QLFA
LEE FARNSWORTH AGENCY

COVID LEGACY

LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES

2021

This report aims to provide insights into the challenges of leading healthcare companies in the COVID era, and predicts the leadership legacy.

At the beginning of December on hearing the news about the first vaccine approval, I started to wonder in earnest about the post-COVID world.

What, I wondered, would be the enduring impact of COVID on the pharmaceutical and med tech sectors that I serve?

I already had some pretty clear ideas about communications with HCPs, but what about the environment within these organisations?

What about the leadership legacy?

Between December 9th 2020 and January 18th 2021 I conducted Zoom interviews with 11 senior leaders.

My cohort (I hope they won't mind being called that) included those with national, regional, international and global responsibility. The majority, but not all, contributors were in commercial roles.

Contributors

Hilary Baseley	Grunenthal
Dan Coombes	UCB
Anna Edwards	Allergan
Miriam Kenrick	Santen
Roy Khoury	LivaNova
Daniela Malik	Galderma
Simon Newton	Jazz
David Spackman	Jazz
Nick Spicer	AbbVie
Kelvin Tan	Jazz
Christian Szita	Ferring

In this report I have tried to summarise what I learned from these conversations.

I hope that the leadership insights I have captured provide valuable stimulus to others in this sector and potentially beyond.

Section 1
Current Status

First, I asked contributors to report on the current situation in their organisations. More specifically, I asked about their assessment of the degree of alignment and motivation in their teams today, versus the pre-COVID period.

Alignment

Most contributors believe that current levels of strategic alignment are good. Several believe alignment may even be stronger now versus pre-COVID. These contributors cited a number of factors which have contributed to alignment gains. Firstly, the pandemic increased the sheer volume of communication:

> **In order to ensure that people felt connected, felt part of the team, felt like they weren't isolated, communication went up through the roof.**

Often the objective of communication was to provide reassurance and to assess the well-being of team members but strong alignment on purpose and strategy was achieved too.

Secondly, leaders and teams were forced to significantly reduce the number of activities that they had been planning to do. Some of these activities were reduced as a consequence of budget cuts and feasibility, but sharpened prioritisation was also a deliberate strategy:

> **The feedback on clarity of priorities was very positive. They said, "Oh, my god for once we know exactly what we need to do. Normally it's a list of thirty different things."**

That said, alignment wasn't easy to achieve. Several of the contributors spoke of the huge effort required to maintain alignment and sustaining frequent touchpoints:

Alignment (continued)

> **There were compensating mechanisms including creating a lot more touchpoints, but that takes its toll.**

And leaders identified some groups for whom alignment was more difficult to achieve or assess. For example, some felt more confident about the level of alignment for their extroverts versus introverts.

> **I'm very conscious that it's the quiet ones that we need to worry about at a time like this.**

Other felt that new hires, new teams and teams in the midst of a significant change effort were disproportionately disadvantaged by the pandemic. Some believed that alignment was a particular challenge in decentralised organisations.

Also, some leaders believe that while strategic alignment is good, there is a feeling that it is somewhat fragile. This fragility is a consequence of the fact that it hasn't been possible to spend extend periods of time digging into contentious topics' which, by their nature, require prolonged debate and challenge.

> **What we're really missing is sufficient time to get into the crunchy stuff and really walk through it so we can come out with the same understanding and vision.**

Motivation

Overall, leaders believe that levels of team motivation have wavered more than alignment. Several spoke of periodic fluctuations. For example, motivation dipped when it became clear that it was going to be a long time before COVID related restrictions are eliminated. Some of the participants spoke about difficulties in maintaining their own motivation and described how they had shared personal feelings with their teams in order to model a culture of trust and openness.

> **I talk about my own feelings, about how I'm feeling and vulnerabilities. I've been doing about that a lot over the last few months.**

Maintaining motivation of field based teams was seen as a particular challenge because some of these employees are concerned about jobs security due to dramatic changes in the way companies engage with customers. Also, where access to customers is difficult, maintaining motivation to complete yet more training has proved challenging.

Many leaders and employees are fatigued (the word fatigue came up often) by the constant, relentless online meetings.

Contributors believe that the number of meetings has increased partly because there is no opportunity for short, informal, water-cooler style catch ups. In the absence of informal opportunities, the formal thirty minute meeting has become the norm.

Lack of travel is another reason that some believe meetings have increased, i.e. there are more meetings because people have more time for meetings; nature loves a vacuum. Of course, this has only reduced the ability for everyone to do the work that needs to occur outside of meetings. But still the meetings come:
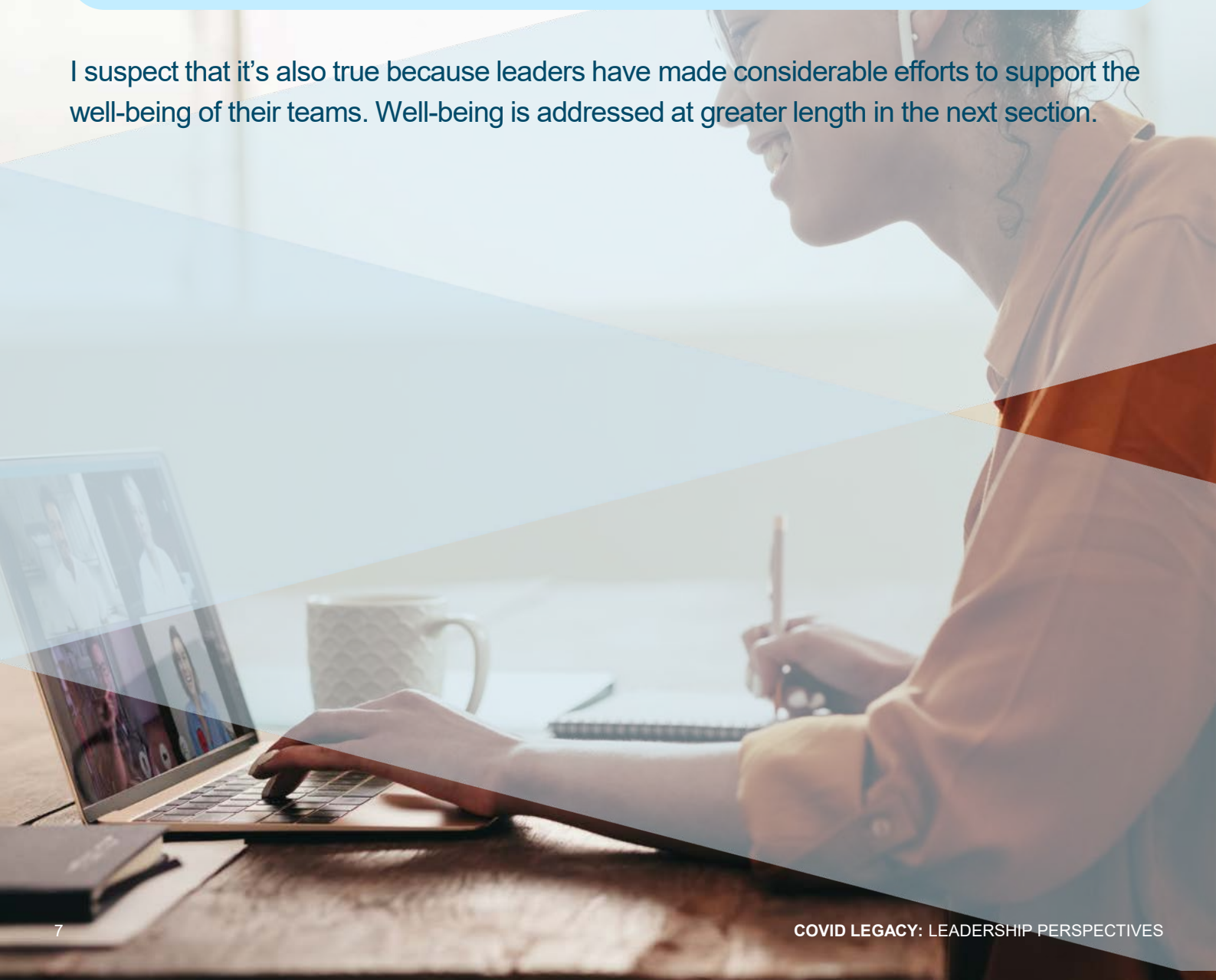
> **Literally it's like work equals meetings, which I'm trying to change.**

Motivation (continued)

However, there are some good things which have emerged as a consequence of these challenges: many of the participants expressed the view that teams have actually grown closer during the pandemic. This was not a finding I had anticipated. It happened because teams have got to learn more about each other's personal lives:

> **I've got to meet a few of my team's kids. And sometimes I have had to say, 'Apologies, I have to go and help with my kid's class. It's funny, we are further away from each other but we've learned to empathise more.**

I suspect that it's also true because leaders have made considerable efforts to support the well-being of their teams. Well-being is addressed at greater length in the next section.
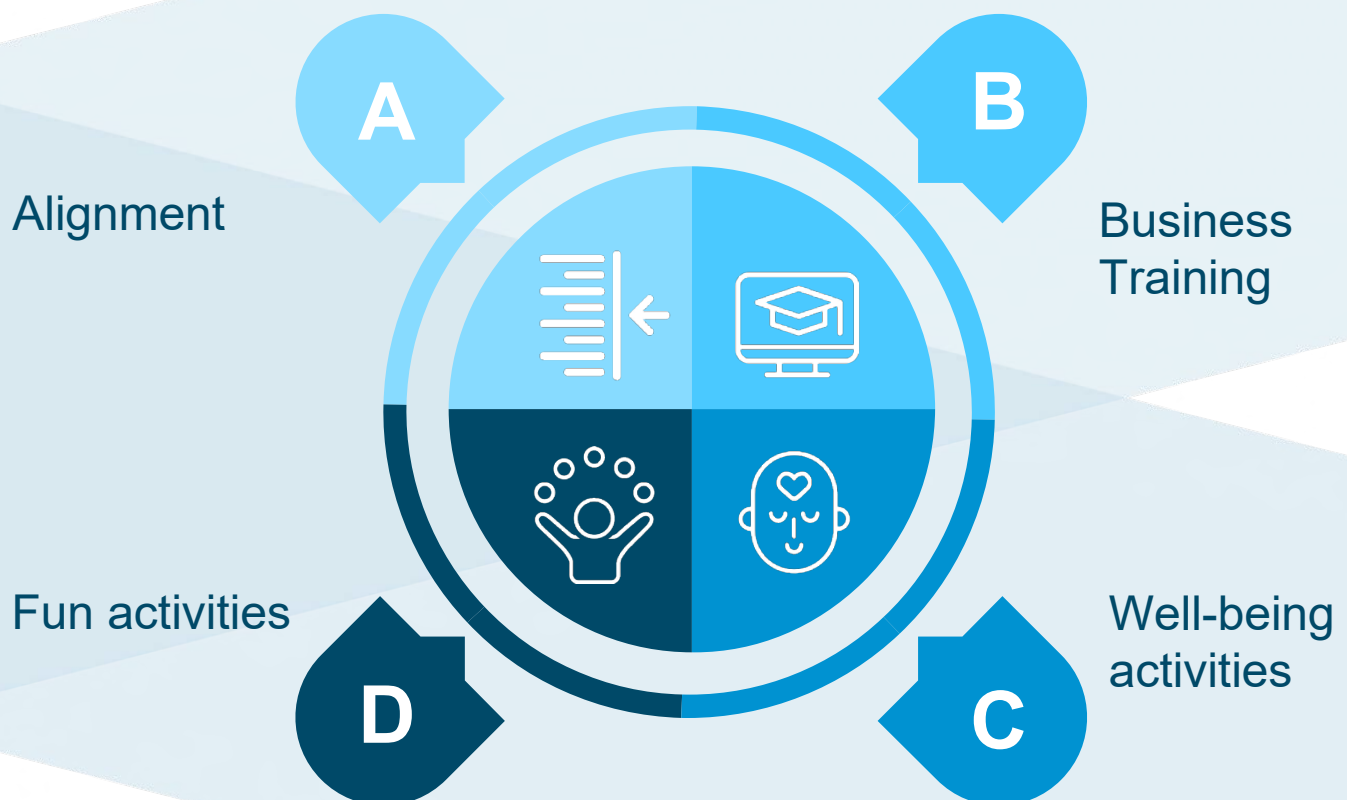
Section 2

Leadership Activities

Next, I asked participants about the kinds of activities they had instituted in order to lead their teams and organisations through the COVID-era.

I have grouped these leadership activities into **four broad categories:**

Alignment

Business Training

Fun activities

Well-being activities

a) Alignment

As, discussed in Section 1, leaders recognized the need for frequent communication from the outset of the pandemic. Pharma companies have hosted a lot of 'town hall' style meetings since March 2020. Some organisations have used polls to more accurately gauge organizational mood.

Initially meetings were conducted approximately every couple of weeks but over time frequency has reduced in most organisations as the pace of change reduced and the 'new normal' became established.
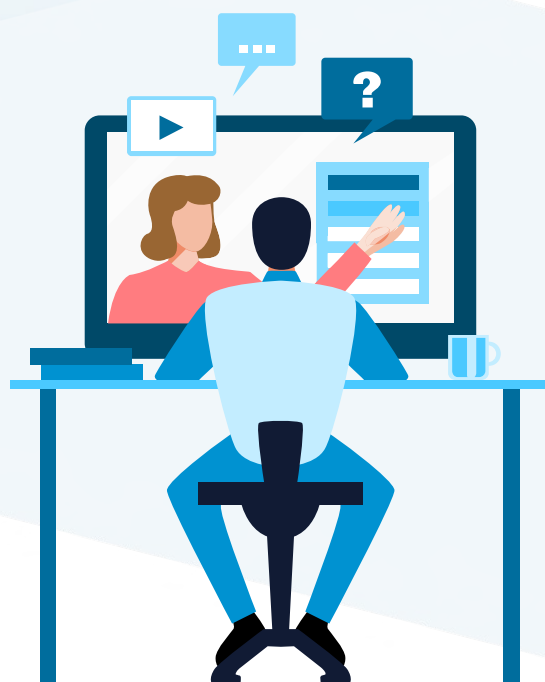
In addition, significant effort has been invested in conducting virtual, cross-functional business planning meetings. Leaders are rightly proud of the degree of cross-functional and geographic alignment that they have been able to achieve.

> **When we look at full brand plans from across the markets, we had a ridiculous level of alignment because everybody felt it was their plan. The unity of approach is incredible.**

Nevertheless, some are concerned that alignment is more fragile because there hasn't been the opportunity for deep debate about the most contentious elements.

b) Business Training

Reduction of customer facing time has created opportunities to update scientific and clinical training. A, lots of effort has been invested in providing virtual communications training and especially virtual selling training. Discussions about selling capabilities were beyond the scope of these conversations but it was clear that the transition to virtual selling has been a pain point for pharma companies.

c) Well-Being Activities

Leaders have invested a huge amount of effort to support the well-being of their teams. The catch-up meeting has been the workhorse of well-being management. 'How are you?' has been the crucial question. Beyond concerns about delivering on the task, leaders have gone further to ask, 'How are you coping with all of the challenges in your life?' 'How is your family?' 'How is the home schooling going?' In short, the leaders I spoke with have demonstrated that they understand, care and empathise.

> **I've been very much in listening mode. I've been trying to understand what people need to get through this and then shaping that into how we approach the pandemic.**

Leaders have also dedicated significant time to well-being in 1:1 meetings. Some have reached out beyond their leadership teams to gauge the mood of the whole organization. However, they have come to realise that this can be misinterpreted, leading to unintended stress.

c) Well-Being Activities (continued)

Leaders quickly became aware that virtual meetings were a significant drain on the well-being of their teams. They have taken a number of actions to reduce the impact of constant thirty minute meetings. Meetings mitigation activities have included:

Meeting training	Creation of meetings guidelines or charters	Creation of protected off-line time, including at the more extreme end, 'Off-line Fridays'

One of the contributors even scheduled a sham 90 minute virtual meeting in order to ring-fence downtime for their organization. When staff dialed in to this meeting they were told that they were free to spend the allocated time going for a walk, with their family or doing any other self-care activity.

Leaders have also employed less traditional well-being activities, such as:

Yoga

Mindfulness and meditation

Personal resilience training

d) Fun Activities

Leaders recognise that fun is an important part of the glue that binds teams:

> **Other teams were picking up what we were doing and challenged it. I think it's spectacularly missing the point if people don't understand why the fun stuff is important.**

I was impressed by the all the different ways that leaders have created opportunities for teams to laugh and have fun together. Listed below are the activities that I heard about:

Quizzes (lots of quizzes)	Comedy nights	Bake off competitions	Book clubs
Cocktail making	Magic shows	Online happy hour	Advent calendar competition
Colouring	Karaoke	Bingo	Murder Mystery event

d) Fun Activities

> **We sent everyone a box. In it there was some flour, some crayons, candles and cookies. We said, today is going to be about hanging out together.**

All of the participants had invested effort in supporting the well-being of their teams and all had invested effort in fun. The mix of well-being versus fun activities seemed to vary amongst the leaders I spoke with. But perhaps the distinction is a false one; after all, having fun together is a very effective way to preserve well-being.

Section 3

Anticipating the post-COVID corporation

Leaders and teams have learned how to function via virtual communication, because they've had too. Companies have conducted even relatively large-scale events, such as brand-planning and internal conferences, online. I was curious: based on what they had learned during the COVID era, when and how did leaders anticipate that teams would come together post-COVID?

a) The office environment

Leaders believe that one consequence of the COVID era is that the effectiveness of working from home has been legitimized and validated:

> **I don't think I will ever work five days a week again in an office ever again, in my professional career.**

This development is warmly welcomed by most leaders. They believe that COVID has helped to enable a long overdue transition to greater flexibility:

> **One of the things that COVID has done is demonstrated to those leaders who didn't trust that people would work in the home setting that work is not a location.**

However, leaders are still trying to figure out the most effective way to make the post-COVID team function:

> **It's been interesting listening to my colleagues in France and Germany who were able to go back into the office. They felt their productivity went up two-hundred percent.**

a) The office environment

Leaders still need to figure out how to capture the productivity gains that physical togetherness provides while supporting flexibility. Leaders are considering allocating specific days when teams will work in the office. But even this is not as simple as it might seem at first pass.

> **There's no point coming in and then you just all sit at your desks and work on what you could have done at home. I think we need to say, 'We are going to have a three hour team meeting and scheduled catch-ups.**

And some are concerned that hybrid meetings (i.e. where some of the team are physically together and others are online) could reduce the productivity gains.

> **What I think doesn't work is when you try to mix both. When you have twenty people together and another ten joining virtually; I think that makes it very difficult.**

Interestingly, some leaders are giving thought to re-designing offices in order to create an environment that support the kind of work that people do when they physically come together (I will expand on what kind of work that is in Section 4).

> **I think our office space will be more designed for collaboration.**

b) Meetings

Here I am referring to those periodic meetings which include participants who are not all based at the head office. Examples include international leadership team meetings, brand summits and internal conferences.

Here also, leaders believe that physical meetings are more productive than online meetings, especially for some specific activities (more on this in Section 4).

That said, they also believe that online meetings are now much more productive than they used to be. And they are aware of the advantages of conducting meetings online (e.g. reduced costs, reduced time away from home and perhaps even increased participation).

> **We're not going to go back to all the old touchpoints in the business planning cycle. I think CFOs will look at the offices and the travel spending and they will be thinking we don't need all that now.**

Once again, leaders know they need to trade-off between productivity and its costs. In this specific case a pretty clear consensus has already emerged already. Leaders believe that when travel and meeting restrictions are lifted they will roughly maintain the total number of meetings at approximately the same frequency as pre-COVID. However, they believe they will reduce the number of physical meetings by approximately half, making up the number with online meetings:

> **It will be more of a hybrid. Maybe half will be physical meetings and we will also continue with virtual because we know it works now.**

Section 4

Aligning activity type and meeting type

Given that leaders anticipate that physical meeting opportunities will be reduced in the post-COVID corporation, I was curious to find out what kind of activities leaders will prioritise during precious physical meetings. Here, again, the consensus was clear. There are broadly two kinds of activities which leaders will prioritise in physical meetings.

a) Cultural activities

Leaders recognise that team building and other deep cultural work is much more effective when it is conducted face to face. They also recognise that there is huge value in just creating opportunities to let people get to know each other or to renew and reinforce existing relationships:

> **There is something great about being together as a team and looking at these brilliant people and realizing that I am lucky to be part of this group.**

b) Problem solving

Leaders believe that creative problem solving activities are much more effective when people are together. Foremost amongst these activities is brand strategy development and business planning.

> **It will be for the creative things. The kind of situations where somebody has an idea and somebody builds on it. It gets bigger and then someone comes in with a curveball. You pull it apart and put it back together again. That process is difficult virtually.**

Section 5

The first time…

For my final question I asked the leaders to tell me about their number one priority for the first time they are able to come together as a team post-COVID.

Here the consensus was absolute: Nobody spoke about business reviews; nobody spoke about strategic alignment; nobody spoke about a major change initiative. Everybody spoke about community and humanity. I will let their words do the talking:

> **The honest answer is to have a beer, say thank you, shake people's hands, look in the whites of their eyes and just ask them how they are.**

> **Part one is going to be how are we and a recognition of what we've been through. It would be tragic to think, "Right, let's crack on". It's a poignant moment.**

> **It's more about the feeling than, I really want to do my launch plan, for example. It will be so exhilarating to get everyone in the room, chatting, talking, touching, looking each other in the eye. That's the bit I am aching for.**

Closing comments

We are fortunate to work in or providing services to the pharmaceutical industry. Our industry and thus our careers have been less adversely affected than many others. However, nobody has emerged unscathed. Staff are fatigued and most lpeople long to reunite with their teams and communities.

It hasn't all been bad though; people have learnt new skills and they have positively surprised themselves with their resilience.

It is likely that they will emerge from the pandemic more efficient and effective. And they will definitely cherish the time that they are able to spend together.

With huge thanks to the leaders who contributed their time, their insight and their wisdom