

# Styles & Climate in a Time of Crisis

Leadership styles and organizational climate scores do not appear impacted by the upheaval midway through 2020.

Thought Leadership



Wildfires. Racial unrest. Financial uncertainty. A global pandemic. If it were a movie script, the executive producers likely would dismiss it as being over the top.

But, if the film were made, how would the script writers depict the leaders in it? Would the heroes use the same leadership styles in these perilous times? Would their impact on the climate experienced by their direct reports be different?

Of course, we are not living on a movie set. These are tragically real challenges faced by leaders today. In the past, CEOs have made small shifts in their style of leading when faced with a crisis. For example, in the 2008 Great Recession or more recently, the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union, on average, leaders tended to become more directive, according to Korn Ferry research. They engaged in more close supervision, monitoring their employees’ work progress, and controlling the decision making within the organization.

The Korn Ferry Institute dug deep into our databases to evaluate whether or not similar trends emerged during the coronavirus pandemic. Specifically, we asked: are direct reports rating their managers differently on their leadership styles or the climates they create since the pandemic began?

Unexpectedly, the answer, so far, is, “No.”

## Our methodology

Korn Ferry’s Styles and Climate tools are 180-degree surveys that give direct reports the opportunity to provide feedback to their managers. The Styles survey offers feedback on six approaches leaders may take when leading others: Directive, Visionary, Affiliative, Participative, Pacesetting, and Coaching. The most effective leaders are able to use a range of different styles depending on the demands of the situation, but with a greater emphasis on use of the Visionary, Coaching and Participative styles. Leadership styles have a significant impact on the climate that leaders create for their teams.

Styles	Definitions
Directive	Gaining immediate compliance
Visionary	Providing long-term direction and context
Affiliative	Creating trust and harmony
Participative	Building commitment and generating new ideas
Pacesetting	Accomplishing tasks to high standards
Coaching	Supporting long-term development

The Climate survey provides feedback on six key aspects of climate that impact team performance: Clarity, Flexibility, Responsibility, Standards, Rewards, and Team Commitment. This survey provides leaders with feedback both on the climate they are currently creating for their team (actual climate) and the change in climate that team members would ideally like, to allow them to perform at their best (measured as a gap score).

Climate	Definitions
Flexibility	No unnecessary rules, procedures or policies. New ideas are easily accepted.
Responsibility	Employees are given authority to accomplish tasks without constantly checking for approval.
Standards	Challenging but attainable goals are set for the organization and its employees.
Rewards	Good performance is recognized and rewarded. Employees know what they do well and what they need to improve.
Clarity	People know what is expected of them and how they contribute to organizational goals.
Team Commitment	People are proud to belong to the organization. They collaborate to achieve a common objective.

To determine if there have been any shifts in Styles and Climate scores during the pandemic, we looked at results for all leaders in our global Styles and Climate database from January 2018 to August 2020 and classified them as either 'before pandemic' or 'during pandemic'. The coronavirus pandemic started to impact different geographies at different times, and so the start of the pandemic was determined separately for each country by using the earlier of:

- The date each country first had 100 cases/day
- The date that widespread lockdowns or restrictions began

In total, the Korn Ferry Institute looked at Styles and Climate results for over 66,000 people, representing 24 functions at more than 1,200

organizations, across 27 industries. Where sample sizes were sufficient, we examined results separately by demographic attributes, including regions, gender, and job levels, among others. We used Cohen's d to evaluate the size of the difference in mean scores between surveys completed before the pandemic and those completed during the pandemic.

## Stability in unstable times

Globally, average ratings on Styles and Climate surveys have remained stable during the global coronavirus pandemic, according to our analysis.

Before and during the outbreak, direct reports' ratings of their leaders' styles have remained the same. In our global sample, no meaningful changes (Cohens d of .20 or greater) were observed. This suggests that, on average, managers and senior leaders have continued to use the same style of leadership to get work done with and through their teams, even as the nature and conditions in which they are working have changed. There have been no Hollywood blockbuster style upticks in use of one style or dropping of others.

Similarly, average climate scores have not shifted during the pandemic. Despite the chaos, direct reports generally have not changed how they see their managers in terms of providing clarity, supporting flexibility, or other dimensions of providing a positive climate. In addition, the gaps between the climate leaders are currently creating (actual climate) versus the climate direct reports would like to have (ideal climate) have not meaningfully grown or contracted.

Leadership styles have a strong and significant impact on climate, with a large relationship ( $r = .76$ ) between the overall scores from these two tools. And this also hasn't changed during the pandemic. The size and direction of the correlations between specific styles and dimensions of climate has not shifted, suggesting that people continue to seek and value the same types of leadership as they have in the past.

## Close-ups don't reveal a different picture.

Given the mayhem, we wanted to make sure our global view was not obscuring important differences at a more granular level. We dug more deeply into the data in several ways.

First, we undertook subgroup analyses for the three regions where we had sufficient data: China, Europe, and a combined group of leaders from the United States and Canada. With one small exception, the results were the same as with the global sample: no changes in mean Styles and Climate scores were observed so far during the pandemic. In Europe, there was a slight increase in Pacesetter (d = .21), but this single finding, out of so many examined, could be a result of sampling, rather than a substantive change. It is something we will watch for as countries battle new waves of the coronavirus outbreak.

Second, given prior research that found small increases in leaders' use of the Directive style during both the Great Recession and Brexit, we closely examined directiveness ratings by country and client. Neither analysis revealed systematic changes.

Finally, we scrutinized whether any differences appeared when we looked at the data by demographic variables. Separate analyses by gender again showed no differences in Styles and Climate scores during the pandemic as compared to before the pandemic. Separate analyses by job level were also attempted but led to inconclusive results due to notable differences in the composition of pandemic and pre-pandemic groups. For example, in the senior leader group, the proportion of data from China, where average directiveness scores typically exceed the global norm, more than doubled during the pandemic. In other words, there were not sufficient data to make pre- and during-pandemic comparisons by job level.

This brings us to where we have seen some change. Our data suggest there are some shifts in which organizations are using Styles and Climate surveys and how they are implementing these tools. We saw fewer participants from Europe, and more from Asia and South America, use Styles and Climate through the mid-summer of the pandemic as compared to before its onset. There were relatively more participants from utilities and real estate, and fewer from banks and manufacturing. In addition, there were more senior leaders and fewer first-level managers. We also looked to see if there were any changes in the number of raters providing feedback to each leader, but only observed a difference for mid-level leaders, where the median number of raters decreased from 5 to 4.

## Conclusion

As the pandemic continues to unfold, it is possible that we may see shifts in the styles leaders use and the climates they create. For now, even amidst the pandemic crisis, employees continue to rate their managers as they would have a year ago. Raters continue to use a similar range of ratings on the scale; they are not becoming more lenient or more severe in their evaluations. Organizations can continue to use the Styles and Climate surveys with confidence in the usefulness of the feedback.

## Contributors

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### **About Korn Ferry**

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.