



**CEB**  
**Chief Executives Board**  
**for Coordination**

**High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM)**

41<sup>st</sup> Session, 25-26 March 2021

Virtual

**Senior Leadership Commitments**

for the Future of Work in the United Nations System

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## Introduction

United by the highest standards of the international civil service and the UN Secretary-General's call for 'principled and visionary UN leadership,' the CEB Task Force on the Future of the United Nations System Workforce has identified five critical Senior Leadership Commitments (SLCs) that have been developed to help prepare UN leaders to steer the transition of their organizations and workforce towards the future of work. These commitments build on the UN System Leadership Framework and incorporate the lessons that have been learned from the COVID-19 crisis as well as the challenges that need to be addressed by entities.

The [UN System Leadership Framework](#) set out nine defining characteristics of UN leadership: It is *norm-based, principled, accountable, inclusive, multidimensional, transformational, collaborative, self-applied, pragmatic and action-oriented*. While these remain unchanged, the pandemic has accelerated transformational change and provided the opportunity to challenge many previous assumptions about the way we work. Assumptions that linked productivity to a common physical space and standardized work schedules are no longer valid, and principles of trust and results-based performance have never been more important. In this new space, leadership will be defined by the experience individual leaders can provide.

The five Senior Leadership Commitments (SLCs) are supported by three crosscutting Principles and provide a structure for leaders to embark on a journey to embrace the future of work. Leaders need to model the behaviours they want to see in others. The SLCs are designed for all senior leaders across the UN system.

Upholding and embodying all of these five Commitments will require openness, determination, resilience, and sustained support from UN entities to their senior leaders, especially in the forms of ongoing coaching and collective reflection. This new way of working will help to reinvigorate our organizational culture by shifting away from a top-down approach to inviting pro-active and inclusive leadership. For those assuming leadership roles, a thorough onboarding process anchored in these Commitments and the practices and behaviours they entail will need to be developed by their respective entities.

There are several accountability mechanisms that organizations could consider to promote the implementation of these Commitments. An illustrative list of suggestions is provided below:

- Ensure regular dialogue and reflections in which these Commitments and Principles and their concrete application are discussed and reflected upon.
- Encourage senior leader to share and discuss the Commitments with their teams in order to identify together achievements, challenges or ways how these can be best put into practice.
- Integrate the Commitments and Principles into entity-specific competency frameworks, performance appraisals and other relevant frameworks.
- Ensure personnel in leadership positions review and adopt publicly (in front of their teams) the Commitments and Principles.

## The Senior Leadership Commitments



**1 People first:** Fostering employee engagement and inclusion by putting people first.



**2 Grow:** Recognizing learning and development as a fundamental and continuous necessity.



Five commitments designed for leaders who pledge to uphold them across the UN System to enable excellence everywhere.



**3 Connect:** Embracing new leadership and organizational models that encourage greater collaboration.



**4 Trust:** Cultivating a culture of authenticity, participation and transparency.



**5 Evolve:** Nurturing the passion and change needed for excellence.

## Crosscutting Principles

These principles provide the underlying foundation for the Senior Leadership Commitments and should be incorporated into their operationalization.



**Leveraging technology** to enable new and more efficient ways of working.



**Embracing a truly 'One UN'** spirit that goes beyond each organization and genuinely places common objectives first.



**Being ecologically conscious** of how we work and act to ensure the lightest possible environmental footprint in everything we do.

1<sup>st</sup> commitment:

## People first

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*Fostering employee engagement and inclusion by putting people first.*

Striving for superior service delivery by providing an environment for employees to thrive, no matter where they serve. Offering the best possible employee experience to sustain and strengthen engagement and to ensure the people we serve are at the forefront of our work.

### As a Senior Leader, I commit to:

- **Shape an inclusion culture:** Support and treat all employees respectfully, fairly and equitably, equipping colleagues to thrive through inclusion, engagement, openness, collaboration and innovation, so that people feel empowered and valued to contribute to an organizational culture that is participatory, where everyone can flourish and strive for excellence in an environment free from abuse of authority, harassment, including sexual harassment, and sexual exploitation and abuse.
- **Optimize the employee experience:** Ensure that every aspect of the current model works harmoniously to deliver the best possible experience for employees. It is important to recognize that by changing what doesn't work, we can adapt and drive employee engagement.
- **Harness continuous improvement:** Consciously investing in and recognizing the need to develop all employees and fostering a productive, fulfilling and purposeful workplace where everyone may thrive.
- **Align people and purpose:** Continuously seeking alignment of organizational and individual purpose, so that employees may honour their calling within an authentic and people-centric context, where an entity's values are integrated into every aspect of their organization.

### Ideas for the journey – or examples of concrete actions:

- Moments that matter: I apply a flexible mindset to support employees when faced with difficult moments in their lives, and develop internal communication initiatives with managerial teams to encourage a similar management style.
- Being a champion: I advocate for improved recruitment experiences, better onboarding, and for providing managers and employees with the tools and environment that enable them to deliver their best and where development is seen as critical for performance.
- Enabling flexibility: I endeavour to provide employees with the right tools and a supportive environment that enables them to deliver their best.
- Inclusion: I make myself available to meet with individuals or various groups that represent the broad diversity of the global workforce with an open mindset that welcomes the perspective of all, especially the more invisible segments of the workforce and endeavour to "listen to understand" rather than "listen to respond".
- Be an advocate: I actively advocate for all employees' rights, especially in regards to gender equality, freedom from sexual harassment, advancing the concerns of marginalized groups and being particularly mindful of women, persons with disability, minorities and LGBTIQ+ employees who may be more likely to experience discrimination in certain duty stations.
- Meetings with intentionality: I structure and conduct meetings that are welcoming of everybody's participation, irrespective of their communication styles

2<sup>nd</sup> commitment:

## Grow

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*Recognizing learning and development as a fundamental and continuous necessity.*

In an increasingly complex world, the ability to learn and adapt is crucial. Our understanding of learning should therefore extend beyond individual educational and training activities and consider growth and development as an essential and ongoing part of our work. Continuous learning opportunities are necessary both to be attractive to employees and to allow our workforce to adapt effectively to rapidly changing contexts and needs.

**As a Senior Leader, I commit to:**

- **Promote and facilitate learning:** Enable and encourage personnel to take advantage of meaningful learning opportunities, either to build on existing skills or to develop new ones. Ensure that learning needs are regularly identified and addressed.
- **Enable personal growth and career pathing:** Provide employees with the opportunity to discuss professional development or career aspirations within the UN system and support them in exploring opportunities in a versatile and flexible way.
- **Be open for different learning approaches:** Give employees the freedom and opportunity to identify and use the learning format best suited to their specific goals and needs either by using learning formats that are already widely used or by exploring new approaches provided the costs can be justified.

**Ideas for the journey – or examples of concrete actions:**

- Capacity-build: I actively support and encourage my team and peers to develop their capacity for creativity and change through on-the-job experiences and by accessing the wealth of on-line learning content that is readily available both within the UN context and beyond.
- Learning from work: I invite the practice of reflection within my team, considering calculated risks and lessons learned. We develop a method to make this approach part of how we work.
- Learning 'on-the-job': I recognize that as most learning actually takes place while we are working, I advocate for supporting teams with job aids to work on concrete task. For instance, this might include engagement with broader learning opportunities e.g. establish communities of practice; encourage the use of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) etc.
- Learning from others: I invite colleagues or employees from another department/entity to shadow me and my senior management team for a period of time to provide candid feedback regarding opportunities for improvement. I also encourage participation in formal and informal mentoring and coaching initiatives for employees' growth and development. I am open to learn from others, irrespective of their seniority.

3<sup>rd</sup> commitment:

## Connect

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*Embracing new leadership and organizational models that encourage greater collaboration.*

Traditional organizational structures with a hierarchical command and control structure are not well-suited to meet the challenges of new ways of working. High-performing organizations today operate as a network of interconnected, empowered teams that are more responsive and effective in meeting challenges. Inviting new and collaborative ways of working allows us to leave siloed thinking behind and operate more freely by removing barriers, flattening structures, and engaging in open dialogue.

**As a Senior Leader, I commit to:**

- **Simplify processes and flatten organizational structures:** Foster autonomy and empowerment so that responsibility and decision-making authority are shared more widely to strengthen accountability across the organization, shorten approval processes and create more efficient administrative procedures.
- **Strengthen collaboration and teamwork across boundaries:** Promote the formation of cross-functional teams that are appropriately resourced and trusted to work effectively and flexibly. Encourage and enable teams to explore more autonomous ways of working and give them the information and decision-making power they need to do so. Enable personnel to engage in projects and initiatives that may extend beyond their functional areas.
- **Define management from a facilitating and supporting perspective:** Adapt the role of managers from a command and control function to an enabling and guiding one - coaching, connecting and helping teams to reach their full potential. Ensure that people in leadership roles have the necessary skills and if not, have the opportunity to develop them.

**Ideas for the journey – or examples of concrete actions:**

- Why not flexibility?: I begin from this perspective when approached by supervisees who need more flexible working arrangements. I set an example by publicly availing myself of flexible work arrangements regularly and encourage my team to do the same.
- Enhance autonomy: I enhance autonomy within all teams that I supervise by setting clear performance output expectations, trusting lead personnel to deliver and providing necessary support. I encourage teams to explore more autonomous ways of working that leverage self-management principles.
- Supportive leadership: I embark on a personal journey to develop my own leadership repertoire so that I model a supportive leadership style as my default set of behaviours – always bearing in mind that my actions are crucial for a positive employee experience.
- Break down the silos: I support the premise that personnel can join and contribute to various teams, groups, or networks beyond their job description, unit, or organization.
- Unleash the potential of our workforce: I encourage creativity and invite finding ways to connect people and their skills with support needs or opportunities for collaboration within my entity and across the UN system.

4<sup>th</sup> commitment:

## Trust

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*Cultivating a culture of authenticity, participation, and transparency.*

In order for the United Nations to honour its values, all employees should expect a respectful, open and honest workplace. As the UN largely operates from a paradigm of complex rules and regulations, this context impedes rather than perpetuates trust. Leaders must be mindful of that and transform the workplace into an environment where all employees can benefit from a culture of trust.

### As a Senior Leader, I commit to:

- **Foster psychological safety:** Prioritize the critical dimension of psychological safety by nurturing a healthy culture where employees feel safe to be themselves and can speak their minds and where prompt action is taken in instances of misconduct, including sexual misconduct. Recognize that employees' psychological safety and mental health are fundamentally important to their well-being and performance.
- **Enable a positive culture:** Work on self-awareness and growth to build trusting and authentic relationships and team dynamics. Trust and enable employees to manage their own life and work commitments.
- **Break down barriers that impede trust:** Work on reducing and simplifying rules, where they are not needed to shape an organizational culture where employees are trusted, free to be resourceful and not impeded by bureaucracy.
- **Ensure meaningful dialogue and transparency:** Widely share information to ensure transparency and prevent the 'knowledge is power' approach. Proactively invite feedback and seek opinions from others.

### Ideas for the journey – or examples of concrete actions:

- Information sharing: I encourage meaningful two-way dialogue that invites lively discussion for anyone to join in, such as video streaming a meeting without any agenda other than to share ideas, or to pilot and experiment on new initiatives.
- Champion authenticity and share experiences: I can blog, write or be interviewed for internal communication platforms and help normalize and standardize an open and authentic approach.
- Action for trust: I advocate for trust to be discussed by senior managers in my organization as part of having broader reflections and action plans at a team level. I regularly engage in open discussions with my team in order to build trust.
- Allow employees to say "No": I personally empower employees at all levels to decline specific tasks when they have reasonable grounds, without fear of retaliation.
- Keep talking about how we work together: I promote trusting and constructive exchanges between supervisors and supervisees and among teams to explore what is going well and what could be improved.



5<sup>th</sup> commitment:

## Evolve

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*Nurturing the passion and change needed for excellence.*

Given the complexity and fast-moving dynamics of today's challenges, the UN must be agile and able to adapt quickly to fulfil its vital role and diverse mandates. This requires vision, courage and determination, as well as innovative strength and the openness to explore new ways of working.

**As a Senior Leader, I commit to:**

- **Augment my entity's capacity for innovation:** Normalize the understanding that innovation is something that everyone is capable of. Empower and support personnel to experiment and develop ideas. Provide time, space and (where possible) funding to reflect, think critically and test new approaches to work and deliver.
- **Foster a culture of creativity, sharing experiences and learning from failure:** Champion calculated risk-taking, create a culture of piloting and testing, allow for mistakes and share personal learning experiences related to risks, mistakes or lessons learned. Rethink 'failure' as part of human nature and opportunities to learn, grow and develop.
- **Amplify and sustain initiatives driving change:** Enable employees to be agents for change, whether as part of smaller internal teams or larger systemwide networks. Contribute the resources needed to build sustainable initiatives.
- **Embrace organizational change as an ongoing opportunity:** Encourage the exploration of new ways of working and delivering, and create the necessary space if initiatives require time to function well. Promote the use of new methods and approaches, such as crowdsourcing ideas and feedback from personnel, trying out new partnerships with actors outside the UN system, or rapid prototyping to rapidly identify opportunities for improvement.

**Ideas for the journey - or examples of concrete actions:**

- **Experimentation:** I personally embark on experiments to enhance my capacity and to reflect and share my frustrations and insights in this regard. I support my team to include, as a minimum, one innovative activity/experiment in their performance plans for coming years.
- **Freedom to innovate:** I provide space to personnel to identify new approaches for how we work and deliver and solutions to overcome obstacles in order to improve workflows and organizational performance.
- **Reflection spaces:** I introduce regular events where we reflect on what is working well and not so well with the team – using methodologies such as action learning sets or peer learning. We 'stop, pause, reflect' as part of how we work.
- **Collaborate and act on solutions:** I use suitable formats to obtain collective views and feedback (either in-person, open door policy, or through brief online anonymous surveys). Most importantly, I ensure that the inputs gathered are analyzed transparently and put to good use.

## Crosscutting principles

1<sup>st</sup> principle:

### **Leveraging technology**

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*Leveraging technology to enable new and more efficient ways of working.*

Digital technologies are shaping our world and continue to transform the way we connect, communicate and collaborate. UN senior leaders encourage open communication by enabling robust data to be shared transparently wherever it is needed and to connect people and skills in new and innovative ways. Reinvigorating how we work needs cultural, behavioural and technological advancements to make this new era of collaboration beyond organizational boundaries a reality. These changes require systems thinking and agile mindsets where sharing information and decision-making power are actively encouraged to enable teams to act quickly and employees are given equitable learning opportunities, so nobody is left behind.

2<sup>nd</sup> principle:

### **Embracing a truly 'One UN'**

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*Embracing a truly 'One UN' spirit that goes beyond each organization and genuinely places common objectives first.*

Recognizing the importance of the unique experience and resources that the UN system brings to bear on global issues, senior leaders strive to enhance service delivery that requires a more effective, efficient, coherent, coordinated and better performing United Nations. One that operates holistically and is supported by a common management, programming and monitoring framework and enables cohesion across the UN System. By design, delivering as one enables every senior leader to achieve excellence across our global operations.

3<sup>rd</sup> principle:

### **Being ecologically conscious**

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*Being ecologically conscious of how we work and act and ensuring the lightest possible environmental footprint in everything we do.*

As the world standard-bearer, the UN system must lead by its own environmental standards that are set out for the world to follow. Championing an eco-conscious mindset is a fundamental principle that needs to be given far greater prominence in every entity, to encourage a lighter and greener environmental footprint across our entire operations. Virtual conferences reduce the need for face-to-face interactions and help to reduce carbon footprints. Our collective adaptation to travel restrictions shows that an obvious place to increase the 'greening' of the UN system's operations is around the reduction of official travel. Increased use of technology also represents a hidden

environmental cost, which must also be factored into how we operate now and in the future. Ensuring that supply chains, procurement and partnerships are as clean as possible, while enabling personnel to make green choices at their workplace and home offices represents a vital change that should become commonplace in every entity. There is much to be done in championing responsible environmental stewardship everywhere we serve.

Entities must strive to ensure that sustainability and earth-friendly measures are incorporated into all facets of our operations, which is aligned with the United Nations objective for 2021 to build a global coalition for carbon neutrality. Just as we call upon the World's Governments and companies to act, tackling climate change must also be at the heart of everything we do internally throughout our global workforce, so that everyone actively has a stake in the 'state of our planet'.

## Support for the leadership journey

*Ideas for senior leaders to consider as they implement the Senior Leadership Commitments in their respective organizations.*

The Senior Leadership Commitments (SLCs) are grounded in the UN System Leadership Framework, which frame the SLCs. They represent the “glue” between all of the touchstone documents that govern and shape leadership within the UN System. The SLCs connect to the objectives and sentiment expressed in both the Charter of the United Nations as well as the 10 Principles of the UN Compact. They should be treated as a guide for the future of work for all senior leaders; a guide for what is expected from those who lead the entities of the United Nations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Commitments and Principles are not mutually exclusive; they do not replace any individual organizational values, competencies or other organizational frameworks, but instead complement what individual UN entities have identified as important to their respective organizational goals.

In considering how to approach and implement the SLCs and reflect on what support or tools you may need to integrate the Commitments and Principles into your responsibilities as a leader, the following areas of work particularly warrant attention:

**Leaders’ Support** | Invest in sustained support to senior leaders who in turn are responsible for adopting and implementing the SLCs. Leading others can be a lonely responsibility, and opportunities for honest exchange, feedback and reflection are not always easy to find. Yet leaders especially should be given a space to learn and grow, as they bear great responsibility as well as the expectation of leading by example to others. Organizations should therefore consider providing the following types of support throughout:

- (i) Regular sustained coaching, not just during crisis or on an ad-hoc basis;
- (ii) Leadership programmes and/or learning opportunities focused on applying Commitments (e.g. how to build trust; how to think through increasing collaboration, etc.) and Principles (e.g. how to better leverage technology or how to integrate ecologically responsible thinking into operations);
- (iii) Take care to notice and respond effectively to the impact on personnel of poor workplace practices, general work overload, all forms of misconduct especially sexual misconduct, and other significant stressors particularly in field contexts. De-stigmatize mental health issues and foster a supportive environment. Make use of the [UN mental health strategy](#) which provides practical guidance on how to support oneself and others;
- (iv) Create appropriate time and space to informal opportunities to exchange ideas and learning, such as through peer-to-peer networks or facilitated dialogue sessions;
- (v) Put in place feedback mechanisms (e.g. 180, 360 degree feedback tools; standing agenda item to solicit feedback during meetings; virtual suggestion boxes; etc.) and offer learning to senior leaders on how to provide constructive feedback. The goal is to create a shift in mindset and create a culture of that sees feedback as a value to improve, not a fear or criticism.

**Champion Networks** | Picking up on the benefit of peer-to-peer networks for senior leaders, networks of like-minded leaders who champion the principles and commitments laid out in the SLCs can be a powerful catalyst for change. They serve both as a way to exchange good practice, as a community to reflect and discuss what works and doesn’t and as a motivator for others to get involved.

But leaders should also leverage the existing networks to test ideas and seek input. The UN system has benefited from numerous networks, and can learn from their experiences. There are networks that are focused on specific communities of practice, such as innovation (UN Innovation Network), human resources (HR network) or change management (UNSSC’s UN Lab for Organizational Change & Knowledge). Then there are networks that were started to drive change, address existing

shortcomings and promote new ways of working. This includes self-organized and co-created networks at the system-wide level, such as Young UN: Agents for Change or the Alliance to Reimagine the UN Together, and at the organisational level initiatives such as #NewWork.

More work needs to be done to ensure perspectives from the various countries/regions where the UN works are better represented. The networks that are more widely used at country-level or in the region should be augmented. Alternatively, new support mechanisms should be put in place where existing networks can be leveraged to better support colleagues away from HQ; and finally more awareness and urgency needs to be created to strengthen the liaison between HQ and countries/region to routinely include the field perspective in HQ-led initiatives.

**Commitment to Engagement and Open Communication** | As with any organizational or behaviour shift, it cannot happen in isolation and requires exchange, dialogue and commitment to engaging with each other. Clear, honest and open communication is the foundation for all Commitments. Organizations are invited to frame the SLCs in language that works best for their respective entity. Senior leaders are strongly encouraged to engage their colleagues and teams in conversation around how to approach and implement these Commitments and to ensure an open feedback loop.

**Accountability** | It is up to the discretion of each UN entity on how to adopt the SLCs and hold each other to account in living and modelling the behaviours and actions. In the context of the future of work and how the global pandemic has accelerated the shift we have experienced in our work over the past year, the invitation is to look for alternative approaches to measuring accountability. Rather than starting with the assumption that accountability needs to be 'controlled' and 'monitored', leaders should consider to focus inwardly first and identify their own work. Secondly, accountability will be more successful, if expectations are communicated clearly, so colleagues understand what it is they are supposed to do and expect from others. Lastly, psychological safety and trust are critical for accountability to be effective. This is what would allow for honest conversations and dialogue around what works or doesn't and why work priorities may need to shift. Leaders should seek out feedback all the time, from colleagues at all levels, using different platforms and forums, so it becomes a habit. And in so doing, they role model the right behavior.

There are numerous options and tools available that could be used, such as the following:

- (i) Storytelling is an impactful way to demonstrate and showcase learning. It can create new cultural habits and patterns.
- (ii) Using 180 or 360 feedback tools could be a helpful way to provide feedback, as long as the process is divorced from performance reviews and instead framed as a developmental tool.
- (iii) Organizational culture assessment tools or pulse checks can be used to understand personnel's perception on leadership behaviours and the current levels of trust. Assessments can serve as a useful data-set to explain and move actions forward and highlight opportunities and gaps.
- (iv) Integrating and aligning SLCs into existing performance management systems and compacts in form of learning and growth goals (not in a punitive manner), to emphasize the importance of checking in on one's own understanding and awareness.(v) Introducing elements of showcasing one's progress with one another. Nudging each other to strengthen transparency, comparability, sharing lessons learned, and capacity within the office