

# LEADING FROM THE FRONT

Louise Rodgers and Rachel Birchmore — the podcasting ‘coaches on the couch’ — offer up some key tips on hybrid working and ‘visible leadership for turbulent times’ from key practitioners across the industry

‘What is an office? What is it for?’ Angela Dapper, principal of Grimshaw’s London office, opened a recent web event with the question on everyone’s mind.

‘I think we probably relied on it way too much previously,’ she adds. ‘We saw it as *who* we were and critical to our branding and identity. But, all of a sudden, we became a multitude of offices spread across cities. And countries, even. And it really changed the way we looked at what the physical space itself needed to be and who we were as an office.’

Over the past year of recording conversations with leaders across the built environment sector, we have heard and observed a number of trends, in both leadership and ways of working, which were accelerated because of the pandemic.

One thing that quickly became clear runs like a red thread through all these conversations: what got us here is not going to get us *there*, wherever ‘there’ is and whatever it looks like.

The speakers at the first *Coaches On The Couch* ‘Made Visible’ event (alongside Dapper of Grimshaw were Jayne Rolls of Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, Alastair Roberts of Hawkins\Brown, Tara Gbolade of Gbolade Design Studio and Tamsyn Curley of Place Careers) all accept that turning back the clock to a nine-to-five office routine for everyone is not only unlikely to happen, but is not what most people want to happen. A kind of ‘conscious uncoupling’ is already taking place.

This brings a number of new challenges, of which the function of the office — whether flexible, hybrid or blended working becomes the norm — is just one. Others include how we communicate; how we hold true to our vision and values; how we create the right kinds of support for our people; and how we balance the needs of the business with the needs of the individual.

As with any problem-solving, a certain amount of trial-and-error seems inevitable. This was summed up by Roberts. When asked whether Hawkins\Brown has accepted that hybrid working is the future, he says: ‘Yes, we certainly have. It’s easy to get to that point and then the rest gets quite difficult, quite quickly. We’ve seen some really good things come out of working from home, but we’ve also become aware of the really good things that we get from being in the studio. So, what we are trying to do is to find a model that helps us to

get the best of both worlds, and if we get that right, that will be brilliant, and if we get it wrong, we will end up with the worst of both worlds which is obviously what we’re trying to avoid.’

There are lessons here from the early stages of the pandemic. Most practices seemed to make the technical transfer from an office to a home-based workforce without too much trauma, and soon learnt to incorporate some of the rituals from office life.

As Rolls of FCB explains: ‘Our intranet became more important than ever. Along with the project information already on there, we developed dedicated pages for things like COVID-19 information and how the practice was managing the situation, almost day by day. It included mental health, wellbeing and diversity pages and a virtual staff noticeboard. Across our offices we used to have coffee time at 11 o’clock in the morning, lunchtime, then teatime at 4 o’clock. So we moved all of those to become virtual events.’

Replicating and adapting office practices to keep existing team members engaged is one thing; recruiting and on-boarding new people is something else. As Curley comments, there are signs that work streams are remaining stable, with many practices indicating a positive first quarter outlook in 2021. This means that many, particularly younger, architects may be joining practices without having ever

met, face-to-face, the person who recruited them.

Rolls talks of the action being taken at FCB. ‘We are currently working with a company to help us with online interactive inductions and onboarding, something that we want to be able to offer so that new-starters can begin to feel part of the office from the moment they accept their offer,’ she says. ‘The hope is that by being interactive and using videos and including stories from current employees we will be able to communicate our culture much better than a policy or a booklet that we gave out before.’

Gbolade leads a smaller, and newer, practice, where communicating culture to new recruits is not such a problem. Gbolade Design Studio tends to recruit people who they feel are already signed up to what they stand for.

‘We approach people that we know and think we might work well with, or who might work well within our culture, and actually share with them our vision,’ she explains.



Coaching coaches — Louise Rodgers and Rachel Birchmore

**‘We communicate about projects, but we really need to work hard to make opportunities for more meaningful conversations because that’s how we create connections’**

Angela Dapper, Grimshaw



The speakers at the first *Coaches On The Couch* ‘Made Visible’ event

**‘There are no easy answers. But we do feel optimistic overall and there is a real opportunity to reinvent our working model. So, yes, lots of work to be done’**

Alastair Roberts, Hawkins\Brown



**‘We approach people that we know and think we might work well with, or who might work well within our culture, and actually share with them our vision’**

Tara Gbolade, Gbolade Design Studio



**‘We are currently working with a company to help us with online interactive inductions and onboarding’**

Jayne Rolls, Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios



**‘There are signs that work streams are remaining stable, with many practices indicating a positive first quarter outlook in 2021’**

Tamsyn Curley, Place Careers

‘We’re quite transparent—give them our vision (we have a vision document) and ask them to make comments, amend, add their thoughts, and let us know whether it is something they want to be part of.’ It is a bold and innovative recruitment strategy, in line with Gbolade’s ambition to put vision and purpose at the helm of how she grows her practice.

Onboarding is quite different to managing the continued professional growth and development of younger or less-experienced architects, however. Some practices, such as FCB, already had a system of mentoring in place but have speeded up the mentoring process. ‘Each student is buddied up and offered a place on our mentoring scheme straight away,’ explains Rolls. ‘All meetings at the moment are virtual, which means anybody in the practice can be invited to join. So younger and less experienced architects can observe meetings such as client meetings, design team meetings and internal design reviews to provide them with that valuable experience.’

Roberts agrees that working from home has dissolved many of the physical barriers to resourcing. ‘Before, it was really hard to get people in Manchester to work on London projects and vice versa. Now we are finding it really easy to put teams together, with staff in London and Manchester and Scotland working on one project,’ he says.

All the webinar delegates emphasised the continued importance of good communication, including to wellbeing. As Dapper observes: ‘We communicate about projects, but we really need to work hard to make opportunities for more meaningful conversations because that’s how we create connections.’

Gbolade explains the approach her studio has taken. ‘Because we aren’t seeing each other enough, we often explain why we are making particular decisions and we’ve been honest and open and vulnerable, highlighting the challenges we are having, whether that be in meetings or overload with Zoom or whatever that is, and encourage input. Our teams are the ones who make suggestions. As directors, we respect that we don’t have all the answers, so we very much look to them to define what works for them and then we work alongside them to make that happen.’

Arguably, this is easier with a smaller studio. One of the issues all, and particularly larger, practices are already grappling with is the need to balance the needs of the business against the needs of the individuals who work within the business, many of whom have got used to a different kind of routine that doesn’t involve a long commute or rigid working hours.

Roberts reflects: ‘If we’re saying that the point of the office is to generate that togetherness and collaboration and interaction, but when we go back we just let people make their own patterns as suits them best, it’s actually not going to work. It’s going to need some really careful thought and management. We have to think about HR and IT as well as the physical layout of the studio.’

‘There are no easy answers. But we do feel optimistic overall and there is a real opportunity to reinvent our working model. So, yes, lots of work to be done.’ ●

Louise Rodgers and Rachel Birchmore are leadership coaches and co-hosts of the podcast *Coaches On The Couch*, which can be found on all the usual platforms

## Five ways leaders can prepare their practice for hybrid working

### 1. Get back to fundamentals

The over-riding purpose and principles of your practice should remain constant and clearly expressed during times of turbulence. For many practices, their offices have traditionally been their ‘shop front’. How can you continue to express the things that are core to what you do if you can’t rely on your office environment to communicate this?

### 2. Use your imagination

Architects are experts at designing physical spaces for serendipitous meetings. That same imagination needs to be applied to the virtual world where contact is, by necessity, more intentional. What is it you want to achieve, or communicate, from making connections? Focus on this and the means to create opportunities for meaningful contact will become clearer.

### 3. Make communication purposeful

One of the things most people are glad to leave behind are those meetings that are mostly about information giving. Bringing people together, either physically or online, needs more consideration. Now, more than ever, meetings need to be outcome-driven rather than ‘talking shops’. Find other ways to communicate the essentials and use meeting time for focused collaboration.

### 4. Share the burden

Leadership can’t be about shouldering the burden of everyone’s professional and personal development, or their wellbeing. It has to be as much about fostering support and connection, so that each person is held up by a network of others rather than waiting for one-on-one time with their line manager. What networks can you foster both internally and externally that will support the learning and growth of your people, so that you are safeguarding their wellbeing and enabling them to continue to make a positive contribution to your practice?

### 5. Embrace the shift

Respond with agility to the positives of our shared experience of the past 12 months. We have been given unprecedented access to each other’s homes and lives. The intermingling of personal and professional can’t be undone. We can’t turn the clock back, and neither should we want to. What is it that has shifted? What do we want to leave behind and what do we want to keep?