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Special supplement

A Human Approach to Leadership

A Human Approach to Leadership

By
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How technology is challenging traditional leadership

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In corporate settings, technology is all about efficiency, cost savings, measuring and gathering data. Compare this with the world of entertainment where it's about involvement, drawing people in and getting emotional buy-in. When business processes are designed the technology is not seen as a tool for engagement of employees, it's seen as a way of automating human activities.

Experiences with virtual meetings

One of the biggest challenges for leaders during the pandemic has been adapting to virtual meetings. In the past it's been the person with the loudest voice in the room, or the one who gets to interrupt first, who usually has the most influence. Now it's more likely to be the person with the best microphone, fastest broadband or good lighting who gets to influence others.

On screen, leaders can't rely on the trappings of status any more. They can't call people into their big office and intimidate people. Microsoft Teams or Zoom is a more level playing field.

When technology doesn't work, the first inclination for leaders is to revert back to face-to-face meetings instead of fixing the technology problem. Yet, while virtual meetings seem to work when run well, and face-to-face meetings arguably also work, but mix the two and it's difficult to get the balance right. The remote participants are likely to be at a disadvantage and if they are travelling, and on a mobile link it's even worse.

Leaders are used to being able to get people together to achieve results and this means their calendars are stacked up with meetings. Many of these are badly run and there has been little education on how to organise and facilitate meetings. Some leaders have developed skills in setting up, coordinating and running physical meetings but they need to ask themselves some questions given the current circumstances: How do I react to these changed conditions? What is my responsibility? How am I going to delegate? Can we achieve this goal without having a meeting?

In adopting remote meeting technology we have tried to replicate sitting around a table in a virtual meeting instead of designing the experience from scratch. Maybe many meetings can be distributed in time as well as space. Can apps such as WhatsApp or Slack be used for decision making?

Good leaders have mastered the art of running virtual meetings and keeping the flow going by stopping people all trying to talk at the same time. Until recently, leaders could get away with poor meeting skills. Now they need the skillset to know which tool to use in these new circumstances. But who in the organisation worries about this? IT is concerned with technology, HR thinks about the people but nobody is thinking about how decisions are made. Things fall between the cracks because nobody other than the CEO is responsible for the way technology impacts culture. In corporate settings, technology is all about efficiency, cost savings, measuring and gathering data. Compare this with the world of entertainment where it's about involvement, drawing people in and getting emotional buy-in. When business processes are designed the technology is not seen as a tool for engagement of employees, it's seen as a way of automating human activities.

Managing culture and change

The digital transformation agenda for any company should be with the CEO. He or she should be concerned about managing the culture of the company, and digital technology plays an important part in this. It's not just all about the speed of production, it's also about the quality of work life. The games industry has developed techniques for making activities enjoyable even to the point of being addictive. Some of these design features should be included in work activities to make them enjoyable as well as efficient.

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Leaders in the past have been good at running a business and have also had to make changes as an extra activity. Typically they've spent 80-90 percent of their time on the current tasks and the rest on managing change. Change has been seen as an extra burden that nobody liked. Now the priorities have altered. More and more leaders are spending most of their time changing business, not just running it. This requires a different set of skills. Leaders have to understand that change is constant and that they have the power to make it into something positive.

Digital technology is a tool that amplifies what you want to achieve. It is there for the CEO to use to inspire people and excite them. It should create enthusiasm amongst employees and inspire them to follow the leader. It should be seen by leaders as a force for good and an aid to bringing in positive change. Running the business is not their priority any more, they are there to make change.

Digital leadership

There is now an MBA in Digital Leadership being run at the HWZ University of Applied Sciences in Zurich. The first semester emphasises that technological change and cultural change are equal. So if, for example, you want to introduce some collaboration software but have a company that is completely siloed, and people don't trust each other or feel like sharing, then the best collaboration tool in the world won't work. For this solution to work you also need to have people confident in sharing beyond their teams, where there is an open feedback culture.

This course teaches people how to manage technology and culture together as part of organisational change. Then the last semester covers digital vision. Leaders need to be able to review all the new technologies, such as blockchain, and form an opinion on what is relevant to their company and what makes sense for them to adopt. They need to be familiar with the case studies that drove value for other businesses. Maybe they should be spending some time with the Artificial Intelligence start-up that has a cool piece of software that everybody is writing about.

Once leaders have seen what technologies are available and the opportunities they create, they can find the ones that are interesting and potentially useful. They can then formulate their personal foresight
for the digital future of the business, and because it's something they believe, they will be able to communicate it effectively.

Leaders need to be able to provide clear direction on digital technology, but they don't need to be technical experts. They have to know enough to be able to ask the right questions. Traditionally, when the world was changing at a manageable pace, the leader had all the answers. Now they are uncomfortable because they don't have detailed knowledge of the digital world. The solution is for leaders to admit they don't know everything but instead to be a critical mind and ask the right questions.

90%

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The inquisitive leader

The self-worth of a leader is now coming from a different place. It no longer can be justified through their knowledge, it must be justified through the questions they ask. A good leader is the person who is most inquisitive, which is a different set of qualities from those of the hero leader of the past. Experience is still useful, but when someone thinks they have nothing new to learn, that's a problem. Leadership is about working out which questions to ask, so you don't just end up solving the wrong problems really well.

Think like an entrepreneur

The COVID-19 pandemic has made people step back from assumptions about how we get work done. Before this crisis we assumed that the old way of doing things was the only way. Now the world of work is very different, are we using people in very different ways to get things done? Leaders need to escape from conventional thinking and look at how their organisation works. They need to ask "What are we trying to do and how do we achieve it?", rather than, "Here's how we do things." What's needed is entrepreneurial thinking and being prepared to change in-built assumptions.

Leaders need to accept that they have assumptions and test them. For example, they may assume that people get more done when they are in a group. But they should find a way
of testing ideas out and be prepared to change their assumptions. They should look at the way meetings are held to see if they are good ways of making decisions. Maybe there are technology tools that are more effective.

Everyone has assumptions, biases, lenses and life experiences. Leaders are no exception. What you see depends on who you are. Digital technology is a powerful tool that can reinforce biases, as is evident from social media where selective information is fed to people depending on their preferences. If that moves into the corporate environment, decision processes are influenced by algorithms repeating old decisions. Human ingenuity recognises that there is a digital filter bubble and it becomes a problem if leaders don't recognise it. They need to ensure they are getting a balanced information diet.

IT as a strategic tool

Leaders need to keep learning and build up know-how in the role of technology in organisations. They need to understand that technology can reinforce existing structures and amplify unconscious bias, and can therefore work against change. People who all think the same are rewarded while the rebels, who dare to challenge the status quo, get thrown out. Existing systems get automated and become rigid. Big data can be used to reinforce impersonal decisions without thinking through what impact it will have on individuals.

To succeed in the digital age, leaders need to view information technology as a strategic tool for attracting and retaining key staff, rather than only seeing it as a way of driving efficiency and saving money. It's a way of keeping people engaged and making work fun. Technology should be taking the routine work away from individuals, releasing them to use their creative human skills which cannot easily be replaced by a machine.

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Post-Covid? What will change? What won't come back?

12 months ago, work-from-home policies allowed occasional time out of the office, and linked more flexibility to seniority – younger professionals needed to earn their managers' trust. Today, after tasting the remote world for a year, this group says that their peers have little interest in returning to this workplace of the past.

"We were convinced that everyone needs to be physically together work effectively," says our tech manager. "2020 has proved this wrong – our team is delivering well in a remote workplace." He predicts that a full week in the office will be the exception as the world emerges from COVID-19 work styles.

Our contributors advise leaders that they will attract and retain the best talent, and earn the respect of staff, by creating a work environment that listens to peoples' work-life preferences.

The group reflected on how they saw leaders responding to the COVID-19 workplace.

• One company assessed the situation in April 2020 and reacted decisively with the message: "plan to work from home until the end of the year, possibly longer… Tell us what do you need to work effectively from home."

• Several organisations drastically shifted workplace policies. Two cancelled plans to move to new city centre offices, instead scaling back fixed office space and informing staff of a new policy: presence in the office will be on a rotating basis, maximum 2-3 days per week. A consulting practice has reduced the number of desks to less than the total staff number, with presence in the office not required. There are no personal desks, teams are empowered to "self-organise how they work and meet", and there will be monthly face-to-face meetings and social events where staff presence is required.

• Other leaders sent mixed messages, delaying decisions and continually speaking of getting back to the office asap. Observations from some international agencies (EU, UN) saw that decisions took longer; the first discussions about appropriate office equipment at home came only after seven months of home working.

Onward…back to the 'old normal'?

Our marketing professional sees that many leaders will return to the 'old normal' as soon as they can. In interactions with recruiters, she queried expectations for on-site working; many want everyone to return to full-time in the office. "Scanning the job market you can clearly see companies with flexible working policies. Three of four companies I spoke with recently are calling for staff to be back in the office as soon as is feasible. Looking at job descriptions posted on the web, many mention 'back to office asap'? I don't click on these offers."

But we lost social interaction…

The 2020 remote work experience has revealed serious human relations issues. All those interviewed voiced concerns that the loss of face-to-face and social interactions are affecting the quality of professional exchanges and have a visible impact on some people's mental health.

Our regional director worries that Zoom catch-ups cannot replace the dozens of informal interactions that make face-to-face work useful and productive: in the corridor, over lunch, coffee or a beer after work. He wonders how many potential killer innovations were lost in 2020, not finding their way onto a cocktail napkin sketch due to a lack of social interaction. Or opportunities missed because reduced social contact stopped the usual processes of bringing teams together, getting buy-in, smoothing disagreements or sparking new ideas. He feels that a reduced lack of social interaction puts a drag on innovation. "I miss the learning that comes for social interaction and spontaneous encounters," he says.

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The contributors also mention the grind of endless Zoom/ Webex/Skype calls, catch-up and group meetings. They see many colleagues working longer hours, taking fewer or no breaks and having days without going outside

The reality of anxiety, solitude and mental health

Stories of depression and mental health issues were cited in every conversation. Our marketing professional says that her global consultancy has several members in the team of 50 that have taken depression-related medical leave. The company now has coaches on-call to engage to speak with staff.

The contributors also mention the grind of endless Zoom/Webex/Skype calls, catch-up and group meetings. They see many colleagues working longer hours, taking fewer or no breaks and having days without going outside.

Our tech manager comments: "Humans are social animals. We thrive on personal and group contacts. I have a good social circle, so COVID-19 has not threatened my wellbeing. But many people in my network have been living alone for months; some with few contacts outside the office. COVID-19 forces us to look at ourselves differently. Last year, we had to quickly figure out how to work together under the new rules. We did that. But the real question is how do we get through the current crisis together – what kind of person do I want to be; how can we help each other?"

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Leaders don't need a post-Covid transformation plan, says our start-up CEO, but a 'listening plan', where employees see that their concerns are important to leaders. "Smart leaders understand that they can motivate their teams with a work culture that fits peoples' styles and family situations"

The human factor as a leadership strategy?

So, faced with this seismic shift, how many of our leaders see the situation as a routine problem to be managed, or as something else that requires them to address people's deeper concerns?

Our contributors' consensus is that credible leadership and building a resilient organisation are all about being closer to people's feelings. "The human factor in leadership is not just nice to have. It's what makes the difference," says our tech manager.

Leaders don't need a post-Covid transformation plan, says our start-up CEO, but a 'listening plan', where employees see that their concerns are important to leaders. "Smart leaders understand that they can motivate their teams with a work culture that fits peoples' styles and family situations. If we are happier at work, this translates to higher satisfaction, staff retention and value for the organisation," she says.

Our marketing professional's consultancy was merged into a new global network last year, with a CEO many layers removed from regional staff. "I didn't initially remember the new CEO's name, but was touched by the human tone of his emails to all staff as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded. This gives the impression that he cares about the team."

Even if a leader is far from staff, if they are armed with accurate data – and a heart – they can find ways to connect at a human level, responding to personal situations that colleagues are experiencing

Even if a leader is far from staff, she says, if they are armed with accurate data – and a heart – they can find ways to connect at a human level, responding to personal situations that colleagues are experiencing. "For example, empathising with young professionals working alone from home, or single mothers. It's possible to have a personal connection through email," she comments.

Our data services director says that for real results leaders need to gain people's trust and go beyond the workplan and performance tracking. "I motivate my team with heart and passion. I am there for them, understanding and flexible. I invest a lot of energy to get to know each person. If people trust you and see your vision, they will be with you to build something bigger together. When the first crisis hits, our team stays together. Every leader can choose. Some prefer an authoritarian style...mine is enduring."

The conclusion is clear. Leaders can expect a better ROI of this approach over 'pragmatic' command-and-control management. Given the choice....who would you rather work for?

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