

Leadership in a Virtual Working World: A Review

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Understanding how the function of leading in a virtual cloud environment is becoming critical as organisations are increasingly forced to use dispersed teams to continue business operations in the “un-usual” current economy. This paper shares some findings of a study titled “A select bouquet of leadership practices advancing good governance and business ethics: A conceptual framework” undertaken in the pursuit of a doctoral degree submission. These findings can inform leaders by providing academic knowledge on the subject. Furthermore, it can support the enterprise leadership environment in transitioning from a physical to a cloud-based proximity which, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, must and is happening relatively fast.

Keywords: COVID-19; communication; empathy vision; trust; Leadership; humility; people; profit.

Introduction

It is generally accepted that, as companies grow, their structures evolve. The dispersion of their functions and teams also evolve across sites, whether nationally or globally. COVID-19 (Coronavirus disease 2019) has upended this norm and has established virtual teams connected through the cloud as “the new norm.” Here, we address concerns on how this has affected our perception regarding leadership’s new role “in the cloud,” where face-to-face interactions must be experienced in a virtual context.

We live in an age where much of what we do can be achieved through an application or at the push of a button or where there is a drive-through option and a requirement for 24/7 availability. Virtual worlds operate in a similar fashion, paying little or no regard to personal boundaries, work–life balance, and cultural diversity. Leadership comprises concrete situated acts (which are relationally based) that are purposeful and systematic to influence subordinates to meet goals and deliverables. Thus, the question that arises is whether there are solid theoretical foundations to leadership that, in the midst of what has become ambiguous daily work-life balance where the demarcation line between work and daily life is not clear, can support leadership’s role and ensure that leaders have the ability to motivate subordinates to deliver as required. If the COVID-19 pandemic has

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taught us anything, it is that leadership matters – even more so for organisations facing an unknown future.

This paper aims to share findings from academic leadership studies to help guide and assist leaders (irrespective of their current leadership style) in transitioning from a face-to-face world to one that relies on the technology of cloud-based interactions.

To Thine Own Self Be True

Leadership is relational in nature. It involves purposeful acts and a systematic influencing of subordinates to reach concrete, task-related goals.¹ Leaders bear a huge responsibility, and often, face expectations from superiors, peers, and subordinates to know everything and make perfect decisions.² Nonetheless, and despite such lofty expectations, leaders do remain fallible. As a crisis strikes, a leader's first responsibility is usually to "stabilise the threat." The leader must create space to become self-informed and attain accurate situational awareness within and around the organisation.³ When placed within extreme and unique contexts unexpectedly, a leader cannot pretend to know more than they do and make decisions based on instinct or previous experience.⁴ Individuals operating in a "physical world" rely on different strengths than those needed in a virtual world. With the increasing digitisation of society, work pushes the boundaries of our abilities while offering opportunities and challenges to our moral boundaries.⁵

To make the best decisions for the organisation, leaders will undoubtedly need to rely on expertise that they may not have. If they can avoid the trap of over-indexing on "excessive belief in one's own strengths", the resulting expression of humility will be a huge asset.⁶ Owens, Johnson & Mitchell define expressed humility as an interpersonal characteristic that emerges in social contexts and connotes the following behaviours: (i) a manifested willingness to view oneself accurately, (ii) a displayed appreciation of others' strengths and contributions, and (iii) teachability.⁷ Expressed humility comprises a pattern of humble behaviours that occur in interpersonal interactions and is observable by others. Authentic leaders' who are perceived to be emotionally balanced, consider various courses of action, have respect for others, exhibiting courage to do the right thing and have an accurate self-view supports consistency between personal values and behaviour.⁸ Humble leaders' accurate self-view regarding their weaknesses serves their innate drive to learn and value others' opinions because leaders can appreciate the strengths in, and learn from, others.⁹

¹ Alvesson & Einola (2019).

² Chi, Lan & Dorjgotov (2012).

³ Day & Antonakis (2012).

⁴ Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta (2009).

⁵ Royakkers, Timmer, Kool & van Est (2018).

⁶ Owens & Hekman (2012).

⁷ Owens, Johnson & Mitchell (2013).

⁸ George (2015).

⁹ Owens & Hekman (2012).

During a crisis or extreme event, a leader must recognise their own natural human response to events and process the possible strong emotions that accompany it. This will develop the capacity to recognise and understand the same reactions in their subordinates. That is, leaders must first relate to and help themselves before they can do the same for others.¹⁰ To do this, the leader must deliberately raise their self-awareness by paying attention to themselves at the present moment, without evaluating or judging what comes to mind.¹¹

Emotions have been shown to determine affect-driven behaviours like impulsive acts, organisational behaviours, and conflict resolution which, in turn, influence employees' behaviours.¹² Individual level tasks are performed at a cognitive level. When a task is transferred to a team, an emotional level is introduced because of conflict over differing opinions and ideas relating to the task deliverable.¹³ The effectiveness and appropriateness of a leader's conflict management skills are strongly influenced by the depth and development of their self-management skills.¹⁴

The foundation of authentic leadership rests on four components: self-awareness, internalised moral perspective, balanced positioning, and relational transparency.¹⁵ Leroy, Anseel, Gardner & Sels show that self-consistency and self-knowledge have a positive impact on follower satisfaction with leaders, organisational commitment, and perceived team effectiveness.¹⁶ The psychological attributes impacting authentic leadership are confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience. According to Northouse, "they are trait-like because they may characterise a relatively fixed aspect of someone's personality that is evident throughout their life (like extroversion), and they are state-like because, when training or coaching, individuals are capable of developing or changing their characteristics."¹⁷ Stander, Beer & Stander find that authentic leadership led to stronger work engagement because of the qualities of optimism and trust that this kind of leadership generates in employees.¹⁸ Semedo, Coelho & Ribeiro find that authentic leadership is highly correlated with followers who thrive at work and with employee creativity.¹⁹ Nobody can be authentic by trying to imitate somebody else. It is important to acknowledge that authenticity is paramount as no leader can have all the perfect answers all the time.²⁰

Being self-aware can improve a leader's ability to listen to others, alleviate their fear and anxiety, and enable them to move forward. Awareness of what others are feeling, and the modelling of vulnerability, empathy, and compassion

¹⁰Davidson, Kabat-Zinn, Schumacher, Rosenkranz, Muller, Santorelli, Urbanowski, Harrington, Bonus & Sheridan (2003).

¹¹Davidson, Kabat-Zinn, Schumacher, Rosenkranz, Muller, Santorelli, Urbanowski, Harrington, Bonus & Sheridan (2003).

¹²Chang, Sy & Choi (2012).

¹³Jordan & Ashkanasy (2006).

¹⁴Chang, Sy & Choi (2012).

¹⁵Northouse (2019).

¹⁶Leroy, Anseel, Gardner & Sels (2015).

¹⁷Northouse (2019) at 208.

¹⁸Stander, Beer & Stander (2015).

¹⁹Semedo, Coelho & Ribeiro (2016).

²⁰Hougaard & Carter (2018).

during a crisis, have been shown to lower stress and limit the adverse physical symptoms of team members, while improving team goal achievement and productivity.²¹

Effective Communication and Trust

Leaders are looked for guidance during these unfamiliar times. Non-face-to-face leaders who operate “virtually” must know how to use technology and be willing to make themselves accessible and available to their employees.²² Leaders must talk to their people. Having consistent, reliable fact-based communications is a key ingredient for bringing organisations together and reducing workplace anxiety.²³ While leaders must still make challenging decisions (for which they will be judged in hindsight), making well-informed decisions will be key.²⁴ To be well informed, leaders must listen. Having the ability to shift gears into “listening to understand” from “listening to respond” will be crucial for success in virtual operations.²⁵

In situations resulting in extended stress, leadership that provides competence, support, structure, priorities, role clarity, effective communication, coordination, and maintains cohesion, focus, calm, a sense of humour and adequate preparation and response has, in the preliminary research on these topics, typically been evaluated as effective.²⁶ Physical distance, in general, increases the need for better communication to ensure effective coordination.²⁷ Based on the research findings of Van Iddekinge, Ferris & Heffner, Nicolaidis, LaPort, Chen, Tomassetti, Weis, Zaccaro & Cortina, Dugan and Bavik, Tang, Shao & Lam psychosocial proximity is found to influence the types of actions taken by organisations and have psychological effects on members.²⁸ By maintaining appropriate communication, companies can maintain the high levels of identification required by units without compromising the authority of leadership systems.²⁹ According to Burris, Detert & Chiaburu³⁰ leaders who are difficult to work with tend to stifle communication. In situations with high uncertainty, followers are more attracted to ethical leaders because they provide focus, direction, behavioural guidance, and show concern and support for followers.³¹

Most people do not know their leaders personally and can only know what they make sense of from afar through cues and messages (by way of

²¹Scott, Colquitt, Layne Paddock & Judge (2010).

²²Bradt (2015).

²³Ko, Ma, Bartnik, Haney & Kang (2018).

²⁴Hehman, Sutherland, Flake & Slepian (2017).

²⁵Bradt (2015).

²⁶Klein, Ziegert, Knight & Xiao (2004); Salas, Goodwin & Shawn-Burke (2010).

²⁷Antonakis & Atwater (2002); Bell, McAlpine & Hill (2017); Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta (2009).

²⁸Van Iddekinge, Ferris & Heffner (2009); Nicolaidis, LaPort, Chen, Tomassetti, Weis, Zaccaro & Cortina (2014); Dugan (2017); Bavik, Tang, Shao & Lam (2018).

²⁹Bell, McAlpine & Hill (2017).

³⁰Burris, Detert & Chiaburu (2008).

³¹Ko, Ma, Bartnik, Haney & Kang (2018).

communication and behaviour) sent from those in leadership.³² One of the strongest variables that affects communication is referred to as “psychological safety,” which Edmondson defines as a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe from negative consequences to self and career while indulging in interpersonal risk-taking (confronting differences with others in ways that could lead to learning and change).³³ In a “psychologically safe” environment, people expect others to respond positively should an individual expose their thoughts by asking a question, seeking feedback, reporting a mistake, or proposing a new idea.³⁴ As it relates to social aspects (like the COVID-19 pandemic), Seifert suggests that to promote trust and relieve anxiety relating to a crisis, leaders must be open, transparent, and publicise ongoing efforts to restore processes, systems, and reconstitute personnel and other resources, and identify the various forms of support available to members.³⁵ Without such transparency, maladaptive myths and rumours can spread easily in extreme contexts.³⁶

Leonard and Howitt highlight that organisations can operate within routine or non-routine contexts; establishing communications across internal and external networks in both contexts is important.³⁷ In simulated situations, Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta show that leaders focused more on performance planning and consideration of followers, as advocated in situational theory, are more successful in removing followers from purported dangerous situations and in keeping events under control (internally and externally).³⁸ They did this by providing clear, step-by-step directions and communication for followers and ensuring the appropriate and correct communication was extended to the external environment.

Transparency and trust can build and sustain a relationship. This is an essential consideration in addressing sustainability challenges, as it requires openness and transparency in acknowledging and confronting realities, resilience and flexibility when withstanding pressures, and innovation where more than incremental improvement is required.³⁹ Leadership itself cannot be distinguished from the unique social dynamics inherent in the context. Followers will re-evaluate trust in their leaders and focus on the leader’s competence more so than on their character.⁴⁰ Trust between the leader and the follower is a mediator to company performance.⁴¹

Customers and society place an inherent expectation on firms to be ethical in meeting their demands.⁴² Trust and respect among key stakeholder groups (particularly employees and customers) are vital to an organisation's success. Trust

³²Treviño, Brown & Hartman (2003).

³³Edmondson (1999).

³⁴Detert & Edmondson (2011).

³⁵Seifert (2007).

³⁶Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta (2009).

³⁷Leonard & Howitt (2007).

³⁸Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta (2009).

³⁹Treviño & Nelson (2017).

⁴⁰Hannah, Campbell & Matthews (2010).

⁴¹Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang & Avey (2009).

⁴²Valenzuela, Mulki, Jaramillo (2010).

engenders loyalty and cultivates the company's good reputation, thereby building brand value and company performance.⁴³ Leaders in the public sector are mandated to set examples on issues of trust and integrity (which may not be detrimental to society's values), while determining and driving public sector activities to enhance the utility of human needs.⁴⁴

Should a leader constantly change their behaviour, followers will perceive leaders as unpredictable and unreliable, and therefore, unworthy of trust.⁴⁵ If a leader espouses one set of values (the way they should behave) and actively promotes them but personally practices another set, trust will be further undermined. The traits that CEOs most often attribute to ethical leaders are honesty, trustworthiness, and integrity. Trust is associated with credibility, consistency, and predictability in relationships. Honesty is the crucial element needed in a trust-based relationship.⁴⁶

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "trust" is defined as "assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something with an expectation or belief that one can rely on another person's actions and words and that the person has good intentions to carry out their promises."⁴⁷ Trust is most meaningful in situations where one party is at risk or vulnerable to another party. Traditionally, trust is the primary mechanism through which leaders and followers exchange power and influence. It is a fundamental requirement for leaders to demonstrate their ability and competence to lead and their integrity and benevolence toward those over whom they wield power.⁴⁸ This is achieved by employees being exposed to leaders who consistently demonstrate behaviours (what they say and how they behave are aligned) that promote trust, such as consistency, integrity, concern, and benevolence. In a virtual environment, however, many physical face-to-face and direct interactions that build connections and trust are absent.

When groups first form, people are usually willing to give others the benefit of the doubt, with the prevailing feeling being that "we're all in the same boat." In a virtual environment, it can be difficult to understand what is really going on, and even harder to build rapport and trust. According to Bullock and Klein, trust is proposed as the primary challenge facing virtual teams today.⁴⁹ Academic literature on team management and leadership acknowledges that there is a relationship between personal communication and trust.⁵⁰ The leaders' empathy that subordinates perceive makes them more willing to give the leader their trust. The leaders' attractiveness has a positive effect on empathy.⁵¹ The perceived attractiveness of leaders can be altered based on increased exposure to them, or as

⁴³ Avery, McKay, Volpone & Malka (2015).

⁴⁴ Rehman (2011).

⁴⁵ Treviño & Nelson (2017).

⁴⁶ Mihelič, Lipičnik & Tekavčič (2010).

⁴⁷ Merriam-Webster dictionary (2020).

⁴⁸ Marques & Dhiman (2017).

⁴⁹ Bullock & Klein (2011).

⁵⁰ Zolin, Hinds, Fruchter & Levitt (2004).

⁵¹ Colquitt, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, LePine & Sheppard (2002).

people become more familiar with the leader. Lasting trust and strong relationships come from reliable actions and communications over time.⁵²

Stakeholder Relationships and Team Dynamics

Leadership influence affects employee behaviour⁵³ and the organisation's overall performance.⁵⁴ From an organisational perspective, leaders are expected to set the company's strategic direction. They are responsible for serving and protecting their stakeholders and the whole community.⁵⁵ Factors like the globalisation of markets and rapidly evolving technology force businesses to respond to survive.⁵⁶ A company's values should be the foundation of why it exists, how it makes decisions, and its true purpose. These values must be authentic and specific so that they resonate with stakeholders.⁵⁷ All stakeholders must be part of a global discussion about how technologies are changing the systems that surround them and impacting the lives of humans.⁵⁸

Ethical leaders withstand the challenges that come with leading an organisation. They must have an extensive understanding of the importance of positive relationships with the stakeholders (internally and externally). Additionally, the quality of the relationship between them must be built with trust and respect as important determinants of success.⁵⁹ According to Nelson, Poms & Wolf,⁶⁰ living in harmony with ethical and authentic characteristics and principles establishes the efficiency of a sustainable human enterprise that can flourish. Buble advocates that leaders must be perceived as people of good moral standing who show concern for employee welfare and are very approachable.⁶¹ Chi, Lan & Dorjgotov further support this by emphasizing that ethical leaders consistently try to incorporate moral principles in their behaviour and that their values and beliefs embody their commitment to an organisation's purpose, enshrined through prudence, persistence, and patience.⁶²

Leadership comes with many risks (physical harm, financial harm, reputation loss, failure, and accountability). It includes the need to make tough decisions in the pursuit of success while operating in uncertain environments where policies and procedures are not enough.⁶³ It is also the leader's responsibility to manage risk effectively.⁶⁴ To manage risk, leaders must (i) ask the right questions even if

⁵²Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick & Finkel (2011).

⁵³Hughes (2019); Noelliste (2013).

⁵⁴Mayende & Musenze (2018); Yatich & Musebe (2017).

⁵⁵Rossouw & van Vuuren (2018).

⁵⁶Bedi, Alpaslan & Green (2016).

⁵⁷Northouse (2019).

⁵⁸Hadfield (2016).

⁵⁹Resick, Martin, Keating & Dickson (2011).

⁶⁰Nelson, Poms & Wolf (2012).

⁶¹Buble (2012).

⁶²Chi, Lan & Dorjgotov (2012).

⁶³Hoskisson, Chirico, Zyung & Gambeta (2016); Northouse (2019); Yukl (2013).

⁶⁴Treviño & Nelson (2017); Zeidan & Müllner (2015).

they are difficult,⁶⁵ (ii) consult various stakeholders with different perspectives, backgrounds, points of view, and knowledge to predict, assess, and manage risk,⁶⁶ and (iii) be of good character, have integrity, courage and compassion, and be careful, prudent, and aware of their limitations.⁶⁷

Leadership is a choice, and a responsibility shared with other leaders in an organisation who influence other people (internally and externally), programs, systems, culture, and company structure. It is embedded in a specific context that has stakeholders; it does not exist in a static time frame, but covers more than just the present. Leaders are viewed as an organisation's representative to internal and external stakeholders. They are accountable for performance outcomes.⁶⁸ External stakeholders, like the community, may require philanthropic programs like poverty alleviation, unemployment reduction, and provision of basic infrastructures in the health and education sectors to solve their socio-economic needs. This set of needs creates pressure on a firm.⁶⁹ Sagiv and Schwartz emphasise the assumption that society exerts pressure on an organisation's culture, and thus, there are similarities between societal and organisational values.⁷⁰ At a macro level, the value choices made by companies have a large impact. At a micro-level, rules, codes, norms, and principles that guide the entity's internal activity can affect internal and external stakeholders, with ultimate responsibility being placed on the company's board.⁷¹

Delivering on organisational goals in increasingly complex global companies requires that leaders align new needs with existing structures and influence others, in both internal and external social contexts. Doing so requires flexibility in adapting to changing organisational systems, team dynamics, and diverse workforces.⁷²

Researchers agree that leading virtual versus traditional face-to-face teams is more challenging.⁷³ Virtual leaders are expected to invest additional time and effort to help coordinate virtual team tasks, build relationships among geographically distributed members, and facilitate team processes.⁷⁴ Leadership at the team level impacts team processes and outcomes, and individual effectiveness.⁷⁵ To structure tasks and facilitate social-emotional processes within a virtual team, leadership is an important ingredient.⁷⁶ Depending on the focus, task and relationship-oriented behaviours can be either directed at the entire virtual team or individuals within the

⁶⁵Giessner & van Quaquebeke (2010); Hoskisson, Chirico, Zyung & Gambeta (2016); Siepel & Nightingale (2014).

⁶⁶Treviño & Nelson (2017).

⁶⁷Ahn, Lee & Yun (2018); Byun, Karau, Dai & Lee (2018); Den Hartog (2015); Moore, Mayer, Chiang, Crossley, Karlesky & Birtch (2019); Zhang & Tu (2018).

⁶⁸Carton, Murphy & Clark (2014).

⁶⁹Okpara & Wynn (2012).

⁷⁰Sagiv & Schwartz (2007).

⁷¹Du Plessis, Hargovan & Harris (2018).

⁷²Carmeli & Halevi (2009); Kozlowski, Watola, Jensen, Kim & Botero (2009); Morgeson, DeRue & Karam (2010); Uhl-Bien & Marion (2009).

⁷³Hoch & Kozlowski (2014).

⁷⁴Purvanova & Bono (2009).

⁷⁵Morgeson, DeRue & Karam (2010).

⁷⁶Al-Ani, Horspool & Bligh (2011).

team.⁷⁷ In terms of leader influence on virtual collaboration, both task and relationship-oriented behaviours are critical. According to Colquitt, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, LePine & Sheppard,⁷⁸ and Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk & Gibson,⁷⁹ leader task-oriented behaviours, such as coaching, enhance virtual communication and collaboration. Fostering good relationships among team members promotes a collaborative context and work climate within a virtual team and makes members more responsive and willing to help other team members.⁸⁰ As a virtual team's members will likely have diverse backgrounds, leaders of such teams must ensure that all members understand, appreciate, and leverage diversity to establish trusting relationships.⁸¹

Where self-managing teams are active, there is a tendency to have shared leadership. This represents a process by which team members share responsibilities, mutually influence and guide each other, and conduct collaborative decision making.⁸² Distinct from traditional hierarchical leadership, shared leadership has an influence process that is more lateral than vertical.⁸³ It is a form of collective effort that enhances team performance in an electronic context.⁸⁴ Leaders may choose to facilitate the formation of shared leadership within teams, which may complement formal leadership. In a virtual environment, leaders may formalise the team goals and communicate them to the entire team via e-mail, whereas virtual leaders may ask members to take responsibilities for various tasks during virtual conferences and encourage them to periodically report on their work status to everyone else in the team.⁸⁵ According to Carte, Chidambaram & Becker,⁸⁶ shared leadership in virtual teams is "best characterised as task leadership." This implies that assigned leaders are responsible for building trusting relationships within virtual teams, thereby facilitating the emergence of shared leadership, and thus, enhancing team performance. While leaders exhibit behaviours that are directed at the entire virtual team, they should also interact with each team member individually (every team member faces challenges that are unique to their local work environment).⁸⁷ Virtual leader behaviours directed at the individual levels are paramount in shaping employee cognitive, affective, and motivational states, and contribute to individual effectiveness.⁸⁸

Albuquerque, Koskinen & Zhang find that team-level processes and emergent states such as empowerment, positively impact individual members' informal learning and commitment in the team.⁸⁹ Chen, Kanfer, DeShon & Mathieu and Tajfel & Turner demonstrate that team-level efficacy is positively related to

⁷⁷Wang, Zhou & Liu (2014).

⁷⁸Colquitt, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, LePine & Sheppard (2002).

⁷⁹Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk & Gibson (2004).

⁸⁰Al-Ani, Horspool & Bligh (2011); Hill & Bartol (2016).

⁸¹Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen (2007); Maruping & Agarwal (2004).

⁸²Hoch & Kozlowski (2014).

⁸³Al-Ani, Horspool & Bligh (2011).

⁸⁴Carte, Chidambaram & Becker (2006).

⁸⁵Liao (2017).

⁸⁶Carte, Chidambaram & Becker (2006),

⁸⁷Hill & Bartol (2016).

⁸⁸Liao (2017).

⁸⁹Kukenberger, Mathieu & Ruddy (2015).

individual-level self-efficacy,⁹⁰ as employees working in teams see themselves as individuals and incorporate team membership into their definition of self. NA can be contagious, as individuals are able to learn by observing and replicating behaviours of other team members.⁹¹

Unlike in a traditional (face-to-face) team setting, coordinating within teams, building trust, forming shared experiences, and managing conflict requires additional efforts in a virtual enterprise world.⁹² Additionally, virtual leaders also must face the challenge of establishing their credibility.⁹³

Purpose and Vision

People can often feel that they are “in the same storm” and working with others within the same company, and yet not feel that they are “in the same boat” or on “the same page”. Stepping back to gain perspective is a practice as useful for organisations as it is for individuals.⁹⁴ According to Graham,⁹⁵ for individuals and organisations to be the best version of themselves, they must have purpose, along with passion, possibilities (vision), and place.

Jacobs & Longbotham find that processes like seeking the counsel of trusted individuals, praying and reflecting, help establish a higher purpose in leaders and drive the desire to minimise any discrepancy between their spiritual beliefs and the environmental conditions they find themselves in.⁹⁶ Craig & Snook show that less than 20% of leaders are strongly aware of their own individual purpose.⁹⁷ They show that leaders may identify with their organisation’s purpose (which they generally know very well), but at an individual level, lack personal purpose. “Purpose is [...] the key to navigating the complex world we face today, where strategy is ever-changing, and few decisions are obviously right or wrong. If, therefore, we fail to identify our leadership purpose, we will be unable to develop and follow a plan to bring it into action and thereby achieve our most desired goals in both personal and professional regard”.⁹⁸ Purpose is not what we do, but how and why we do it. Thus, it is closely aligned with qualities like awareness, respect, morality, vision, and understanding.⁹⁹ In times of change, it is important for leaders to pose questions about what the organisation stands for, and what it should continue to do or stop doing in the future when conducting town halls and on-line group conversations.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁰Chen, Kanfer, DeShon & Mathieu (2009); Tajfel & Turner (1986).

⁹¹Bandura, Freeman & Lightsey (1997).

⁹²Liao (2017).

⁹³Al-Ani, Horspool & Bligh (2011).

⁹⁴Goleman & Boyatzis (2017).

⁹⁵Graham (2011).

⁹⁶Jacobs & Longbotham (2011).

⁹⁷Craig & Snook (2014).

⁹⁸Craig & Snook (2014) at 107.

⁹⁹Marques & Dhiman (2017).

¹⁰⁰O'Reilly & Tushma (2013).

Leadership studies have consistently acknowledged the essence of vision (the idealised verbal portrait of what an organisation aspires to achieve; an aspiration of what to strive for) as a significant component and determinant of leadership performance.¹⁰¹ Vision is future-oriented, an idealised utopia with a long-term time frame and is crafted as a generalised, broad statement that can lend itself to multiple interpretations.¹⁰² Most studies on leadership have focused on how the vision is articulated and communicated.¹⁰³ Strange & Mumford show that the vision process arises from the leader's prescriptive mental model.¹⁰⁴ Vision statements often use abstract language and imagery, and emphasise values, distal goals (and how to achieve them, which may be vague), and utopian outcomes.¹⁰⁵ According to Boisot & McKelvey,¹⁰⁶ to be effective organisations, companies must have adaptive systems where the organisation's and environment's complexity can be matched.

According to Erçetin, Açıkalın & Bülbül, we have learned that order can emerge from chaos and that natural systems can self-organise.¹⁰⁷ Natural systems show us that "strange attractors" in chaos bring order as in the case of snowflakes, for example.¹⁰⁸ In today's competitive, globalised and connected world, more companies are relying on intellectual capital rather than manufacturing and primary industrial activities. These evolving organisations deeply embrace innovation, knowledge, technology, learning, and adaptation as core competencies.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, they must constantly adapt and change – not as a matter of choice, but as a means of survival – to environmental changes through innovation and continuous learning to be part of an increasingly complex world.¹¹⁰ Kahane identified three complexities at the root of the toughest problems that leaders face today: "(i) dynamic complexity: cause and effect distant in time and space, (ii) social complexity: diverse stakeholders with different agendas and worldviews, and (iii) generative complexity: emergent realities wherein solutions from the past no longer fit."¹¹¹ A realistic view of current leadership demands and the contextual environment must incorporate the complexities involved in developing an effective vision.¹¹²

Due to environmental dynamics, organisational actors are constantly changing. Leadership tenure in modern organisations is often short-lived and fluid because of competing institutional challenges, agile leadership competence demands, and stakeholders' low tolerance for failure.¹¹³ A central question is whether vision is relevant or even necessary, given the environment's complexities, dynamics, and

¹⁰¹Rafferty & Griffin (2004).

¹⁰²Marques & Dhiman (2017).

¹⁰³Carton, Murphy & Clark (2014); Venus, Stam & van Knippenberg (2013).

¹⁰⁴Strange & Mumford (2002).

¹⁰⁵Berson, Halevy, Shamir & Erez (2015).

¹⁰⁶Boisot & McKelvey (2010).

¹⁰⁷Erçetin, Açıkalın & Bülbül (2013).

¹⁰⁸Erçetin, Açıkalın & Bülbül (2013).

¹⁰⁹Marques & Dhiman (2017).

¹¹⁰Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss & Figge (2015).

¹¹¹Kahane (2004) at 4.

¹¹²Marques & Dhiman (2017).

¹¹³Treviño & Nelson (2017).

the need for constant adaptation.¹¹⁴ To be effective, a vision requires the leader to understand the past to similar mistakes, have deep knowledge of the present (including the connectivity and interactions of various components of the whole system), and the capacity to use available information to make accurate projections and predictions of future events.¹¹⁵ Neuroscientists conducting studies on mental time travel find that individuals use the same region of their brain to remember the past and to envision the future. Episodic memories of the past are crucial to predicting the future.¹¹⁶

In many organisations, once mission and vision statements have been crafted and written up, they tend to be forgotten.¹¹⁷ Vision requires thoughtful planning and intention.¹¹⁸ Intention is also closely tied to one's sense of purpose.¹¹⁹ Meaningful purpose creates a much stronger energy of intention, and the vision keeps the purpose alive and vivid with anticipatory images of the future.¹²⁰

Re-Invention

To improve the effectiveness and performance of companies, leaders in highly turbulent and complex environments have long considered new idea generation and opportunity recognition as effective means of supporting the growth and competitiveness of their business.¹²¹ How does business do what it has always been doing, but differently? Leadership is also viewed as the inspiring and enabling factor that influences different aspects of employees' performance and work behaviour.¹²² Re-invention mode versus survival mode is dependent on the mindset. Further, the opportunity in this regard lies in what is to be – what the company, its leaders and people will be, how they can work, reach their customers, and communicate – and not what has to be preserved.¹²³ When there is no longer any uniqueness in what a company is offering its customers, the result is merely a matter of survival. Competition is then based only on price.¹²⁴ In the African context, the values that should be espoused by leaders include legitimacy in a role, the desire to develop a group and promote the growth of individuals, a community focus, joint decision making in a spirit of sharing values, the promotion of dignity and respect in the culture of an organisation and in its climate.¹⁶²

Facing change is not new to companies. Leaders must decide between waiting for the change to happen and driving the change – which could possibly involve no longer protecting what, overnight, has become an old business model. What if,

¹¹⁴Marques & Dhiman (2017).

¹¹⁵O'Reilly & Tushman (2013).

¹¹⁶Zimmer (2011).

¹¹⁷Marques & Dhiman (2017).

¹¹⁸Taiwo, Lawal & Agwu (2016).

¹¹⁹Graham (2011).

¹²⁰Marques & Dhiman (2017).

¹²¹Chen, Tang, Jin, Xi & Li (2014).

¹²²Chen, Tang, Jin, Xi & Li (2014).

¹²³Sinek (2020).

¹²⁴Kim & Mauborgne (2005).

knowing nothing, you had to re-invent the industry you are in now? What is its purpose? Why did the business start in the first place? What value and values do you offer the people who buy your product and service, and can you ignore and let go of what was or has been?¹²⁵

Pairing vulnerability with confidence is the next normal. It will be critical in helping people transition from states of anger or denial into working together to build a desirable future. Leaders are uniquely positioned to ignite hope and create the future organisation's image that people are excited to be a part of.¹²⁶ The virtual world of connecting is not there to put a company out of business but rather to drive re-invention (although this has been sudden due to COVID-19). It is not about what is done but why it is done – the important consideration is purpose and understanding what jobs support this purpose.¹²⁷

Leaders must drive the improvement of employees' commitment and persistence, gain stakeholders' support and persuade them to realise the new way forward.¹²⁸ This implies that leaders must develop new leadership competencies to effectively direct the process of change and opportunity recognition in highly challenging, turbulent, and competitive environments.¹²⁹ Since the 2008 financial crisis, many global companies (especially in developing markets) have switched their competitive strategy from low cost (based on price competition) to differentiation, as cost leadership strategy is no longer suitable for accommodating the diverse and short-term customer needs.¹³⁰ The challenge strategic leaders have to contend with is balancing the short- (which will inhibit change or innovation) and long-term company needs (inevitability of change) such that both innovation and the company's daily operations run efficiently.¹³¹ To achieve both short and long-term deliverables, leaders must be clear about their values and vision. They must allow (by delegation) employees to make operational decisions so that the leaders can focus on the company's strategic decisions while being aware of the organisation's current capabilities to benefit the company and its stakeholders in both the short and long term.¹³² To create new offerings and products, companies must change the internal environment keeping in mind a culture of innovation, characterised by flexibility and ability to adapt quickly. This will help them respond efficiently to newly identified opportunities. These opportunities will often involve high quality, customised offerings, with after-sales service and customer support.¹³³

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there may be no going back to “normal.” Life will be different (to an as-yet-unknown degree); customer needs will change, business models will evolve and, to be successful, businesses and individuals must adapt to the “new” based on their existing skill sets, capabilities, and mindsets.

¹²⁵Sinek (2020).

¹²⁶Norman, Luthans & Luthans (2005).

¹²⁷Sinek (2020).

¹²⁸De Jong & Den Hartog (2010); Middlebrooks (2015); Ng & Feldman (2013) and Radaelli, Lettieri, Mura & Spiller (2014).

¹²⁹Chen, Tang, Jin, Xi & Li (2014).

¹³⁰Ray Gehani (2013).

¹³¹Galpin, Joufflas & Gasta (2014).

¹³²Baskaran, Yang, Yi & Mahadi (2018).

¹³³Auzair & Sofiah (2011); Urbancova (2013).

This change to the “new normal” will affect everyone, irrespective of job title, circumstance, skill, and knowledge. From a leadership perspective, mindset will be important, as will not caring about *who* is right, but *what* is right.¹³⁴

People and Profit

Take care of the people and they will take care of the numbers. Money is important. It is needed to run a company. In this digital era, there is no app for relationships and job satisfaction.¹³⁵ As we move forward into the new normal, society will require leaders who can nurture collaboration.¹³⁶

Emotions are universal and common.¹³⁷ It is universally accepted that is not easy to achieve harmony between one’s emotions and rational recognition of certain reasons for action.¹³⁸ Several studies have acknowledged that leaders are active managers of group emotion.¹³⁹ When positive emotions outweigh negative emotions, our brains can more effectively handle complex and/or novel tasks as we are more open to new ideas and tend to approach things with a growth mindset.¹⁴⁰ In the face of a crisis, positive emotions will be critical to leaders,¹⁴¹ especially now as they shift their companies into a virtual world while dealing with a face-to-face physical world that must still operate.

Cognitive change is problem focused. It entails the leader exhibiting behaviours that put situations in perspective (the leader is attempting to reduce the situation’s emotion-provoking aspects) for the follower and helping them see the situation positively. By adopting this approach, the leader is seeing a stressor in a more positive light and as a challenge rather than only as a threat.¹⁴² Emotions are rich with communicative information. Their expression can enhance communication, promote positive relational functioning, and bring needed attention to important organisational issues.¹⁴³ According to some authors a key cause of relationship deterioration is the suppression of emotion. When leaders encourage or model the suppression of emotions, especially in the event of a sudden change, they lose the opportunity to address problems with employees, making staff feel invalidated. This also discounts employees’ experiences, leading to a breakdown in open communication.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, research has shown that the physiological stress of suppressing emotions, as it relates to job satisfaction, may directly generate dissatisfaction.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁴Sinek (2020).

¹³⁵Sinek (2020).

¹³⁶World Economic Forum (2020).

¹³⁷Ashkanasy (2003).

¹³⁸Hursthouse & Pettigrove (2018).

¹³⁹Ashkanasy & Humphrey (2011).

¹⁴⁰Jung, Wranke, Hamburger & Knauff (2014).

¹⁴¹Little, Gooty & Williams (2016).

¹⁴²Wright, Mohr, Sinclair & Yang (2015).

¹⁴³Little, Gooty & Williams (2016).

¹⁴⁴Little, Gooty & Williams (2016).

¹⁴⁵Grandey & Gabriel (2015).

Empathic leadership is based on the concept that we are connected with each other and that societies survive owing to our ability to feel for one another and respond.¹⁴⁶ Research shows that empathic leaders have the ability to create emotional bonds, and thus, become competent in understanding and addressing their employees' and customers' needs, appreciating and drawing on people's talents, recognizing others' perspectives in problem solving, and including the correct people in decision making.¹⁴⁷ Leaders who are not naturally empathetic should deliberately surround themselves with others who can help fill that gap.¹⁴⁸ A leader being authentic in exhibiting vulnerability by lowering their guard and confronting the crisis that is unfolding, results in groups feeling genuinely cared for.¹⁴⁹ Cultivating these qualities in a balanced way (by first tuning inward to understand and integrate one's own emotions and fears, and then turning outward to alleviate anxiety and support others over time) enables people and businesses to recover.¹⁵⁰ Many people mistakenly view empathy as a mere emotional reaction. However, it is broader than that and involves "the ability to transcend our ego and see and sense larger systems".¹⁵¹ According to Rifkin, empathy is like an invisible social glue that enables a complex individuated society to remain integrated.¹⁵²

According to Enderle,¹⁵³ a challenge for an ethical leader is producing quality, profitable products while protecting and promoting the well-being of employees and accepting that the right thing may not always be the most profitable. Unlike the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly and severely constricted global economic activity.¹⁵⁴ One of the few bright spots of the unintended remote working situation that arose because of COVID-19 is that reduced costs and created efficiencies for organisations by developing and supporting a more extensive virtual working infrastructure.¹⁵⁵ Short-term profit expectations determine the number of possible staff appointments a firm can make and maintain.¹⁵⁶ Profit also regulates macroeconomic processes and as many workers have now grown accustomed to eliminating their commute or spending additional quality time with family, teleworking expectations are likely to increase.¹⁵⁷

Albuquerque, Koskinen & Zhang show that corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities strengthen customer loyalty and result in reduced susceptibility of corporates in terms of economic downturn.¹⁵⁸ Research on past crises suggests that the relationships between a firm and its workers, suppliers, customers, and local

¹⁴⁶Issah (2018).

¹⁴⁷Mahsud, Yukl & Prussia (2010).

¹⁴⁸Goleman & Boyatzis (2017).

¹⁴⁹Lopez (2018).

¹⁵⁰Holt Marques, Hu & Wood (2017).

¹⁵¹Senge & Krahnke (2014) at 194.

¹⁵²Rifkin (2010).

¹⁵³Enderle (1987).

¹⁵⁴Reinhart (2020).

¹⁵⁵Brownlee (2020).

¹⁵⁶Storey & Salaman (2017).

¹⁵⁷Brownlee (2020).

¹⁵⁸Albuquerque, Koskinen & Zhang (2019).

community can shape corporate performance and resilience to shocks.¹⁵⁹ By creating safe, healthy workplaces, engaging in ethical business practices, providing enduring, reliable services to customers, and investing in the local environment and community more generally, a firm can signal its commitment to satisfying implicit contracts. This, in turn, will boost stakeholders' willingness to support its operations, especially in difficult times.¹⁶⁰

As the pandemic spreads across countries and causes depressed corporate sales, requiring firms to manage liquidity to cover costs, investors and the market at large could re-evaluate a firm based on its cash reserves, leverage, profitability, international supply chains and customers in other countries. The stock prices of firms where the majority shareholding is made up by investment bankers/hedge fund managers have a tendency to perform worse when there is a crisis than the stock prices of those owned by non-financial corporations. These findings are consistent with the view that investment bankers/hedge fund managers tend to sell their shares rapidly in response to negative information about COVID-19 cases, intensifying the downward pressure on prices, whereas owners with long- strategic commitments to firms (including large corporations) tend to dampen the pandemic's adverse impact on stock prices.¹⁶¹

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has, in a very short time frame, had a profound effect on the lives and well-being of the world's population and businesses. Businesses are treading through a time of inconvenient uncertainty. Those in leadership positions will be required to persevere and co-ordinate, sharing knowledge as opposed to taking an isolated approach. Leading successfully will not be contingent on any particular leadership approach or title; leadership will be required at almost all levels of human interaction. Collectively, everyone will learn important lessons and the choices made will affect everything going forward. A moral manager dimension is lacking in many companies which if present would be characterised by the manager's pre-emptive efforts to influence followers' ethical and unethical behavioural practices in the workplace which could compromise *inter alia*, quality. When moral managers exist in a workplace, they make ethics an explicit part of their management agenda since they communicate a moral, ethics and values message. They make a point of role modelling ethical conduct, and may use the reward system (rewards and discipline) to hold followers accountable for ethical conduct. Such explicit behaviour helps the ethical leader to make ethics a leadership message that gets followers' attention by standing out as being socially salient against an business milieu that is often ethically neutral at best, thus sharing of knowledge is critical.¹⁶¹

Opportunity underlies all crises and moving from a predominantly face-to-face to a cloud-based environment will require people to trust each other, work

¹⁵⁹Ding, Levine, Lin & Xie (2020).

¹⁶⁰Deng, Kang & Low (2013).

¹⁶¹Ding, Levine, Lin & Xie (2020).

together, and communicate more than before with a clear goal in mind. They will also possibly have to re-invent themselves, how and what their companies offer customers, and ultimately will have to work in a new way and with the possibility of a new purpose in mind.

Future research may be needed to understand “pandemic” leadership and its effect on virtual teams, how they are managed and the tasks they possibly cannot do virtually. Furthermore, in times of pandemic crisis, how much more communication would be needed from those leading and what is needed to avoid miscommunications. The limitations of this paper lie in the above work being based on current findings available in publicised literature and as yet the impact of radical changes in government policies and work practices across the world as a result of the COVID pandemic is still to emerge.

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