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## CEO CORNER

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# 'Leaders must get comfortable with chaos'

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**H**industan Unilever (HUL) CMD Sanjiv Mehta says businesses must become far more adaptable and resilient, even as best prediction models fail to assure a no-risk world. In an interview with TOI, he says leaders must get comfortable with ambiguity and chaos....

## How far has your business returned to normal?

Since April, we have been able to progressively unlock our operations and by June we were back to our pre-Covid operating levels. In this quarter, the vertical lockdowns have had an adverse impact on operations, albeit not as serious as April and May.

“As a nation we should embrace this crisis as an opportunity – to craft a different and better future together. This is a moment that tests our humanity. It must be met with solidarity”



**SANJIV MEHTA, CMD | Hindustan Unilever**

## What challenges has the new normal posed for your organisation?

The first has been to ensure that our people remain safe across the value chain. The second is supply security — seamless operations at both the back-end supply chain (factory operations) and at the front-end. Third is to keep our finger on the pulse of changing consumer behaviours and preferences. Next, even though we are a zero-debt company, we have to keep intense focus on 'cost and cash' and create optionalities in these uncertain times.

## What are the learnings from the pandemic?

This crisis is complex, with interlinked shocks to our health and our economies. We have realised that even with the best prediction models, we cannot predict our way to a no-risk world. This means we must become more adaptable and resilient. Businesses must determine which parts of the value chain to manage for costs and efficiencies, and where to build for redundancy so that it is resilient to shocks. Leaders also must get comfortable with ambiguity and chaos, recognising that there is no crisis playbook to guide them. They should commit themselves to navigating through the turbulence, adjusting, improvising, and re-directing as the situation changes and new information emerges.

## How do you ensure work-life balance?

I must admit that the last six months have been quite intense. We were fortunate that our daughters had come home, so we were all together, which was a great blessing. Last weekend, they left for Boston to join their B-school, so we are empty nesters once again. While the days are often long, I do try and maintain a certain cadence and discipline. Given that we are running a marathon and not a sprint, it is also important that we take care of our wellbeing.