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Virtual leadership: rethinking virtual teams

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In this article I explore why virtual working has remained for most people an unsatisfactory practice. I suggest taking a new look at virtual teams, and understanding that it is not sufficient to manage them, but that it is critical to lead them in a way that takes into account the idiosyncrasies of the virtual space. I show that leading virtually is a new discipline in its own right that needs to be learnt and researched as such.

Virtual working is nothing new. This way of working (mediated by communication technology) has been practised for at least twenty years and a lot has been written on this topic. However even after so many years virtual working remains an unsatisfactory practice which is at best considered 'second class', something you do when you cannot travel. In the light of incremental globalisation, the need to welcome into the corporate world Generation Y (people born in the '80s who have grown up with all virtual media), and growing concerns for the environment and for a better life quality, it has become more crucial than ever to master virtual working.

For most people virtual working is associated with something that is not real, and for the vast majority of managers I have come across in organisations personal contact can only equate to face-to-face. The flurry of books with models and 'how to' lists around virtual working has not really helped to overcome the hurdles and apprehension about working virtually. 'Virtual' still remains in many people's heads something unreal and linked with technology which can therefore only be of limited benefit in the work place.

The interesting thing is, however, that the word 'virtual' is an old word, first appearing in the late 14th Century and meaning: "influencing by physical virtues or capabilities", from *virtualis*, and *virtus* "excellence, potency, efficacy"[1]. In the mid 17th Century the word's semantic field expanded and incorporated the idea of 'essence'.

My inquiry into what it takes to lead effectively virtually actually reconfirms the original sense of the word 'virtual' and shows that, paradoxically, by learning to lead well virtually, leaders become better at leading than before, because they become more anchored in the awareness of their being as leaders to others.

One of the main reasons that virtual working has remained unsatisfactory is that the leadership aspect of this work has been underestimated, if not completely overlooked. Most literature speaks about 'managing virtual teams' and focuses on the tasks at hand and the things to do and not do. Powell and Piccoli (2004) present an overview of the literature written on the subject. This overview shows that there

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[1] Online Etymology Dictionary, © 2010 Douglas Harper
virtual. (n.d.). *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved March 29, 2010, from Dictionary.com website: http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/virtual
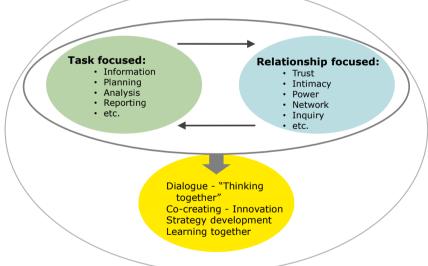
have been several phases of writing. First there was the opinion that if one ensured that the right technology was in place then virtual working would be efficient; later, in the nineties, the literature focused more on getting the right team and the right processes in place in order to ensure effective virtual working. This line of thinking has been developed further and has led to an impressive number of what I call 'recipe books' about virtual working and virtual teams. In the last five years more literature has been published about trust and managing performance in the virtual world. Focus on *virtual leadership* as opposed to *managing virtual teams* remains, nevertheless, very limited.

In the context of my research, undertaken in the Action Research methodology, I worked alongside several leaders who had to learn and practise leading virtually, and over a period of up to 2.5 years we explored together what it takes to lead effectively in the virtual space.

The findings show that the teams which perform best are the ones whose members learn to work in the virtual space on the relationship aspects **as well as** on the task, and who become independent of the need to meet face-to-face. In contrast, the teams which focus only on the task and the management aspects of it plateau at some point and remain dependent on the face-to-face to reach new levels of performance.

To develop high performing virtual teams it is necessary to focus on the relationship AS MUCH AS on the task

Furthermore my research shows clearly that leading virtually represents a new discipline which is different from traditional leadership and needs to be recognised as such and learnt. Here lies another reason why virtual working so far has remained 'second class': most leaders when asked to lead teams virtually find themselves unprepared or inadequately trained. As a result, virtual leaders tend to transfer into the virtual space what they know works best in face-to-face: this is when things start

going wrong. Virtual working requires leaders to learn to radically rethink the fundamentals of communication and co-operation and to be prepared to question several taken-for-granted principles.

Virtual leaders will in particular need to question, unlearn and learn anew the following aspects:
- Virtual meetings: why they are a genre in their own right and require a specific hygiene
- Relationships: their importance and how to build them virtually
- The myth of body language
- Trust and power: two sides of the same coin

I will now explore each aspect in more detail.

Virtual meetings: why they are a genre in their own right and require specific hygiene

Virtual meetings, precisely because they take place in the virtual space, need to be organised and led in a way that takes into account the idiosyncrasies of the medium, with all the consequences that these might have in terms of team dynamics and psychology.

Very often virtual meetings, either in the form of teleconferences or web-meetings, do not receive the status and attention that they deserve and are squeezed in between face-to-face meetings or held (at least teleconferences) in the car, the airport lounge, or any other public place. This leads to several unfortunate consequences with significant impact on the virtual experience, and hence the results achieved in the space. Here are few examples to illustrate this point.

When people call in from a public place they underestimate that background noise, which is significantly amplified in the virtual space, becomes a strong disruption for all attendees. This not only gets in the way of good comprehension but tends, very understandably, to irritate the participants who have made the effort to be alone and undisturbed in a quiet place. Unfortunately this behaviour rarely gets challenged and discussed. People tolerate it and don't show their annoyance; this in turn gets in the way of good relationship building.

Another parameter that deserves particular attention in the virtual space is the process to decide on the start and end times of meetings when all meet synchronously[2]: I observe that companies tend to set timings according to the Head Quarters' time zone, and to forget that this might mean getting up at 3.00 am for some people or working until midnight for others. Admittedly these timing difficulties may be unavoidable if one leads a team spread across the globe, but the problem is exacerbated when people do not agree on the timing in a transparent way, and

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[2] Synchronous mode: people in different places connect at the same time (independently of their time zones), for example in a phone conference or a web conference, as opposed to –
Asynchronous mode: people in different places connect with each other at different points of time (for example in a blog).

perhaps alternating who will have to get up in the middle of the night on different occasions. In other words, scheduling virtual meetings as opposed to face-to-face ones is not a simple process of identifying a date, but involves careful consideration and conversations requiring sensibility and sensitivity.

When people agree to meet virtually the ones based in the same building (again often the Head Quarters group) tend to gather in the same room while others are linked in via a phone line. Who does not know the lengthy teleconferences spent around a speaker phone, and who has not had this strange feeling, having potentially spoken controversial words, of becoming anxious about the silence on the line? For the one who is alone on a phone link the silence can feel very long (silences, like background noises, get amplified significantly in the virtual space), and probably that person will think: "Why is nobody responding? Do they think my argument is stupid? What are they saying to each other in the room? What faces are they making about me?". This example illustrates another mistake in virtual working that will automatically counts against trust building. Hence I recommend to team leaders that, particularly if they are to work on complex issues with their team, they need to ask everybody to be linked in virtually. This may require courage, as some team members might think: "What's all the fuss about? Why can't we just sit together as we're in the same building anyway?". The leader needs the courage to challenge ingrained habits, and the ability to explain why the mix of face-to-face and virtual settings can lead to difficult team dynamics in the virtual space.

The examples above give some insight into my proposition to consider virtual meetings as a genre in their own right, requiring specific and different treatment. Admittedly for some the examples mentioned might feel like details, and they might be wondering why I am spending time to mention and explain them. Several years of practice and research have taught me that these small differences do make a big difference when it comes to the quality of engagement and the dynamics in the team, which in turn impacts directly on the team performance. However, implementing these aspects alongside many others that we have not mentioned here requires that the person in charge of the team not only has the courage to challenge entrenched team behaviour, but also models these new ways of meeting virtually. *Leadership is asked for: management does not suffice!*

Relationships are all you have!

I observe that most leaders I work with tend to associate relationships exclusively with the face-to-face. This can often be recognised through the vocabulary they use: "When we meet, we will be able to discuss xyz". Even if they have met perhaps twenty times on the phone and/or on a web platform, most will think that they have not met at all. This is easy to understand if one remembers, as mentioned above, that most leaders tend to focus on the task at hand in the virtual space and keep all relational aspects (including potential conflicts or more personal exchanges) for the face-to-face meeting. And what if this physical encounter does not happen, or happens next year?

Successful virtual leaders realise that in the virtual space it is not the processes, procedures and role descriptions that make things happen, but the relationships that

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one is able to build, particularly at a personal level, with somebody from the other side of the globe.

When I start a coaching relationship with a leader, s/he often tells me: "But you can´t have a virtual coffee with somebody!". Of course **you can´t have a virtual coffee but you can have a coffee virtually** with several people from around the world! In fact it is very important to have informal meetings with individuals or groups of people, for example to share what everybody did at the weekend. One leader who I accompanied over several months organised what she called 'virtual coffee corners' across seven countries under her responsibility. Bi-weekly, her team members would gather virtually and bring something to nibble and/or drink. The purpose of the meeting was simply to chat about how everybody was feeling, share the rumours in the organisation, and just spend time together albeit in different places and with no agenda. During one follow-up conversation with me she explained that she was amazed at the power of these gatherings and how well they worked. She explained: "I would have never managed to implement the change that I needed to make happen across all the countries without these meetings. They worked like the 'glue' holding everybody together".

Another leader, who I coached over several years, mentioned a year into his new job involving leading several teams (1,400 people in total) across geographies that he had realised how his agenda had changed in the last months. As you cannot meet people in cyberspace as a coincidence, you have to plan the informal exchanges. He would make a point of regularly calling members of his team and exchanging personal words in an informal way. These calls took a considerable amount of time in his calendar, but he was rewarded for his efforts: one year later in the organisational employee satisfaction survey he obtained significantly better results from his teams than his colleagues, who were still leading in the traditional way primarily through face-to-face meetings, and this in spite of major uncertainties and ongoing changes in the organisation.

This behaviour again requires leadership qualities not only in terms of changing the way of interacting personally with people, but also regarding the environment around the virtual leader in question. One of my other coachees faces on a regular basis sheer lack of comprehension by her management when she explains to them that she has to spend many hours on the phone or blogging. Most people who have no experience of leading virtually struggle to understand this need, and tend to categorise such activities as wasted time and lack of efficiency.

The myth of body language

One hypothesis I hold as to why working virtually in the synchronous space invites people to become more aware of themselves and others in terms of how they behave, feel, and relate to each other is precisely the lack of visible body language (assuming people are not connected by camera). I have developed this hypothesis over seven years of practising virtual/audio action learning, based on the feedback I regularly received from the participants in my virtual sets. Paradoxically people feel that when they work in a virtual action learning environment (most of the time only audio based in a teleconference) their sense-making of themselves and others in the space is slowed down, while they become faster at identifying what really matters for

the person sharing the issue, and they connect at a deeper level (than in face-to-face) with the issue holder and among themselves. (Caulat 2004)

I find some justification for this view in several disciplines that I would now like to explore. From a Gestalt perspective, Perls (1969) explains how key the voice is as an expression of the essence of a person: "Self-expression comes out somewhere else (other than verbal communication), in our movements, in our posture, and most of all in our voice. A good therapist doesn't listen to the content of the bullshit the patient produces, but to the sound, to the music, to the hesitations… The real communication is beyond words." (Idem, p.73).

For Heron the voice "is pregnant with whom you really are" (1999, p.234). Gilligan et al (2006), who developed the so-called Listening Guide as a method of psychological analysis, also underline clearly the importance of the voice: "Thus, each person's voice is distinct - a footprint of the psyche, bearing the marks of the body, of that person's history, of culture in the form of language, and the myriad ways in which human society and history shape the voice and thus leave their imprints on the human soul"(Idem 2006, pp.253-254). They then demonstrate that listening to the voice of a person is a crucial way to enter truly into a relationship with that person.

When I run a virtual leadership workshop, one of the exercises I do is 'three levels of listening'. This is an Ashridge exercise that we use also in face-to-face meetings, where we invite participants to listen in to three different channels: the content of what is being said, the emotions and feelings the speaker is going through, and the intuition of the listener – what their gut is telling them about what they are hearing. Participants in the virtual leadership workshops usually enjoy the exercise because they find it very enabling. They often say that it helps them to 'see' in the virtual environment.

Isaacs (1999) emphasises the central role of hearing and listening. He shows how in Western cultures we tend to privilege seeing because our culture is dominated by sight: "The result of this external bombardment of visual impressions is that we tend to think in these ways. In the Western world we have begun to be habituated to this quick pace, and are impatient with other rhythms. But seeing and listening are very different. The substance of seeing is light. Light moves at a far more rapid pace than sound: 186,000 miles per second as opposed to 1,100 feet per second. To listen in other words you must *slow down* (sic) and operate at the speed of sound rather than at the speed of light. The eye seems to perceive at a superficial level, at the level of reflected light. [Footnote from the author: "This was one of the reasons Plato mistrusted the 'mimetic', or image based, artists; his fear was that they would distort people's sense of reality".] While the eye sees at the surface, the ear tends to penetrate below the surface" (1999, p.86).

The famous German jazz author Berendt in his book "Nada Brahma. Die Welt ist Klang" (2007) ("Nada Brahma: The world is sound"), points out that the ear is the only sense that fuses an ability to measure with an ability to judge. This means that while there are many optical illusions, Berendt explains that there are few acoustical illusions: "the ears do not lie". He explains how he noticed that in our Western world we have a seeing hypertrophy and can't hear properly any longer. For him 'seeing' can remain at the surface while hearing automatically goes in depth: according to

him the 'hearing' person has therefore more chances to go in depth than the 'seeing' one (Idem, pp.19-20).

The interesting thing is, however, that almost every time I share my view about the untapped potential of the auditory in the virtual space and advise people not to use cameras for their virtual work, the leaders I work with mention that this view goes against what has been transmitted over time about the power of body language. They cite the well known adage that 78% of the meaning of somebody's statement comes through his/her body language and not through the words used. Having done some further research into this, I found that Mehrabian, whose research is the origin of this belief, has been misunderstood and that his findings have been simplified to such a degree over time that they have become inaccurate.

In his studies, first published in 1971, Mehrabian came to two conclusions. Firstly, that there are basically three elements in any face-to-face communication: words, tone of voice, and facial expression; and secondly, that the non-verbal elements are particularly important for communicating feelings and attitude, especially when they are incongruent. In other words, if the words spoken are incongruous with the tone of voice and facial expression, people tend to believe the tonality and facial expression. This does not mean that non-verbal elements in all senses convey the bulk of the message. According to Mehrabian (1971), these three elements account differently for our liking for the person who expresses his/her feelings: words account for 7%, tone of voice accounts for 38%, and body language accounts for 55% of the liking. They are often abbreviated as the "3 Vs" for Verbal, Vocal & Visual. On his webpage Mehrabian clearly states this: "(...) Total Liking = 7% Verbal Liking + 38% Vocal Liking + 55% Facial Liking: Please note that this and other equations regarding relative importance of verbal and nonverbal messages were derived from experiments dealing with communications of feelings and attitudes (ie, like-dislike). Unless a communicator is talking about their feelings or attitudes, these equations are not applicable"[3].

When power gets in the way of trust and trust is the biggest power that you can have

While it has not been possible to reach final conclusions on the two topics of trust and power in the virtual space, my research offers the following starting points:

- *Power depends on trust in the virtual space*. The use of hierarchical or position power is counterproductive and automatically destroys trust: people tend to say to their team leader what they think s/he wants to hear rather than what really is. Often a vicious spiral develops: the more a leader senses that his/her team members do not tell the full reality, the more s/he reverts to his/her position power and the less people want to say what really happens.

[3] Source: www.kaaj.com/psych/smorder/html - viewed on 27th march 2010

Panteli (2005) also comes to the conclusion that the use of hierarchical power in the form of coercive power negatively affects the development of trust. However, while my research suggests that real power is generated through the way a leader develops trust, she claims that power is generated by knowledge. She came to this conclusion having studied empirically the development of eighteen teams in the same IT organisation for two months: "Several interviewees described the power within their team as originating from knowledge and noted that at any given point in time the most powerful was the individual with the most relevant information" (Panteli 2005, no page number available). One reason for this difference of findings might be linked to the fact that Panteli (2005) seems to have studied the teams mainly in the asynchronous mode, while the considerations of my collaborative inquiry group with virtual leaders, as well as from the interviews with 21 leaders whom I coached on a virtual strategy project, were based to a large extent on the synchronous mode. So far no comparative study seems to exist between the synchronous and the asynchronous mode in terms of power generation, hence it will be difficult to argue further in this direction.

- **_Trust_** is complex to develop in the virtual space, but it **_can be developed purely virtually_**, contrary to what the predominant voices suggest: this requires intense relational work and might lead to highly powerful outcomes. Trust in the virtual space can be generated by a wide range of behaviours: if people feel really listened to; if they feel respected by people turning up on time for a meeting; if people deliver what they said they would deliver, etc.

Several authors such as Handy (1995), Jarvenpaa et al (1998), Lipnack and Stamps (1997), Hoefling (2001), Gibson and Cohen (2003), Pauleen (2003), Kirkman et al (2004), Hertel et al (2005) underline how critical trust is for teams to succeed in the virtual space.

Luhman (1973) underlines the importance of trust (in traditional leadership) particularly in complex and uncertain situations. I would argue that this applies to most assignments in the virtual space. Teams often work on the basis of a very unclear and complex question of what they need to deliver. Hence Luhman's statement seems to be particularly relevant: for him trust begins where knowledge ends. Being able to trust one another's actions and behaviour provides a reliable basis and a predictable parameter in a complex gathering of uncertainties and threats to cognitive solutions.

Remdisch and Utsch (2006) recommend face-to-face meetings between team members of virtual teams to develop trust. No wonder: they only ask leaders for their point of view, which I think is the inherent problem with interviews if they are not combined with experimentation and reflection. My work with clients in the virtual space so far - in over 80% of the cases I never meet my clients face-to-face - regularly shows that at the start of our work people don't feel that they can trust each other if they have not met face-to-face previously. However, after we have run one or two sessions with them, they change their point of view.

Fortunately, the research into trust in virtual teams has evolved a lot over time. While people such as Handy (1995) or Lipnack and Stamps (1997) clearly

advocate, like Remdisch and Utsch (2006), the need for face-to-face interactions to enable a virtual team to perform well virtually afterwards, others, for example Kirkman et al (2002), question this conventional thinking about trust in the virtual space and claim that face-to-face is not mandatory for good work. Wilson et al (2006) compared the development of trust in 52 teams, some being dispersed teams and others face-to-face, over a three-week period; as a result they go against the dominant perspective and claim that trust in distributed teams develops in the same way as in co-located teams, with the proviso that it takes longer to develop because it requires more time for members of those teams to exchange social information. Others such as Oshri et al (2008) actually go so far as to claim that face-to-face meetings can be counter-productive for globally dispersed teams, as they are very time bound, can seldom be attended by all members of the virtual team in question, and cannot provide the long-term support required for the members' socialisation (Oshri et al base their view also on Furst et al, 2004). Based on my practice I strongly agree with this view.

- The semantic fields of trust and power in the virtual space are very rich and wide, and the current research does not always do justice to this complexity. I believe that for leaders to succeed in leading virtually it will be essential to grapple with this complexity. High reflexivity is vital to achieve this. Leaders will need to reflect regularly, both alone and with their teams, on the following questions: When do I feel trustful, and when do I feel trusted? What contributes to the trust in our team? When do I feel powerful? What are the sources of my power in the virtual space? How is this similar to and/or different from my power in the face-to-face?

To conclude

In the context of this article it has only been possible to focus on a selected number of aspects of what makes effective virtual leadership. Further aspects would include, for example, leaders' identities in the virtual space, or the notions of presence and control in the virtual space.

Nevertheless by now it should be clear that working and leading well virtually requires more than 'to do' lists and management efficiency models. It actually makes it necessary for virtual leaders to answer for themselves the WHO question (Who am I? How do I relate to others and to my environment? What assumptions do I hold about relationships at work, trust, power, etc?).

Limiting the training of virtual leaders to the HOW and the WHAT, and in addition delivering this training face-to-face (as most training providers and consultants do), will not lead to the necessary shift of mindset and attitude to achieve breakthrough in the performance of virtual teams. Leaders need to be brought to a virtual space where they can experience, reflect and experiment with others. *Virtual leadership is learner-ship. Not only will we need to keep learning about virtual leadership but we will also need to redefine the research paradigm within which we analyse it:* if we try to 'squeeze' the findings into the existing categories of the traditional leadership research (such as for example leadership traits, competencies-based leadership or situational leadership – Bryman (1997)) we will not serve the

leaders out there. We need to go beyond the existing categories and work from the idiosyncrasies of the virtual space in order to apprehend what it takes to lead virtually from a place privileging self-reflexivity, as defined by Cunliffe (2009).

For leaders, learning to lead virtually will be worth the effort for multiple reasons. A few were mentioned at the beginning of this article, but there might be an even more important one. Several virtual leaders with whom I work explained how they became better leaders by learning to lead virtually: "I cannot sit around this big table and show my PowerPoint slides any longer! I now know what it really means to listen to people, engage with them and be really present to them!".

My proposition is therefore: *if you learn to LEAD VIRTUALLY you will become a REAL LEADER.*

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