



The changing leadership styles of supply chain executives

Over the past five years, we have tracked a marked change in the leadership styles most often used by supply chain executives. Building on a core of solid execution, many executives have also become sources of connection and stability in fast-changing organizations.

The shock of COVID-19 hit supply chain executives as hard as any, as industries from consumer goods to agriculture scrambled to provide for unforeseen needs and work in life sciences took on unprecedented urgency. The shock appears to have accelerated some shifts in how supply chain executives lead that were already underway.

Between 2016 and 2020, nearly 4,000 supply chain executives took a proprietary Heidrick & Struggles survey¹—the combined results of which highlight how much each leader tends toward each of the eight styles of leadership (see chart, “Leadership styles of supply chain executives 2016–2020”).

In 2016, the scores across styles varied little, meaning that supply chain leaders overall used a broad range of styles. Through the years, the share of executives who were more often working as collaborators, energizers, and harmonizers grew fairly steadily, while those tending toward being composers, forecasters, and pilots fell. The core executional focus, which sits with the producer style, changed little.

¹ To learn more about Heidrick & Struggles’ Leadership Signature survey, see Karen Rosa West, “What’s your leadership signature?” Heidrick & Struggles, December 15, 2015, heidrick.com.

This focusing of leadership skills aligns with the growing strategic importance of the supply chain function in most companies. Before COVID-19, the most significant disruption most supply chain leaders were facing was from e-commerce; the resulting shifts in business models made it necessary for supply chain executives to work with leaders far outside their traditional purview, including chief marketing and chief digital officers. This brought supply chain officers out of the back room and, for many, created a full C-suite role. Such roles require far higher degrees of collaboration and connection than more siloed roles.

Looking ahead, we expect the need for supply chain leaders who can transform both their supply chains and their functions to further increase. This increasing need will be driven by omnichannel consumer requirements and e-commerce-driven supply, along with the entry of new competitors into virtually every sector—making it harder for companies to accurately build supply and demand forecasts (especially in long lead time manufacturing environments).

Furthermore, staying ahead in direct-to-consumer businesses will mean staying ahead of constantly changing technology, automation, and engineering tools, as well as adeptly using data and analytics to drive decisions—all of which will require significant digital dexterity² among supply chain leaders. Leaders will also need to maintain agility,³ which, especially for larger businesses with complex and global networks, can be very challenging. We expect that some companies will benefit from drawing new supply chain leaders from different industries to bring a new perspective.

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Leadership styles of supply chain executives 2016–2020

■ <50 (Leans less toward) ■ 50 (neutral) ■ >50 (Leans more toward)

Leadership styles	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Collaborator	51.9	51.5	51.4	57.8	65.3
Composer	53.7	53.6	54.0	46.1	34.8
Energizer	48.3	48.0	49.3	55.8	63.0
Forecaster	51.6	49.5	50.8	47.5	45.8
Harmonizer	48.0	50.5	50.8	55.9	65.2
Pilot	52.8	53.4	52.3	51.3	47.4
Producer	54.1	55.5	54.8	52.8	54.5
Provider	48.5	50.1	48.6	49.0	48.9

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2 For more on digital dexterity, see Shaloo Kulkarni, Eric Skoritowski, and Scott Snyder, "Achieving digital (re)acceleration," Heidrick & Struggles, May 14, 2020, [heidrick.com](#).

3 For more on agility, see Yulia Barnakova and Steven Krupp, "The future is now: How leaders can seize this moment to build thriving organizations," Heidrick & Struggles, December 17, 2020, [heidrick.com](#).

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Supply Chain and Operations Officers Practice

Heidrick & Struggles' global Supply Chain and Operations Officers Practice has a well-established track record for recruiting top strategic leaders as well as providing to a demanding client base. Our experts are strategically located in the world's principal cities and specialize in the following areas: supply and demand planning; strategic sourcing and procurement; manufacturing operations; distribution; and warehouse and inventory management.

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