

Virtual leadership: How executives can bridge the virtual gap

By Marc Schmidt



As the dust of the receding pandemic settles and we try to come to terms with the emerging realities of the new normal, the state of the workforce has probably never been more in flux. Two things are already certain, however: remote working and virtual leadership are here to stay. But how precisely should today's and tomorrow's leaders bridge this newly imposed spatial distance and lead their teams effectively from behind a far-off computer screen?

Digitization may have torn down information barriers, but as remote working takes hold, other, less tangible barriers are being erected in their place. Common sense dictates that holding a motivational speech in front of your team is hardly going to have the same impact if you're talking into a digital device and aren't in the same room. Framed within a black rectangle, it's hard for any leader to convey the same aura, charisma or physical presence as in the flesh. In other words, virtual leadership is a new leadership discipline, which calls for a new set of skills to be adopted and honed.

As part of his MBA thesis for University St. Gallen, Marc Schmidt interviewed executives in Germany using the critical incident technique (CIT) to explore which e-leadership behaviours they successfully applied to remain effective since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The results reveal four overarching behavioural categories, namely: **vulnerability, mindfulness, communication,** and **virtual leadership consciousness.**

Essentially, successful virtual leaders need to show their vulnerable side in order to build trust within their teams and take mindful actions to amplify awareness towards their team members. Additionally, they should communicate precisely to facilitate a culture of comprehension. Finally, virtual leaders should become conscious of the differences between virtual leadership and traditional face-to-face leadership and actively embrace those differences.

Be vulnerable to be strong

For years, executives have fought to hide their soft underbelly. But these changing times call for executives to display their human, vulnerable side if they want to communicate effectively in a virtual setting and create the necessary trust.

One way to succeed is to initiate informal discussions among team members. Executives can also shift the communication to an equal footing and create closeness by revealing more about their inner selves. "You definitely show vulnerability, you talk about your own situation in a way you never would have before," Schmidt quotes one CEO as **saying.**

In some respects, remote working has placed leadership in a more intimate context and executives should use this to their advantage. One leader expresses how during Zoom calls you're "oftentimes somehow at home in your own place but at the same time also at home at your conversational partner's home, and thus establish a different kind of closeness to each other." Another reveals that after their four-year-old child interrupted a call, they asked the child to join in the conversation and even encouraged other team members to invite their children to join in too.

Echoing perceived insecurity can help too. One executive, for example, anonymised a team member's anxious sentiments and shared these via email with the whole company to communicate that they weren't alone and to stress the importance of speaking about your inner emotions.

Another leader even went as far as to proactively admit making mistakes and asked for forgiveness in a virtual meeting in order to pave the way for a more open and collaborative team environment.

Be mindful to amplify awareness

Mindfulness aims to raise leaders' awareness about what is really going on, enabling them to read between the lines and to sharpen their senses to detect the mental condition of team members as well as read the virtual room correctly. In other words, executives use these behaviours to understand how their team members are *really* doing.

As an executive says, "I don't find it difficult to manage the performance of my team, but what defines the biggest risk in my eyes is that some of my team members disconnect from me as a leader or even worse the organization. They just do the bare necessities and I don't even realise it, as I can't see them on a daily basis."

Another executive emphasised that "you have to be more mindful of the nuances" in a virtual setting to grasp subtle facial expressions.

Executives may also need to adjust to team members' differing communication styles. One executive, for example, reveals how one of his normally reserved team members suddenly became outspoken in chat rooms. "I had to adjust my original perception of his messages to sense the intended meaning and not just rely on my historic assessment of his verbal contributions."

Communicate to comprehend

Virtual leaders simply can't communicate too much. "Tell people exactly where you are, what's happening, what's ahead, what you're doing, why you're doing it – listen, explain, answer questions," one executive tells Schmidt.

That said, virtual leaders have fewer dimensions available to convey their messages compared with the face-to-face environment and have to avoid common pitfalls, such as **misinterpretation**.

In order to eschew ambiguities, they have to be more deliberate in their use of language in a virtual setting and invest more than usual in their verbal and written expression. "I had to give very accurate targets and formulate them overly clearly," says an executive. "I didn't want to leave any question marks in the room."

To promote transparency, executives should establish clear expectations and rules. One executive has even introduced a virtual code of conduct to give people guidance and to protect his team members from sending unintentional mixed messages.

Embrace the differences

Communicating via the confines of a computer can be challenging, but it's not impossible. As one executive says, "Yes, there's a difference between leading virtually and in a face-to-face context, but luckily today you still look at a face. You can see the mimic. You can see reactions. You can read the body language, but you have to pay paramount special attention to these marginal variances and most importantly, you must acknowledge the virtuality."

Therein lies the crux of the matter. Leaders need to acknowledge the virtuality by grasping the differences of the new virtual operating environment and subsequently by managing those differences. One way to succeed is through greater self-management and by anticipating leadership situations. Some executives, for example, actively prepare themselves for virtual meetings by meditating or taking a short walk beforehand.

One executive purposefully avoids multitasking during virtual meetings to fully focus on her team. "Specifically, because everyone is doing it, it appears to be universally accepted and it's also easy as my laptop is already open. However, it's focal to me to resist these temptations and share my undivided attention with my team."

Adapt to cope with the new situation

As we go forward in this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, leaders are having to stretch themselves beyond their comfort zone, endeavouring to remain connected to their teams and at the same time tentatively navigate a new, virtual reality. These four categories of behaviours, namely vulnerability, mindfulness, communication, and virtual leadership consciousness capture the essence of what has worked well during the coronavirus crisis and what will work in the future. They are the result of courage and failure that has triggered new thoughts and behavioural adjustments.

As one executive concludes, “If you want to lead effectively in the virtual environment, you have to personalise the virtuality and humanise the digital environment.” It’s no easy task for today’s managers. Nevertheless, it’s a necessary one.

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