



New Leadership
for a *Changing* World

Leading Remotely

Part Two of Two



As we noted in the last paper, COVID presented both a very real existential crisis for organisations, and a new context for crisis leadership. As the crisis developed, more organisations found it necessary to move their entire operation into a virtual space, with most employees working remotely, typically from home. If we agree with academics that **context** has a huge effect on what is considered good leadership practice, then Covid presented a very new context for leadership, remote leadership at scale during a time of crisis and subsequently, business as usual.



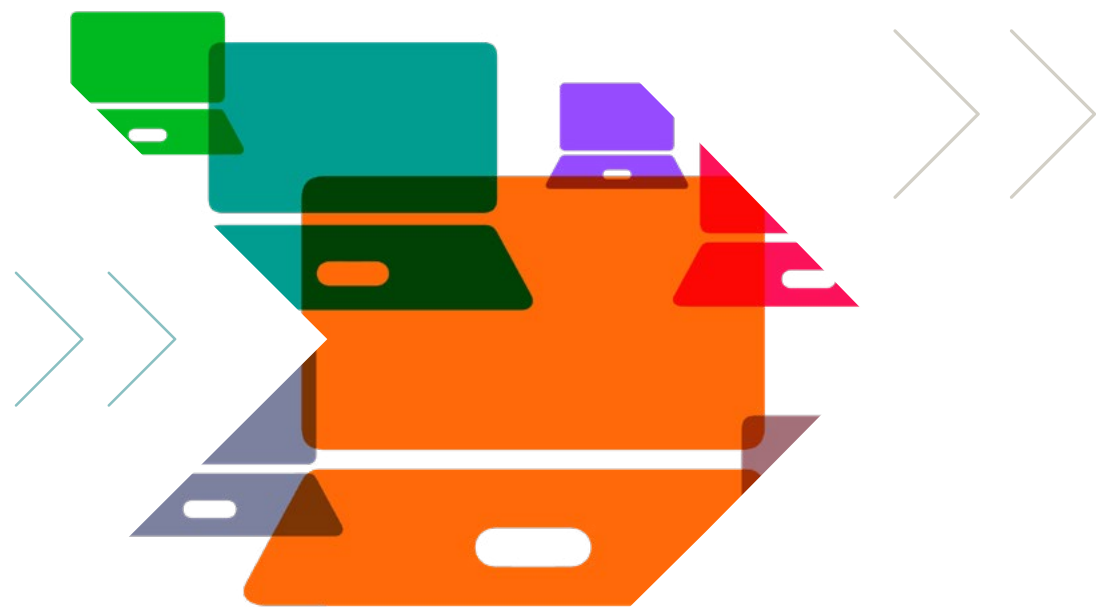
Remote working is nothing new of course. As far back as 2001, a study by MCIWorldcom of companies with 500+ employees, revealed that 61% of employees had already worked in remote teams. As early as 2003, academics¹ were using the term e-leadership to describe the challenges of leading these virtual teams. But these initiatives tended to be in small pockets of the organisation, or in specific projects and teams.

Leaders could set up remote teams at leisure to suit specific tasks and opportunities and monitor their performance and functioning carefully. Suddenly, with the emergence of COVID, organisations faced the prospect of being forced to move their entire operation from the face to face to remote working within a very tight deadline (for some, overnight).

Whilst research into the challenges of remote leadership had been ongoing before the crisis, some academics² felt the existing literature did not adequately address many of the key challenges for leaders, how, for example to develop and sustain relationships with virtual team members. For many academic researchers³, their starting point was that leaders cannot lead virtually in the same manner that they would in a face to face environment. **Why?**



Recent Gallup research suggests that workers typically experience greater levels of stress and burnout working in a remote setting. Further work by Robinson and Hickman found the remote environment often aggravates the root causes of burnout, unmanageable workloads, unrealistic deadlines, unfair treatment and lack of support and clarity from leadership.



Addressing these issues requires a greater focus on ‘people issues’ verses other operational challenges, in turn requiring an enhanced level of emotional / social intelligence on behalf of leaders.

Emotional intelligence has become a widely used term, broadly covering a range of competencies, skills and behaviours typically focused on how we understand and interact with others. The vital element of self-perception is often overlooked, however. Rather than just stressing the importance of empathy

and understanding of others, emotional / social intelligence also stresses the importance of **self-perception** in leaders - the capacity to understand and recognise their own emotions and emotional reactions as they are occurring and **personal stress management**, a reflection of measures of tolerance for stress as well as optimism and flexibility in stressful situations. Once again then we start with the leader’s need for understanding and management of **themselves** and how the crisis is affecting them personally before they attempt to understand the needs of others.

As the leaders' concerns expand beyond themselves to others in a crisis, ensuring that the appropriate communication and cooperation tools and systems are in place for virtual teams to operate typically become a priority, as they are likely to be the first critical elements necessary for remote working to function effectively.

Establishing effective communication methods are consistently identified as primary challenge for leading remotely.

And as the world of work moves beyond crisis and remote working is embedded as business as usual, effective remote leadership is vital.

If we accept that leadership is at least partially socially constructed, that is it is created in the collective minds of leaders and followers, then the virtual team offers an alternative environment for this construction, with different communication media creating new potential for positive (and negative) relationships between teams, their members, and leaders.

If leaders have a key role in information processing (see our comments in the last paper around sensemaking) then virtual teams offer a vastly different and complex medium by which information is presented and processed - and communication is key.

Research has shown that compared to the usual face to face environment, virtual teams were perceived to be functioning in an 'impoverished communication environment', leading to higher levels of confusion and feelings of isolation amongst workers.

The virtual environment is described as a far more challenging one for communication. Of course, much of this research was done before

the widespread emergence and adoption of platforms such as MS Teams, Zoom and Skype which offered rich, video-based communication environments. By 2020, they were already part of day-to-day communication for many organisations but took on a new meaning and significance as they became, for many, the predominant way (along with email and telephone) in which staff and management interacted during the crisis. Further the crisis encouraged the use of existing social media in new work contexts, with applications like Facebook, WhatsApp and WeChat providing ready-made platforms for team communication.





A wide range of issues need to consideration. What communication tools should be used for what purpose in a remote setting? Leaders are spoilt for choice, with a wide range of different platforms to choose from including telephone, email, social media, and video-based conferencing.

Each has different capabilities, video conferences proving useful for discussing complicated issues in real time but also potentially promoting a sense of community; chat is favoured for quick interactions and dealing with routine issues with email typically tending to be used to record outcomes and communicate more formally.

This alone creates challenging agenda for leaders – they need to understand the strengths, weakness, interactions, and technicalities of each tool. This is particularly so for social media.

Whilst the focus of much current research is on how things were said (e.g., what platform or tool leaders used) during the COVID crisis, **what** was being said has received less attention.

One area that is often discussed but has received little empirical examination is the value of leaders helping to increase personal and informal interactions between virtual team members.

Research by Malhotra et al found that leaders in successful virtual teams encouraged team members to share personal stories.

The personal stories were seen to better connect team members and get to know each other informally, which is potentially easier in face-to-face teams.

Saphiere found that, for global business teams, more productive teams engaged in more informal and personal ways compared to less productive teams,

hence stronger personal relationships one way to make virtual teams more productive. Social media is arguably a highly appropriate environment in which to develop such personal connections, indeed whether it be Facebook, WeChat, TikTok or Twitter, that's what such platforms are designed to enable.



But leaders need to be cautious. Just because you are frequently ‘tweeting’, does not mean you are communicating effectively. In fact, you may be doing more damage than good. Each platform comes with its own set of rules and regulations, some formal some informal, some overt, some deeply covert for what is considered good or bad communication.

Rich ‘cultures’ of acceptable and non-acceptable communication behaviour have emerged for each of the major social media platforms, some highly nuanced and only clear to the experienced user. Whilst ‘digital native’ Gen Z employees may be fully aware and sensitive to these rules of behaviour, their leaders may not.

In such an environment it is extremely easy for leaders (particularly in a crisis) to miss these nuances, communicate in inappropriate ways and potentially to blur the division between an employee’s work life and social life.

For some the answer is to develop their own, in-house social media networks, where the rules of interaction can be clearly laid out, formalised, and widely understood through training. Alibaba’s productivity app. DingTalk (DingDong) is a good example, building on earlier initiatives around company wide intranets.

The temptation to over-deliver communication to remote teams, using every available communication media, creates the potential for a hugely complex and confused communication environment, where employees are uncertain of how to function, what media they need to be monitoring, what information is vital rather than nice to know and how to respond to potentially conflicting messages from different parts of the organisation.

This focuses attention on issues beyond communication, establishing clarity around new ways of working in a hybrid or remote world of work:

What are the rules for what constitutes a working day? When are employees expected to be available? How are employees expected to interact via different media? What allowances should be made for individual circumstances? In the last paper we noted the importance of leaders ‘showing up’ during a crisis, being present. How does this play out in a BAU remote environment with new working methods?

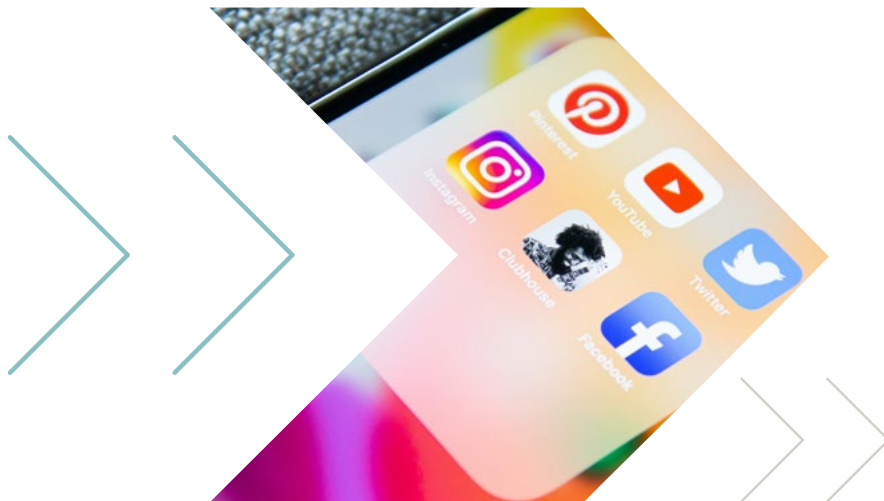


Andrea Trainer, Partner, Public Sector at Miles Advisory asks:



“If we accept that the dynamic context for leadership has shifted, do we also believe that the pandemic has fundamentally and permanently altered the nature of the psychological contract? Is it now a given that employers need to sharpen their wellbeing offer as well as their financial one?”

As leaders, how does one measure success? Output or engagement? If we give both equal standing, what does this mean for the future of hybrid working?”



Reading List



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Miles Advisory

20 North Audley Street | Mayfair
London | W1K 6WE

Tel:

+4420 3978 9898

Email:

info@miles-advisory.com

Web:

www.miles-advisory.com

LinkedIn:

www.linkedin.com/company/miles-advisory



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