is or your title or whatever. It's about understanding human interaction, interpersonal skills. Those are the skills, the life skills that you pick up. Yeah, look, you might be a great stats graduate and you want to become a great data scientist and absolutely go and learn those additional functional skills. But to me, the world of work is how you engage with people. It gets back to some of the things we've spoken about in the past about leadership. It's all about people - work is a people business. Unless you're a brilliant research scientist that wants to be locked in a room on your own doing great experiments, most work involves talking to other individuals and groups of people and trying to get something achieved. So I say to people: almost doesn't matter what job you get, but get into a job, because what I have seen in all of the great organisations that I've worked with and for, is that cream rises to the top. Smart people, bright people, people with good people skills get on quickly. If you're a leader in a company, you're looking at the talent. You're looking at the people who have an impact and you move them through quickly. So if you're good, get in at the ground level, get your hands dirty, don't care what the job title is, just be the best you can be in the job that you're in today and very soon somebody will tap you on the shoulder and move you up.

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BH: Amen. Thank you very much, Brian. It's been such a pleasure having you on the show today, talking about leadership with us. For everyone listening, if you enjoyed the podcast, like, share and subscribe for free and come back next time for a new episode of Tech Reimagined. If you'd like to reach out and contact us, please go to endava.com and fill in the contact form there. We'll be back in touch as soon as we can. Cheers, and see you next time.