

**Embrace your disruption.  
Find opportunity in the cracks.**

ADRIAN FOLEY  
President & COO, Brookfield Properties

# Engaging people in authentic ways

**COO of Brookfield Properties Development Group Adrian Foley speaks to Peter Sheahan on engaging people in our new distributed work environment and shares how leaders can stay organized near-term but also forward-focused and engaged.**

People in all industries are challenged right now to learn new ways of working, to revisit past assumptions of what it means to be “at work”, and to balance home and work to a level most have never even imagined. In this *C-Suite Leadership Series* we talk with leaders and ask them to share their perspectives on leading in times of crisis, especially in a distributed environment.

*This transcript has been heavily edited for length and clarity while maintaining the spirit of the discussion.*

## Composed, communicating, and focused on the near-term to lead the long-term

### PETER SHEAHAN

I am Peter Sheahan, founder of Karrikins Group, and today I have the pleasure of talking with Adrian Foley, the COO and President of Brookfield Properties Development Group. Adrian, we are right at the beginning of the very rough and uncertain period with the COVID-19 shutdowns across the US and around the world. How are you generally feeling?

### ADRIAN FOLEY

**How am I feeling relative to business...it is reminiscent of times past when it is uncertain, and unpredictable, and brings about feelings of anxiety in the near-term. Whether it is me personally or the team around us, I think we are acknowledging these are unique times. I am hunkering down but also realizing, wow, what doors did this open that would have been closed previously?**

I appreciate your optimism in early March, when you coached me to keep my “eyes on the horizon.” You’ve gone through the challenges of ‘92, ‘01, ‘02, and ‘08, and whilst this is different there is still the need for leaders to display calm and confidence, while also needing to maintain a sense of urgency and real action orientation. How do you balance those personally and for your team?

**I have both the benefit of my own personal knowledge and knowing how the uncertainty played out. In each one of the**

## Leaders must hold themselves accountable for providing purposeful explanations.

situations above, I was surrounded by people who I learned from, and was guided by. I am trusting a little bit of my instinct and I am trusting at my core of what is driving my behavior. For instance, if I have a heightened sense of focus around something that needs to be concluded, I trust that instinct.

**I’m conscious that I need to give an explanation because without it, things can get misconstrued. I trust my instinct to guide my decisions. I am also guided by the truth that if I do not give an explanation, or if I catch others doing the same without giving an explanation, we can send the wrong message. As a team, we are trying to be purposeful about decisions that fit into a near-term time frame, because that is all we can put our focus on for today.**

I believe we all know that individuals in an organizational structure take very small things and give them disproportionate meaning. Even more so during uncertainty. Has the frequency of that communication changed?

**I like the cadence and my team likes the cadence of a periodic update, not a minute-by-minute update. We have been doing updates and sessions weekly, and more recently twice weekly within Brookfield. Every Friday we will issue our version of a State of the Union, a reflection on what happened over the last week and how we see the next week playing out.**

**What we have been doing is trying to update the team frequently, but not incessantly. We always say at Brookfield that trust is a combination of consistency over time. It is like a mathematical formula. We need to build trust now and we need to state consistently over this period of near-term time a methodical process around our response, because that is going to relieve anxiety and build confidence that the path ahead is a good one.**

I found with great leaders, they do sometimes get super pedantic about small things, but when the really big things hit, it does not fluster them as much as you might think. From my perspective that is because leaders have a deep sense of confidence in their self and their organization's ability to deal with the problem. I think leaders realize, you cannot stop a crisis of this magnitude from happening, all you can do is move forward with the hand you are dealt.

**Absolutely. It is like you are struck with the distress that this situation is giving everybody, yet you are also optimistic, and almost recognizing the opportunity in the disruption. It is a calming thought.**

I think the point you are making is that the way we have behaved up until this point impacts how we lead during these

periods. What are some of the key behaviors, perhaps naturally intuitive behaviors, you have recognized in yourself that are *unhelpful* in this period?

**It is educational to go through uncertain times. Alan Norris, CEO of Brookfield Properties Development Group, and I wrote down what we learned about prior recessions or prior massive events where we did well as a company and team, things we would want to repeat, and things we realized were *errors* in judgment. My repeating theme would be this innate optimism I have that, "It's okay, it's going to be short," or, "It's okay, the opportunity will outweigh the distress," which mainly has been the case.**

**Build trust and consistency alongside the response to change – start the journey with confidence.**

I feel like we're touching on something that I have noticed in myself in the last couple of weeks, and it's finding myself in a bit of an urgency mode, and keeping very, very busy, doing really low value things, because I can't control what's happening externally. Is that what led to that level of disconnect?

**I think what drove the behavior in the past, for example in 2001, 9/11 hits, and we have got all these real estate investments and I felt incredibly pressured to react and project forward with incredible accuracy as to how the**

next 12 months were going to play out, which is complete madness. I made some real near-term decisions rather than structuring something that would have given me the time to wait, make that decision in the future as opposed to making it immediately, or structuring it so that I didn't walk away from something, or worse walk away from the customer.

The reality was, I needed to just be calmer, be more focused on the horizon, make good near-term decisions that were critical, but also keep the heart rate lower on the longer-term issues. I think these past recessions have educated us on the truth that it takes a long time to rebuild talent.

My experiences in '01, '02, informed a little bit of '07, '08, '09's behavior where frankly, if I am critical of myself, I've realized that I need to be much closer to the customer through this whole journey; I need to be much more near-term in decision making, as opposed to long-term in decision making.

I heard you describe the importance of how you choose to lead in those moments, rather than over-oscillating to having complete clarity on exactly what is happening. I think we would all be lying right now if we said we had any idea how the next 12 to 52 weeks will close out. At Karrikins, we believe that the process of "how" matters, that the level of collaboration and client-centricity matters. It is important to balance the near- and the long-term, such as keeping talent and focusing on team building even if it is costly in the near-term. Would it be fair to say that "how" matters as much as pretending you know what is happening?

**We are looking at other businesses and other sectors of our**

**industry that can inform us as to how things might play out.**

I was walking around town, and a prompt came up that Darden Restaurants had just announced their quarterly earnings, and I thought, "Well, there's the nation's largest restaurant chains. That might be an interesting perspective to listen to." After listening to Darden's conference call I reach out to Alan and our leading thought was, "Wouldn't it be great if each of our executive leadership had owned a call every week or two that they could listen to that gave them a perspective on this near-term environment?"

It was well received. So we kicked off a sharing for any of the public conference calls that take place weekly. I think Nike has one this week; we are flagging them, and leaders are going to share their notes and findings. Look, Brookfield's got a pretty phenomenal knowledge net through its businesses, but candidly, it is one company, and it is great to get other companies' perspectives on how they are dealing with this near-term.

I'm interested in this conversation around contribution and adding value, because in the conversations I've had with other executives and leaders, there's not just having a community responsibility, but also trying to focus on where you make a contribution to the business and the people. Is it influencing some of your own behaviors, or the people around you?

**I think it's critical. I will tell you personally, I think we have got a unique opportunity at showing our contribution to our company community. We have a huge responsibility to community, to the twice-a-week calls that Alan and I sit on,**

which is a global call that involves every kind of business leader across our business properties portfolio. Those conversations are a testimony to how we are behaving during this situation.

You have got to reach out to everybody as best you can within reason to connect, because it is not about doing right now. It is just about reassuring, listening, and from a doer perspective to your comment. You do not drive home going, “Yes, I spoke to 12 team members today, and gave them my view.” I think, “Who cares what your view is, Adrian?” Well, the reality is, they do, and I must acknowledge that, and I must own that, so my humility needs to get a pause, because I do recognize this role I play.

I feel like we’ve come through this sort of period of just trying to get calm and organized and stay in touch with our role in our community. I think about it as merging companies or bringing groups together. We need to get everybody organized, then have them start doing.

You have been leading virtually for as long as I have known you. I remember once having a call with you, not realizing the importance of video, and being able to see my face, and I am not sure I was fully prepared. I would love to know what drove you to the decision to lead more virtually, and secondly, what are some of the challenges from making that shift?

Skype was brought into our operation in about 2007. I remember I was worried about California at the time, and we had about 500 or 600 team members in California at that time. The head of IT said to me, “Hey, Skype’s (Lync back

then) going to be great, Adrian.” I got out from my screen, and suddenly, I saw Peter Shi and red. Okay, he is busy. I saw Peter Shi and green. Oh, he is available. Hey, I will ping Peter. “Hi, Peter,” back and forth sharing files, linking people into instant messaging, and then I saw this video click option.

So I went to the IT professional and said, “Chris, we need 500 cameras put on everyone’s desktops, whether it’s Field, whether it’s Sales, whether it’s Design, everyone in the team needs to have...I don’t care if you’re in Accounting, and you don’t think you ever need to speak to anybody, or if you’re me and you need to speak to everybody in theory; everyone should have a camera.” He said, “Adrian, nobody will turn it on. Everybody will turn it off. There’ll be pieces of sticky tape over everyone’s camera, because everyone will think you’re spying on them and they won’t want to be on camera.”

**Embrace the virtual team and level up your engagement in this new virtual environment.**

In the near-term, he was right, because there was this kind of aversion to doing things virtually. However, what we realized very quickly was that a conference call was no longer a conference call – it was a meeting. A conference call that would have been awkward, and interrupted, and frankly, just more of an information update than a true meeting exchange, was flipped to a virtual meeting. There was real dialogue and real exchange, plus you could see people’s facial expressions,

and make connections.

**What we also realized is, people are much more attentive when they are on Skype calls or on video calls than they are in a typical conference room environment. People acknowledge that they are on a camera; you get more productivity. We could be way more scalable as an organization through this virtual environment.**

I would not be surprised if a lot of leaders are discovering the value of video right now. Beyond the video and the instant messaging, how did you help get other leaders over their beliefs and biases about both the value of seeing you in person, but also the level of trust engraved in the “as long as I can see you at your desk down the hall?”

**As leaders at Brookfield, if we are second-guessing any part of our team members’ behavior in that we do not really trust them, we have got to air that out. We have got to have that conversation. I know I am being very macro with that statement, but that is the truth. If you really have distrust in the teams that you are leading, you have got to air that out.**

**What we did impress upon them is that there is no break down; there is no lower level of conversation or exchange. Virtually, you are getting a discussion or a debate going, which on conference calls, you do not get as much of that true debate that you do get in a real environment. I think there are a bunch of reasons why we need to be together in an office. I think culture gets built frankly, from you and me hanging out with each other in a real environment as opposed to a virtual environment. I also think working remotely is an incredibly**

**practical solution for people’s lives and gets them a work-life balance that they otherwise would not have.**

**In a virtual working environment on Monday and Friday, we call it the book ends of the week; I think it gives you a little more comfort that you can be productive, but also build work-life balance into your week.**

I have seen some leaders control the last five minutes of every meeting to summarize the clear decisions and make sure everyone knows exactly what is happening. Have you changed the way you design and approach conversations in virtual meetings, or do you follow your time-built instinct here more?

**If we are doing anything materially different in a virtual meeting than we are doing in person, it gives us credibility to the virtual environment. We have had it with Karrikins, with your team, where we have had a virtual meeting in groups or in a conference room, and others are singularly online. You’ve really got to make sure in a virtual environment that everybody’s engaged, and it’s not just the people in the room who are having one conversation, and everybody feels like they’re, in a way, out of the room. You make the virtual room a real room, as opposed to, I am outside of the room listening to others talking; it is the physical connection.**

**We have meetings now where if we are in the same office, you take it at your desk. We do not want you in a conference room. We want everybody to be in their single environment, so everybody is equal.**

**For leaders who are doing this for the first time, set it**

so everybody is in the same environment and no one's advantaged or disadvantaged. Tell everyone, get your video up and running, because we want to see you. Those things matter, and maybe they matter more to me, because I have been doing this for a while, and I really see how people are connected or disconnected.

That is the experience we are interested in.

**Exactly. The other thing I would say from a senior leader's perspective is, you do set the tone. Candidly, if you are not good at technology, get somebody around you who is.**

**I literally have something in my ear for four hours of the day. People who not even aware of their own audible sounds; it is that detail. Ask your team to give you feedback. "How does that sound? I can hear Peter, can you?" Try and repeat that practice because it can erode the quality of a good virtual exchange. A lot of leaders are afraid of technology, candidly. Acknowledge that, "Hey, this is not me, but I'm going to get somebody around me who is, because this is really important."**

I am going to get you off to your happy hour, but there is one more question I want to ask you. What are your top three pieces of advice for other leaders?

**My top three pieces just for other leaders during this period would be, remain calm, remain calm, remain calm. Actually, I have three separate thoughts, both for today's and the virtual environment. Remain calm, communicate, focus on the near-term. These are dichotomies but focus on the near-term whilst**

**focusing on the long-term. That is my today's environment.**

**My virtual environment advice would be to advocate virtual communication. Be a pro virtual communication person who engages themselves in video conversations constantly. Lean in with it. Try out new video virtual tools. Even if you are not a technology geek, show intent. Hey, share, "I tried this out. I tried Zoom." If you constantly have issues with it, find an IT person who can steer you straight. Additionally, engage feedback, engage with the team on their engagement issues and react accordingly.**

## Remain calm, communicate, and focus on the near-term.

Adrian, I appreciate your time, and good luck in the next few weeks as you navigate the consistent uncertainty. From the Karrikins team, the leadership you and Alan show is exactly a representation of why "how" matters, and I believe the way Brookfield has grown and gone from strength to strength through previous challenges is a reflection on you and the team.

**Peter, thanks to you. Thanks to your team. We have been working with you here for 14 weeks now, in a targeted focus. It is been fantastic, and I am not blowing smoke. It has, and continues to, improve us as a company to no end, thank you for that.**

Well, I appreciate that. Enjoy your happy hour.



### **ADRIAN FOLEY**

President & COO  
Brookfield Properties

Adrian has been an integral part of the executive team since 1996, where he currently oversees operations for Brookfield Properties. He is directly responsible for stewarding operational objectives and implementing strategic initiatives across the North American businesses. Previously, Adrian managed Brookfield Residential's California operations. Born and raised in England, Adrian earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Greenwich, London.



### **PETER SHEAHAN**

Founder  
Karrikins Group

Peter has stood in the fire with leader of high-performing organizations for almost 20 years, through cashflow crunches, the global financial meltdown, and is continuing to do so during the uncertainty of COVID-19.

Having grown his own companies by accelerating growth and transformation for Apple, De Beers, and AT&T – Peter will provoke you to manage the crisis in ways worthy of your leadership position, and inspire you to unleash an ambition that positions you for growth when we come out the other side.

**We are Karrikins.** We're strategists, world-class facilitators, consultants, coaches, cultural changemakers, behavioral scientists, and experience creators, but above all, we're people looking to make a lasting and positive impact. We help organizations outperform the limitations of strategy, structure, capital allocation, and market conditions.

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