

TALENT

Re-defining Leadership in the COVID Era

In Search of a New
Acronym

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Paradigm shift or paradigm rift?

Since the onset of the COVID crisis, there has been a very lively and rich discussion around what this all means for leadership under the extreme conditions we have been going through. What follows is a very personal contribution, based on my initial training as a social historian and 37 years of experience in the Learning and Development space (business school, Adjunct Professor at HEC Paris, corporate and consulting).

My 12 years of corporate experience – running the global leadership programs for a major aerospace defence player – have been critical in developing my ideas here. In addition, I am attempting here to add some inspiration from the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, history...) along with some intercultural insights to consider the degree of « universality » of the issues we are dealing with. I will be citing some well-known and less well-known sources for those who want to dig a bit deeper on certain subjects.

How will armchair historians look back at COVID 2020 10 or 20 years from now? [1] Will they view its impact on leadership as truly revolutionary or more of a paradigm shift in the sense of Kuhn's immensely influential *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* published back in 1962? [2] We humans (and therefore leaders) have a natural tendency to fall back on old habits and behaviours, as those of us in the L+D space know all too well. If we look back at a few cataclysmic events in the past, we can observe that: the Roman Catholic Church survived the Black Death of the 14th Century; that the plight of many African Americans didn't substantially improve after the Emancipation of slaves in 1862; that those courageous women who "manned" the factories during World War II most often returned to being suburban "Desperate Housewives" in the 1950s; and, to take a more recent example, the Arab Spring (with the exception perhaps of Tunisia) has hardly laid the foundations for robust democratic societies in the Middle East.

When the "virus dust" finally settles, will we return to predominately hierarchical, top-down, often bureaucratic, relatively "non-distributed" leadership or will there be a significant or even radical change? Of course, the jury is out – who knows where we will be in even a few months.

WHY AN ACRONYM?

I have chosen the search for a new acronym as the underlying structure for my reflections on leadership. While acronyms can rightly be viewed as being partially superficial, over-simplistic and artificial, they do have the power to focus our thoughts. Think of the GROW model for coaching [3] or VUCA (which has been perhaps banalized and misused– see below).

[4]

I would like to propose a 6-dimensional acronym

TALENT:
TRUST, AGILITY, LEAN,
EMOTION,
NOVELTY and TIME.

As with many models, there are clear interconnections between each of the dimensions. For example, we can hardly expect

Novelty without **Agility** or
Empathy without **Trust**.

1. There was a wonderful but very pertinent joke in Simon Kupper's article in the Financial Times (« Covering the Challenges of 2020 », 19.12.20) from the twitter account of David Burr Gerrard: « Future historians will be asked which quarter of 2020 they specialized in ».
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Structure_of_Scientific_Revolutions
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GROW_model
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volatility,_uncertainty,_complexity_and_ambiguity

At the moment of writing, it seems most likely we are moving towards a hybrid model of working (2/3 days at home with 2/3 days at the office). This in itself will have a very significant impact on leadership, which means that a collective reflection on all of this is more than critical. In what follows, I will try to make the case that we are in for some very major changes indeed. Unlike some recent crises, COVID clearly seems to be in the “perfect storm” category: an unprecedented acceleration in digital transformation (which was of course already well underway); economic turmoil not seen since the 1930s (in spite of the “whatever it takes” approach by most governments), there seems to be a visceral fear regarding future economic well-being and security; and finally, there is a “life or death” layer to the discussion (will I get infected and will I infect loved ones and colleagues?). Even Hollywood might have lacked the creative juices to imagine such a scenario.

Why TALENT?

Even with the tremendous advances in Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, human beings (and by extension, leaders) will continue to play a critical role in the success of organizations. But this raises a new series of questions: who we recruit, who we promote, who we decide to invest in for L+D spend, how we recognize and reward. There are a few leadership models out there with 6 dimensions – most notably the KornFerryHay Leadership Styles model based on the pioneering work at Harvard in the 1960s.^[5] Perhaps the **TALENT** “proto-model” proposed below could make a small contribution to how we can collectively consider updating our pre-existing models on leadership for the COVID Era. As a final conclusion to the discussion, I will provide a few suggestions on how L+D and other HR professionals can reflect on how they could think about updating their approaches, methodologies and processes (in a word, the “HR cultures” of their organizations). Of course, leaders, in general, should be actively involved in the conversation and not simply “out-source” the issue to their respective HR communities. In short, leaders (and even more importantly, C-suite leaders) need to take an active role in leading their talents more than ever.

The World Economic Forum has just published its ranking of the top 10 leadership competencies for 2025. ^[6]

I think that there is a certain fit with the proto-model I am proposing: for example, around the dimension of **NOVELTY** (innovation, creativity, originality, ideation); and **AGILITY** (dealing with ambiguity, flexibility, reasoning), and **EMOTION** (leadership and social influence, resilience, stress tolerance). In the number two position, here is what I would call a hugely important transversal skill of “active learning and learning strategies”. One of the key challenges, as we move forward, is to empower leaders (as well as to get leaders to empower their teams with a true coaching approach) to become “self-learners”, taking full responsibility for their individual and collective “learning paths”, in line with the 70/20/10 learning model. ^[7]

How can I share my reflections on all this with my team and my peers? In what contexts? What should we share on? What are the strengths and drawbacks of models?

5. 6 leadership styles you need to succeed - Viewpoint - careers advice blog Viewpoint – careers advice blog (hays.com)

6. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/top-10-work-skills-of-tomorrow-how-long-it-takes-to-learn-them/>

7. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/70/20/10_Model_\(Learning_and_Development\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/70/20/10_Model_(Learning_and_Development))

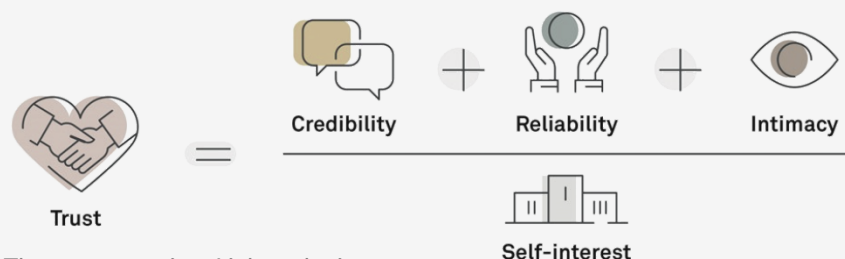
TRUST

It goes without saying that trust “makes the world go round”. It is the bedrock, cornerstone and foundation of everything we do in both our professional and personal lives.

We can think of Leoncini’s well-known 5-tiered pyramid around Team Performance, with trust being the foundation of everything. [8] Beyond the leader-contributor relationship, trust is clearly key in all stakeholder ecosystems (shareholders, suppliers, customers, NGOs...). While trust is certainly universal, there are a couple of important intercultural distinctions: cognitive trust and affective trust. This difference has been very clearly explained in INSEAD Professor Erin Meyer’s very readable synthesis of intercultural theory. [9] According to Meyer, “cognitive trust is based on the confidence you feel in another person’s accomplishments, skills and reliability” (on the extreme end of the scale, we can find Anglo-Saxon cultures). “Affective trust, on the other hand, arises from feelings of emotional closeness, empathy, or friendship” (Latin American, Middle East cultures, for example). My hunch is that affective trust – even in predominantly cognitive trust countries – will become increasingly important for team leaders when a majority of interactions may be done remotely. [10]

**Affective or
cognitive
trust?**

In the current situation, I think it is useful to go back to Covey’s well-known trust equation, where Trustworthiness equals (on the numerator side) Credibility + Reliability + Intimacy, with Self-Orientation on the denominator side. To simplify, leaders who are perceived by team members and other stakeholders as being driven more by the “collective interest” (and the development and the performance of the team) than in pursuing a personal agenda will tend to engender a higher level of trust. [11] In view of this, those leaders with “toxic” leadership behaviours will be even more dangerous for organizations (with a negative leverage effect on employee engagement). Stanford professor Bob Sutton wrote a visionary and deliberately provocative book on this in 2007 – *The No Asshole Rule*. [12] Even a small minority of bad apples can have a very damaging impact on an organization’s level of engagement. We can also remind ourselves of the well-proven adage: most people quit because of their boss. This is the moment for leaders to take the courage to eject the “toxic leaders” from their organizations. These toxic leaders not only have a very negative impact on the engagement levels of their teams but on those, they are trying to influence in their respective corporate eco-systems with what we could in fact call their “fake leadership”.



8. Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Jossey-Bass, 2002.

9. Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map: Decoding How People Think, Lead, and Get Things Done Across Cultures*, Public Affairs TM, 2014

10. Pete Stone of the Just Different consultancy based in Paris made the very astute remark that affective trust is often associated with female behaviors.

11. <https://trustedadvisor.com/why-trust-matters/understanding-trust/understanding-the-trust-equation>

12. <https://www.bobsutton.net/book/no-asshole-rule>

It is my gut and far from the original feeling that trust will become even more critical in the COVID Era. With the emerging hybrid model of working, travel restrictions and severely reduced face-to-face “quality time” in meetings, seminars, conventions, etc., leaders need to give even more explicit attention to this. Gallup has done some very interesting research in this domain, with a particular focus on employee engagement. This is the first time Gallup has observed macro-factors (in this case COVID-19 and the BLM protests) having a strong influence on employee engagement levels, in strong contrast to SARS, the Avian Flu and even the Great Recession of 2008. In terms of remote working, those with the highest level of engagement work remotely 40-60% per cent of the time. On the extremes (0% or 100%), engagement levels fall dramatically. Another very interesting finding is that “having meaningful feedback on a weekly basis, and not just frequently allows maximum engagement for all degrees of remote working”. But in actual fact, there is a massive gap in terms of employees’ perceptions: only 2 in 10 strongly agree that their managers are providing meaningful feedback and only 3 in 10 states that their managers are good at helping them set work priorities”. [13]

It is clear from this that leaders need to put a much greater emphasis on giving impactful feedback which has been carefully prepared and takes into account Emotional Intelligence which will be discussed in the EMOTION dimension. Multi-dimensional feedback – between the manager and the team member and vice versa as well as among team members- has become ever more critical. Perhaps managers need to ask their reports more frequently: “how am I doing?”, “as your team leader, how can I more effectively enable you and the team to perform and grow?”, etc. This will require both managerial and employee courage to share frankly, openly and transparently on the key issues. We could perhaps learn from our Dutch colleagues who place such an important value on these “real conversations”. We also need to get team members to feel comfortable giving themselves feedback in the most constructive and trust-boosting manner. For a lot of organizations, instilling and/or reinforcing such practices will inevitably necessitate important cultural shifts (with a need for C-Suite sponsorship and exemplarity).



From an intercultural point of view, perhaps we should all strive to be relatively more “low context” than “high context” in terms of how we communicate. These concepts came out of the pioneering work of a couple of Social Anthropologists, Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, who transferred their research on Native American tribes to looking at business practices around the globe. Low context communication is relatively more explicit (“the mass of information is vested in the specific code”) whereas in high context communication “most of the information is in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message”. [14] As a lot of the research has shown over the past decades, clarity - in terms of such things as vision and purpose, what is expected of me, how I am recognized and rewarded is fundamental in achieving higher levels of employee engagement and team performance. [15] During a very interesting meeting with Virgin Australia a couple of years ago, the HR Director outlined their approach to employee empowerment: “freedom within a framework” (seeking an appropriate balance between giving employees maximum leeway and very clear guidelines in terms of overall expectations). In the current stressful working environments, leaders will need to be all too aware that giving more freedom can also lead to greater employee uncertainty and stress. To put it simply, things need to be really clear, well-prepared and above all explicit.

In my view, one of the keys to maintaining and enhancing trust will depend on more impactful performance management. If we agree that there is a clear causal link between leadership behaviours and business performance, have we gone far enough in ensuring that our performance management systems are up to the challenge? With the rapid acceleration of hybrid working – and the consequence of a greater need for effective delegation and empowerment – leaders will need to deal with team members who are under-performing or poorly-performing (as well as recognize and reward those who enhance trust amongst team members).

Finally, in our digitally challenged environments, one of the most critical responsibilities of leaders is to ensure that their teams comply strictly with cyber-security protocols. With the new hybrid way of working, there has been a blurring between the private and public spheres. Leaders need to ensure that their teams make a clear distinction between their professional and personal devices.

Over the years, I have often militated for embedding “Finance for Dummies” in senior leadership programs (e.g., within my zone of responsibility, what can I do to improve my company’s cash situation?). In the same fashion, leaders will need to be increasingly cyber-aware to lead their teams effectively and protect their respective organizations.

How can I maintain and improve trust as a leader in this new hybrid working environment? How can I get feedback on the level of trust I am creating? How can I best share my “trust learning curve” with peers?

14. Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences*, Intercultural Press, 1990

15. Having debriefed hundreds of Hay Organizational Climate questionnaires, I have found that clarity really tends to separate average leaders from outstanding leaders

AGILITY

VUCA with the E-Dimension

The COVID Era has certainly made Agility more critical than ever. VUCA has been around since the US Military developed it in the 1980s, but it is my feeling that the acronym has been abused and misused in many corporate and governmental environments. Most of the time we have been paying lip service to agility, imagining scenarios with say a potential of 15-20% deviations (what we could call “VUCA light”).

In fact, we should probably have heeded the advice of those arguing for a more robust model – VUCAE – with an E for exponential. Over the years I have had the privilege of connecting with Singularity University in the Silicon Valley.^[16] If collectively we had onboarded their reflections on the incredible exponential element of change, we could have potentially managed the current crisis more effectively. It is my feeling that this “E-dimension” will be critical over the coming years.



During my stint as an L&D leader in a major global multinational, I had the opportunity to experiment on the subject of agility with a very senior group of VPs. We used the KornFerryHay Agility Questionnaire and were rather taken back by the results. While the individual reports remained confidential, we were provided with a collective picture that demonstrated just how relatively low the overall agility of this very senior sample size was. Based on this experience, I have reflected on the following: are we hiring, promoting and developing the right profiles in terms of agility? Can we in fact develop agility? More on this below in the NOVELTY dimension.

16. <https://su.org>

I would suggest that there is a fundamental link between an organization's capacity to be agile and cognitive biases. Daniel Kahneman has been a pioneer in exploring this for many decades, winning the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2002 and publishing a best seller – *Thinking Fast and Slow* – in 2013. During the height of the pandemic this Spring, Olivier Sibony, Professor of Strategy at HEC Paris, presented a very interesting analysis of how these cognitive biases impacted decisions made during this period. [17] To cite a few examples:

- 1. The bias of our mental model: we focus our analysis of current crises on seemingly similar past events (e.g., SARS 2002-2003). But we are obviously in a very different ballpark.*
- 2. Exponential growth is in fact counter-intuitive – it's way out of our comfort zone. Collectively, we did not see it coming (an example of "VUCA-light"?).*
- 3. There was clearly an NIH ("Not Invented Here") syndrome in our initial reaction to the virus (think of Trump's infamous Chinese virus proclamations). This is what Sibony refers to as "exo-group and endo-group bias". It could never happen to us.*
- 4. There seems to have been a clear phenomenon of "expert group think" back in the Spring of 2020. Of the 18 top scientific experts cited in Sibony's study – only one "outlier" was close to predicting what has unfortunately panned out.*

In terms of the above, how can we encourage and develop leaders to be more agile – and more aware of their cognitive biases – when we are affronted with the next major crisis. How can we make sure that the "outlier" voice is at least listened to? This is most likely going to be a very rich collective learning experience.

A very striking paradox of the COVID Era is that for larger organizations, the corporate planning function has probably become more vital than ever. In our VUCAE era, we need to think more broadly and radically in terms of scenario planning. Perhaps we need to reflect on the profiles in this corporate function – are we sufficiently open to including original thinkers (or to use another term "outliers").

More on this below in the NOVELTY dimension around the idea of Groupthink and "deferring to the creative types". [18]

Finally, what is the relationship between AGILITY and risk assessment? How can we equip leaders to be more "risk-savvy" than ever?

What have I been doing to become more agile in these challenging times? How can I help my team become more agile? And perhaps a more basic question, can we develop agility?

17. <https://www.hec.edu/en/news-room/webinar-cognitive-biases-and-decision-making-covid-19-crisis>

18. There was a wonderful article on this by Simon Kupper in the Financial Times (24.01.21), provocatively entitled « Why Does the Davos Man get it so wrong ». Over the years, this elite group of « Groupthinkers » has failed to see the big events coming (such as the 2018 Financial Crisis).

LEAN

In my opinion, one of the key learnings of the lockdown is that business performance was not necessarily negatively impacted by fewer meetings, less bureaucracy and the suddenly forced experimentation with remote/hybrid working.

When we consider the well-known Eisenhower Matrix (with 4 quadrants – on the vertical axis “importance” and on the horizontal axis “urgency”), I think that the lower right-hand quadrant (non-urgent/ unimportant) has proven to be much larger than 25%. [19]

In terms of the LEAN dimension, could sociologists help us better understand what we need in terms of leadership for this COVID Era? François Dupuy (whom I had the great pleasure of meeting on a number of occasions) – wrote a seminal work back in 2011: *Lost in Management*. He very knowingly speaks of how organizations – by creating rules and processes to ensure “homogeneity and clarity” [20] – actually create what he calls “intermediary bureaucracies”. In a famous quotation of the Franco-Austrian sociologist Erhard Friedberg (my loose translation): “Rules are not important for what they say but how the actors make use of them”. [21] In a nutshell, organizations have proven to be very effective in adding layers of bureaucracy and paying people to manage all of this (processes, reporting...). Could we use this period of “forced reflection”, to get leaders to more deeply reflect on the cost-benefit analysis of corporate processes? The clear risk is that our new hybrid working mode - back-to-back Zoom/ Teams/ Cisco meetings - could actually replicate and in fact reinforce existing corporate bureaucracies. Could we rather seize the occasion to re-think, re-set and reframe (something around “Back to the Basics”?). Could LEAN methodology in terms of leadership help us here? There has always been a fine line in balancing the well-founded need to create a robust corporate process whilst fostering innovation (along with getting a maximum out of our increasingly diverse talents). In a nutshell, how can we benefit from adding more fluidity and flexibility to our modes of leadership? We also need to think about what this means for “scaling-up” in fast-growing organizations, where remote working has become dominant.

As we will be seeing in the TIME dimension below, some leaders have difficulties in changing their management practices for COVID-era hybrid working (e.g., continuing to control and supervise the schedules of their team members). These ‘old-school’ leaders already had a preference for spending most of their time in meetings. The ever-provocative Elon Musk has recently pleaded for CEOs to spend less time in meetings and reduce their use of PowerPoint.

**Now more than
ever is the time
to think lean**

***How can we most effectively
apply LEAN to our
leadership behaviours? How
can we “protect” our teams
from corporate bureaucracy
whilst maintaining a
minimal level of control?***

19. <https://www.eisenhower.me/eisenhower-matrix>

20. François Dupuy, *Lost in Management : la vie quotidienne des entreprises au XX^e siècle*, Seuil, 2011

21. Erhard Friedberg, *Le Pouvoir et la Règle: Dynamiques de l'action organisée*, Paris, Seuil, 1993.

EMOTION

In order to simplify as much as possible my proposed acronym TALENT, I have chosen EMOTION (in fact, I am really trying to focus on the wider notion of Emotional Intelligence) [22].

**EI is more important
than ever**

In our new, increasingly complex era, leaders need to be more versatile than ever. The “chameleon model” – that of adapting one’s leadership styles to the specific needs of team members (level of competence, years of experience in the role, level of motivation, motivational “drivers”, personality profile...). Even more, than in the past, leaders need to have their antennae sharply attuned to pick up “weak signals” from both team members and those from their stakeholder eco-systems. With the hybrid model of working, it seems that there are vast differences in what employees are experiencing: from those feeling “liberated” to be able to work from comfortable second homes in idyllic locales to those feeling isolated in inner-city cramped living spaces. There may even be some interesting gender issues here: one study found that “22% of British men find working from home difficult...only 13% of women do” [23].

There are a lot of tools out there to help leaders and their teams better understand where they are all coming from in terms of personality profiles (DISC Insights, MBTI, Facet5, GENOS...to name but a few). [24] For a relatively small investment and with effective debriefing and facilitation, such tools can have a significant impact on team performance. In light of the dramatic changes to the workplace, it is my view that these will become even more impactful. Such exercises can help leaders become even more “chameleon-like” than ever: by promoting active listening, being more prepared and explicit when needed, emphasizing purpose, and overall serving as true “enablers” to enhance engagement and performance of their team members. One of the great benefits of remote working is that it can give a greater voice to introverts. It is also a great opportunity to make meetings more inclusive by mitigating the nefarious effects of the “dominators”. Of course, this entails that leaders have the emotional intelligence to bring out the best in everyone. If they fail in doing this, leaders risk a growing sense of frustration and even resentment on the part of certain team members.

In view of all this, leaders need to be helped in developing their coaching skills. Finally, many change management experts over the years have argued that communicating with empathy has been a key success factor in explaining how organizations have succeeded in their transformations. This is now more than ever the case.

***Everyone is talking about
“emotional intelligence”, but
what can we actually do to
“put it into place”? How can
we be a role model for
emotional intelligence?***

22. I am very grateful for the advice of fellow consultant Danny Nassif on this (www.birdsconseils.com). He also made the great suggestion of looking at Relationship System Intelligence, which focuses on the intelligence of systems as a whole. While leadership is clearly a role, it can be taken on by more than one person. For further reading, please look at: www.crrglobal.com

23. « Work-life Balance » The Economist, July 18, 2020 pp. 24-25

24. Facet5 has a very interesting 5th Dimension around Emotionality, exploring for example how different team members feel about significant change. <https://www.facet5global.com/LiteratureRetrieve.aspx?ID=138582>

NOVELTY

In order to fit the **TALENT** model, I have chosen **NOVELTY** but could easily have replaced this with **INNOVATION** (once again a further illustration of the artificial side to acronyms).

How can we do real
design thinking
remotely?

Innovation is so often cited as being very key for business performance, but are we really walking the talk? Do we encourage leaders to exploit their inner innovative selves? As we discussed above on the **AGILITY** dimension, are we being inclusive towards “outliers” and challengers (along with recently hired talents)? Or is there a dominance of Groupthink – discussed in the **AGILITY** dimension above?

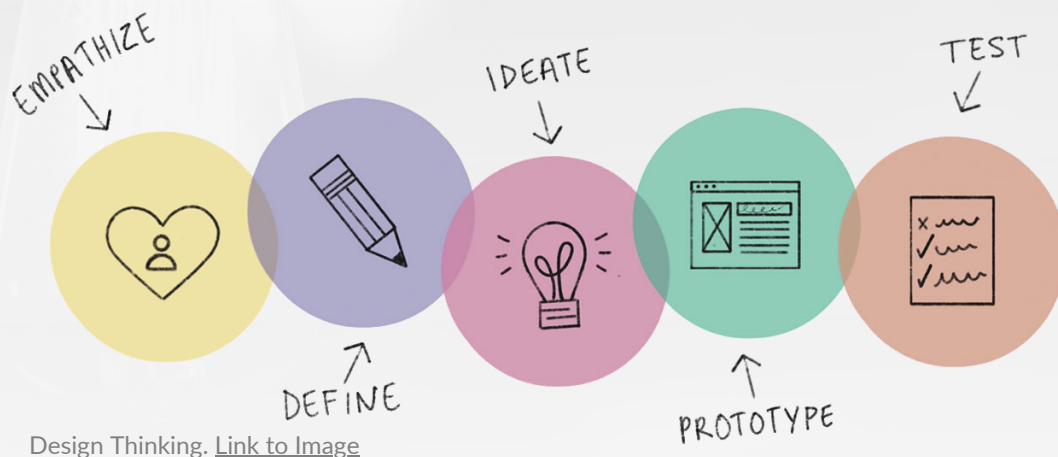
Another key issue that has been raised about innovation in our new era is the negative effects of home working on creativity. Alan Haldane, Chief Economist of the Bank of England has recently warned of the negative economic effects of a decline in employee creativity as there will be fewer serendipity encounters amongst colleagues and that without continued exposure to new ideas and experiences, employees from home risk developing “cognitive tunnelling”. [25] How can leaders best mitigate the risks?

Enhancing creativity among team members working remotely for a significant part of their time has and will continue to be a major challenge for leaders. We are only at the very beginning of the learning process, but I don’t think we need to start from an assumption that it simply can’t be done. Many business schools have been doing some incredible work in setting up virtual campuses (my former business school – NEOMA – comes to mind here).

Could we push (and therefore reward) leaders to more actively encourage and enable their team members to reach out to colleagues across the corporate silos (both divisional and functional)? Using collaborative tools and technologies such as virtual reality, could we try to replicate what happens in those serendipity moments around the proverbial water fountain? This is easier said than done: we need to “reinvent” how we collaborate, with a need for new rituals. Could we try to “force” serendipity and foster idea collision?



Could we encourage employees to seek conversations with co-workers further up and down the corporate hierarchy (without having to ask for “permission”)? I think we are back to the “freedom within a framework” discussion mentioned in the **TRUST** dimension above. I remember a fascinating visit to the 3M Office in Singapore with a group of top hi-tech leaders. 3M Corporate policy allows employees to spend 15% of their time reaching across the organization to innovate. The vast majority of these interactions took place remotely. 3M was very happy with the results and we could see a positive effect on employee engagement.



There is a wide range of approaches, methodologies, and tools out there to boost corporate innovation. I had the great opportunity of discovering Design Thinking with a number of colleagues at the Stanford Design School just over 10 years ago. In my previous corporate environment, Design Thinking had a very powerful impact, including a major influence on Digital Transformation. One of the tenets of D-Thinking is to get the widest range of diversities around the table (engineers and technical experts, business developers, designers, social anthropologists, end-users...). One of the key learnings of the past year is just how effectively we have been able to operate remotely, even at 100%. In fact, D-Thinking is well-suited to a purely digital environment.

As a consequence, for those organizations which haven't yet initiated crash courses for their leaders in D-Thinking, now is the time. There is in fact a great link here with the **AGILITY** dimension discussed above: VUCAE has become more relevant than ever. Combined with other innovation methods – such as strategic foresighting – D-Thinking is an essential tool to help leaders navigate a very uncertain future.

How can we best promote creativity in a hybrid working model? Can we do design thinking remotely? And if so, how?

TIME

Improvised leadership is so pre-Covid; now is the time for real leadership.

I think that this is perhaps the most profound dimension of my proposed proto-Leadership Model. With the enforced lockdown in many countries, employees were given the forced opportunity to experiment in a radical way with remote working. A recent study by the Harvard Business Review and NYU demonstrated that remote workers during the lockdown actually put in longer hours (on average 4 more hours per week than pre-COVID). [26] To look at the bigger picture, time is in fact a very artificial and culturally sensitive resource. The pioneering pair of social anthropologists – Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall – came up with the intercultural scale of “monochronic” and “polychronic” time. [27]

On the “monochronic” side of the scale, people prefer to do one thing at a time, take time commitments seriously, see time as a scarce commodity and adhere religiously to plans (Germanic Swiss have the highest score). On the other end of the scale, “polychronic” people are at ease with doing many things at the same time, consider time commitments an objective to be achieved (if possible) and, overall, place a higher value on human relationships than on getting the task done (Latin America, Middle East, Africa are on the extreme side of the scale here).

To these intercultural observations, we can add personality profiles in terms of how people manage time (for example the P and J dimensions of MBTI). Now that the Pandora’s Box of managing one’s own time has been opened up for so many remote leaders and team members (with the sense of freedom and the challenges that this can bring), I am not sure that we will ever be able to go back to the pre-COVID situation where some managers with a Taylorian mindset still focused on measuring how many hours bottoms were glued to their respective open-space cubicles. People have experienced a sense of freedom with the enhanced flexibility – working full out when their concentration levels are at an optimum and managing their own work-life balance (e.g., “my productivity really improves when I do an hour of cardio at 3 in the afternoon” or “when I take the dog for a walk”). But the caveat here – as we saw above in the EMOTION dimension - is that leaders will have to adapt to the different profiles on their teams and will have to engage in real leadership and not just tick-in-the-box Performance Management.

For some team members, this greater sense of freedom can lead to greater fears and heightened stress. In the past, some leaders have gotten away with a more “improvised” style of leadership using charisma and presence. In our new hybrid world, this will prove to be much less effective. Now, more than ever before is the time for real leadership.

How can we as leaders better manage our team members’ expectations in terms of time as a resource? How can we best adapt to the specific needs of team members in terms of “freedom within a framework”?

26. See footnote 23

27. Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences*, Intercultural Press, 1990.

CONCLUSION

In the opening section, I mentioned the notion of “paradigm shift”. But what if it is even more than this, what we could call a “paradigm rift”? The implication of this is that we are going to be facing immense gaps in leadership competencies to manage the rift. In terms of what is really new in terms of leadership, several things stand out:

**It aint over
until it's over**

1. *The “E-dimension” of the revamped VUCA model. Leaders will be faced with unprecedented demands on their agility. How, for example, will leaders deal with the fake news that can destroy corporate reputations in a whirlwind? We are not out of the woods.*
2. *The need for more “low context”, explicit communication (across different cultures). If leaders are not very clear about what they are trying to communicate – any “fuzziness” will only serve to sap employee engagement. Leading team meetings effectively in a hybrid working environment will be key.*
3. *The need for new corporate rituals in the hybrid working environment. As we saw above, leaders must be savvier about how they manage the time resources of their team members. We probably need the help of social anthropologists here.*
4. *Finally, the need to find the right balance between practising real empowerment and the need for an incredibly clear framework, to allay the fears for whom this will be challenging. There is of course a clear need to understand where our colleagues are coming from.*



Some concrete and practical implications for HR professionals (as well as leaders in general)

In conclusion, what are the concrete implications for HR professionals and, in particular, L+D leaders/experts? In terms of the 6 dimensions outlined above, here are a few reflections:

1. **Recruitment** – Are we paying enough attention to hiring a more diverse range of talents? Do we have the right balance of talent between IQ and EQ? Are we hiring individuals or “categories” (diplomas, gender, disability, etc.)? Could we for example experiment with Agility questionnaires as part of the selection process? Should we use such tools as the MBTI, DISC, etc. more systematically to measure how diverse our recruitment is (but not necessarily as a selection tool)?
2. **Onboarding** – How effectively are we onboarding newly-recruited talents? How are we initiating them into the organization’s culture (both explicit and implicit)? More importantly, are we taking advantage of their “fresh eyes” regarding the practices, procedures and culture of the organization? Do we fully accept potential challenges? Do we systematically conduct “learning reviews”? In short, are we really taking the opportunity to hear their voice?
3. **Leadership Models** – Many organizations are reflecting on revamping existing Leadership Models in view of the impact of COVID on Leadership – for example, a greater emphasis on Agility or Empathy. While HR may “own” the process, all stakeholders need to be involved.
4. **Development/ Assessment Centers** – These have proven their value over the years in terms of developing self-awareness and enabling leaders to construct viable and sustainable Professional Development Plans. Do these need to be re-designed for the new era in a digital format? Could doing them remotely actually be more beneficial?
5. **Learning Actions** – Are the most senior leaders playing a full role in terms of providing input for L+D needs analysis, sponsorship and personal involvement in learning initiatives? Are they devoting sufficient time to developing the talent of their respective organizations (e.g., participating in mentoring programs, kicking off leadership programs, demonstrating exemplarity)? In terms of the 70/20/10 learning model, are they encouraging social and on-the-job learning and not just ticking boxes for the 10%? [28]
6. **Talent Development** – In terms of people reviews and succession planning, should we RETHINK VS RE-THINK some of the parameters for making decisions on L+D investment and promotion? With our talent pipelines, do we have a sufficient focus on Diversity and Inclusion?
7. **Performance Management** – Are we truly recognizing and rewarding talent in terms of leadership behaviour along with business results and the level of corporate compliance? In terms of objective-setting, are we going beyond SMART to measure how effectively are leaders managing the complex stakeholder networks surrounding them? Are we measuring how effectively they are developing their teams? Have they become better coaches? Are we paying sufficient attention to the what, the how and the why (purpose)?

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