

# Report on virtual CEO Roundtable

28 April 2020



AB InBev - Ahold Delhaize - Asahi Breweries Europe - Coca-Cola İçecek - Danone - DHL Consulting - ICA Gruppen - Kalypso - Kellogg's - Kimberly-Clark - KraftHeinz - Learn to Grow - Lila Group - Manor - METRO - Migros Ticaret - Nielsen - Reckitt Benckiser - Moderators from LEAD Network

## Executive summary

Since its inception in 2017, the CEO Roundtable has become a unique forum for senior executives within the European consumer packaged goods and retail industry to speak openly about the challenges and rewards of promoting more women to leadership positions.

Our most recent session was conducted virtually, due to coronavirus restrictions. Chaired by Frans Muller, CEO of Ahold Delhaize, the discussion involved 23 CEOs and senior leaders, 40% of whom were women. Two key topics were explored:

1. **Inclusion and belonging** are more important than ever at a time when normal support structures have vanished. People may be feeling anxious and unsafe, or may be reassessing what is truly important to them. What leadership styles are most effective during the crisis – and beyond?
2. Data shows that the **socio-economic impact** of the pandemic could have a disproportionate impact on women and reverse the progress we've made towards gender equality, while the UN has warned of far-reaching consequences for women and girls.<sup>1</sup> How can companies mitigate these effects and remain focused on diversity during the crisis?

### Key takeaways

- A more inclusive leadership style is emerging: leaders are communicating frequently, listening more and showing genuine concern for employees' wellbeing. They are reinforcing trust by being transparent about decision making.
- With many people working from home, there is a new awareness of the value of women's unpaid labour and a greater appreciation of flexibility – positive developments that are likely to stay with us long after the crisis is over.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/put-women-and-girls-centre-efforts-recover-covid-19>

- Diversity action is being maintained during the pandemic, whether that's taking steps to help female employees who may be at risk of domestic violence, or holding mentoring sessions remotely, using platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams.
- If handled skilfully, the paradigm shift to remote working presents a unique opportunity to redefine company purpose, create new structures and dynamics, and build a more inclusive future.

During the discussion, our participants generated scores of insights and suggestions for inclusive practices during the pandemic and beyond. This report organizes these points into themes for easy reference. There is also an update on our CEO Pledge and an appeal for your ideas for LEAD Network's virtual 2020 annual event.

We hope you find this report a useful tool as you continue to manage and motivate your teams during these difficult times.

## Leadership style and communications

- The current situation calls for leaders to be both action-oriented and reflective, which can be a tough balancing act.
- Leaders are making time to discuss their decision-making with the workforce, using formats such as group meetings, webinars, Q&A sessions and videos. These forums can also be used to share inspiring stories from around the business to energise people, talk about what's coming up in the week ahead, and listen to people's concerns.
- Leaders must build trust by being transparent and reassuring people that decisions are taken in everyone's best interests. It's vital that information is up-to-date and correct, in order to combat rumours and misinformation. The key message is that no one is going to be left behind.
- Where store-based staff are in the frontline because of their contact with the public, it is crucial that leaders communicate clearly on safety issues. Many send out a daily message from the CEO to demonstrate support.
- The status of food retail and its associated supply chain has risen to the number-two position in society, second only to the healthcare sector. People working in this area are seen as critical partners who are helping to feed families and communities, and keep everyday life functioning. This fact makes employees very proud and can be a powerful way to motivate team members who are working remotely.
- Some companies are using employee surveys to do sense checks and identify issues. They need to create a baseline for the 'new normal' against which changes can be measured. Some are even doing a daily 'how are you feeling today?' survey to keep track of employees' welfare.
- There is a genuine interest in people's health and wellbeing, with senior managers calling people they would not usually connect with. There is more caring, empathy and humility. Inclusive behaviour is on the rise.
- The crisis is allowing leaders to get to know their employees in new ways: virtual meetings mean seeing the inside of people's homes, their children and their pets. This brings a

closeness that was not there before. It also allows leaders to show vulnerability, since they too are subject to disruptions such as a crying baby, barking dog, or technology glitch.

- Leaders are asking their employees if there is anything they can do to help. Requests can then be acted on, for example delivering office chairs or other equipment to people's homes to ensure they have a safe and comfortable set-up to work from.

## Remote and flexible working

- The adoption of remote working and flexibility has been massively accelerated by the crisis and will permanently change the way companies operate. The assumption that you need to be physically in the office for meetings has vanished. Digital has built a new definition of what presence means.
- Remote working makes it easier to build new connections: employees have time with CEOs that they did not have before; industry leaders are finding that government officials are easier to access through virtual channels.
- With everyone stuck at home, there is a dawning realisation that work and private life cannot always be neatly separated. There is a greater understanding among men of the unpaid work that tends to be done by women, such as childcare and chores.
- There is a more flexible attitude to scheduling: some companies have introduced new guidelines such as no meetings before 9am or after 5pm; a stop at lunchtime to focus on family and allow parents to connect, and weekend or evening working for those that prefer it.
- Agility has increased. The crisis is forcing companies to simplify the way they work and cut complex interfaces and unnecessary hierarchies/bureaucracy.
- It's useful to create safe spaces for employees to come together and talk about how they are doing, for example through 'coffee calls' on platforms such as WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams. This helps to keep the social aspect of work within the virtual environment, to enhance the sense of belonging and wellbeing. People need 'feel-good' times more than ever.
- Once lockdown restrictions are eased, companies should allow people to make their own decisions about when it is safe and practical for them to come back to the physical workplace.
- After the crisis, there will be a re-evaluation of buildings and the use of physical space. Meeting rooms may be largely eliminated in favour of virtual meetings. Processes may be simplified and hot spots created to enable collaboration and more inclusiveness. Companies need to embrace the lessons of the crisis, embed smart working practices, and ensure they don't just revert to 'business as usual.'

## Diversity

- Once offices and warehouses begin to reopen, companies need to adopt a D&I lens when setting guidelines about safe working practices. Gender considerations must be factored into decision-making. For example, pregnant women may not be able to wear PPE.

- In the light of the UN’s warning about the long-term risks for women and girls due to the pandemic, companies may increasingly feel they have a responsibility to support families and individuals where government support is inadequate.
- There has been a surge in domestic violence, and companies need to help keep women safe. They may want to ask themselves what alert mechanisms are in place and what is the appropriate level of involvement? They could consider expanding the remit of existing employee hotlines to take in coronavirus-related issues.
- Organisations must not take their eye off the ball regarding ongoing topics such as unconscious bias and maternity leave. Some are being very intentional about this, for example by having a virtual International Women’s Day and continuing training for managers on unconscious bias.
- Mentoring should continue. It can be done very effectively via platforms such as Zoom, or even with simple voice calls.
- Companies must train female employees where necessary to ensure they have the skills to handle new technology.
- Some companies have observed female leaders handling the current volatility and uncertainty better than their male counterparts – they have been calmer and more orderly, and better at finding balance, perhaps because they are already used to juggling responsibilities.
- Female leaders have been stepping up and volunteering to take on extra responsibilities, which could open up more career opportunities once the crisis is over.
- The retail sector is becoming more attractive to top female talent, partly because businesses are creating such a strong sense of community and belonging during the crisis. Female leaders are naturally good in supporting staff and customers in the store. Companies now have the opportunity to seize the crisis to push the D&I agenda forward and attract qualified female talent.
- Some companies are focusing on hiring women from the technology sector since IT is an area where women tend to be underrepresented. Digital technology is only going to receive more prominence as shopping habits shift and remote working continues.
- As well as being a huge challenge, the pandemic offers a unique opportunity for companies to transform for the better. In the long term, we may see more effective problem-solving and more appreciation of diversity, because everyone is on the same level when they meet virtually. Decisions have to be made transparently rather than in side spaces or cliques. Leaders usually have their ‘go to’ people; now they are seeing different people stepping up and providing valuable perspectives.

## Feedback

Participants reacted very positively to the virtual roundtable, giving a satisfaction score of 4.3 out of 5. They praised the breakout discussion groups; the sincerity of the contributions and the chance to interact with other CEOs.

*“There was rich participation. The fact that 20+ CEOs attended just shows the continued focus on diversity and inclusion during these times.”*

*“Great organisation both in terms of content and digital setup.”*

*“Thank you so much for a very well managed and insightful session. I got some very good pointers out of it.”*

*“It is very valuable to hear what other companies are doing and how they are reflecting on these times.”*

## Progress on the CEO Pledge

At our Madrid event last year, we were pleased to report that the proportion of women in senior executive positions in Europe had risen to 34%, up from 25% in 2017. The LEAD Network CEO Pledge has been instrumental in achieving this progress. To date, 38 companies have either signed the pledge, or are close to signing.

After the virtual roundtable, we were delighted to learn from METRO CEO Olaf Koch that the company has decided to sign the Pledge – a clear message that diversity commitments can and must continue during this time of crisis.

To really make an impact in the industry, we want to reach 50 signatories in the near future. We believe the current crisis presents a chance to harness the lessons of flexible working and make a step change for gender equality. And you can play a key part in making this happen:

- Drive industry-wide take-up of the CEO Pledge by tapping into your network and encouraging friends, colleagues and contacts to sign. If all current signatories did this, we could quickly double our numbers.
- When negotiating a contract with a supplier or manufacturer, request that they sign the CEO Pledge. This is already common practice in certain areas such as sustainability.

## Do you have ideas for LEAD Network’s 2020 virtual event?

Our annual event, which was scheduled to take place in Istanbul this autumn, will now be held virtually. While this is not something we would have chosen, we are determined to find the positive in it. It may mean that even more people are able to attend, and we hope it will open up new ways of interacting and sharing our support for each other.

We would very much like to hear your ideas about topics and formats we could incorporate into the event, scheduled for 6-8 October 2020. Please contact Mick Broekhof at [mick.broekhof@lead-eu.net](mailto:mick.broekhof@lead-eu.net)