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Working well with power in the virtual space

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon recent research into leadership and the use of power in the virtual space and also upon the author's nineteen years as a facilitator of Virtual Action Learning (VAL) and Virtual Leadership (VL) training. This paper briefly surveys various developments in the last twenty years which have nudged us as people and organisations into more virtual ways of working and learning. The author's belief is that VAL, and virtual collaboration generally, constitute a different paradigm of interaction with its own idiosyncrasies and is therefore different in many ways from what we have learned from face-to-face experience. This account of practice combines some key findings from the author's latest research with the learning from her practice over these years. Five main lessons emerge for facilitators of VAL and virtual leadership including the effects of using cameras and different channels of communication on power dynamics and the importance of voice and silence in the virtual space.

KEYWORDS

Power in the virtual space; virtual working; Virtual Leadership; Virtual Action Learning

This paper is based on my recent research into virtual leadership and the use of power in the virtual space. It also draws upon my nineteen years as a facilitator of Virtual Action Learning (VAL) and Virtual Leadership (VL) training and my previous research in VAL and VL. It is my firm belief that VAL, and virtual collaboration generally, constitute a different paradigm of interaction with its own idiosyncrasies and therefore require different norms. This means that the practice of virtual facilitation, and more specifically VAL facilitation, is different in many ways from what we have learned from face-to-face experience.

Over the last two and a half years, I have been conducting a research programme involving five groups with a total of twenty managers from different organisations and continents. We followed a process based on the Action Research methodology and worked with concrete cases shared by the managers. We inquired into the following question: How are power and power dynamics in the virtual space similar or different, compared with face-to-face? Over a period of nine to twelve months, we were able to identify specific emerging themes within each group and to test them in the managers' practice. The research results were then formulated on this basis.

Much has happened since I started developing my practice as VAL facilitator in 2003: a financial crisis in 2008/2009 radically cutting travel budgets, the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull bringing air travel to a standstill for several weeks, exponentially

growing globalisation paired with a growing concern for the protection of the planet and ... COVID. While the first four developments nudged many organisations into more virtual ways of working and learning, the latter catapulted the whole world into virtual. While many consultants and coaches were pondering before COVID: 'Should I or should I not?', suddenly virtual is! I would like to take stock: given the significant developments in communication technology and the massive change of practices, how has my own practice of VAL evolved?

This account of my practice combines some key findings from my latest research with the learning from my practice over years. There are five main lessons that I would like to share because they have proved to be more essential from year to year:

- (1) Using different channels of communication in virtual settings creates unhelpful power dynamics.
- (2) The use of cameras gets in the way of deep connections.
- (3) Silence is very powerful when you allow it to speak up.
- (4) You need to become friends with your voice.
- (5) Creating a 'container' or safe space in VAL work is even more essential than face-to-face.

Let's start with the mixture of communication channels. I consider this to be a bad habit in many organisations and one aspect where too many virtual facilitators collude with their clients in the spirit of not wanting to challenge the status quo too much.

- (1) **Mixing different channels of communication** (with some people being face-to-face in the same room and others linked in virtually) generates unhelpful communication patterns and power differentials for several reasons:
 - (a) **Not being heard because of noise:** People around the same table often do not realise how much noise they produce simply by dragging papers or glasses on the table. The sheer fact of being connected with a headset covering both ears and providing the direct contact between individuals – directly from one auditory system to the other – creates strong intimacy that is not possible with a mix of connections. As a matter of fact, those around the same table are in one universe and the ones connected virtually do not belong to it. It requires self-confidence, resilience and patience for the latter to stick with the discussion, stand their ground and to make sure that they are heard. The balance between share of voice as well as share of ear is disturbed.
 - (b) **Feeling unsure about others' points of view:** Most communication platforms only show on camera a limited amount of attendees around the same table and their faces are often difficult to recognise. This means that the person connected virtually only receives one part of the feedback when they express a point of view. This can be disconcerting, particularly when this person asks a question and faces a wall of silence. It is no wonder that they feel unsure about the reaction of the people around the table: 'Are they making funny faces about me?'
 - (c) **Potential feeling of inferiority or guilt:** Being connected separately may reinforce a certain sense of 'inferiority'. People might either feel that their contribution is less valuable because they are remote or fear that their contribution is seen as less committed by the ones attending face-to-face, who might imply that the ones remotely connected are not prioritising the session in question to

attend it face-to-face. This happens even with the best facilitators trying to mitigate the power differentials through attentive and precise facilitation.

There are more reasons for this phenomenon but I will limit my reflection to these three for the sake of conciseness. One thing is certain:

Good VAL work is only possible when all participants are in a separate space, are undisturbed and all use the same channel of connection. I would like to encourage VAL facilitators to stand their ground on that one and insist on the appropriate setting.

Let's now focus on the second aspect that I consider to be either a real chance for a huge leap forward in exploiting the potential of virtual connections, or a big lost opportunity, depending on whether you implement it or not.

(2) Be heard, but not seen: The use of cameras gets in the way of deep connection

Through the wide use of communication technologies such as MS Teams or Zoom since COVID, many coaches facilitate Action Learning with cameras. This form of facilitation probably feels more familiar and closer to face-to-face facilitation. I am convinced, more than ever, that the use of cameras actually gets in the way of deep connections in the virtual space. There are many reasons for that. I will focus on two key ones.

I have developed this hypothesis over the many years of practising VAL, based on the feedback I regularly received from the participants in my virtual sets. Paradoxically, people feel that when they work in a VAL environment (most of the time only audio based in a teleconference or using only the audio connection on MS Teams for example) 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, 234). Gilligan et al. (2006), who developed the so-called Listening Guide as a method of psychological analysis, also clearly underline the importance of the voice and demonstrates that listening to the voice of a person is a crucial way to enter truly into a relationship with that person.

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 become 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 [...] 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. While the eye sees at the surface, the ear tends to penetrate below the surface. (1999, 86)

In my VAL facilitation training, I offer a technique of deep listening including listening through your own body, that participants can learn rather rapidly and apply with amazing results.

Body language gets overestimated

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 coaches 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 their 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 shows that, in the case when people express feelings and emotions, 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. On his website Mehrabian clearly states that the results of his findings only apply to the expression of feelings and emotions and should not be generalised to communication in general.

Headset-to-headset connection is your entry ticket for emotional connection

At this stage, I would like to build on several of the comments made earlier and underline that virtually, it is easier to go more quickly with the flow of the conversation in a VAL set. This is precisely because of the strong audio-connection enabled through headsets covering both ears and establishing (thereby) a direct line between the auditory nervous systems of the sender and recipient. If no camera is used, this connection can become very impactful and strong. People also tend to open up quicker and deeper. If cameras are switched on, then the strength of the audio connection becomes diluted, because people's attention is divided between the picture of themselves on the screen, the pictures of other attendees on the cameras and possibly also some documents shared at the same time. Holding the attention in that way can be very tiring and therefore the concept of 'Zoom fatigue' emerges. The point is obviously not about a specific virtual collaboration technology but about this habit of using cameras at all costs. Whether this is on Zoom, Skype, WebEx, Adobe Connect, MS Teams, etc. it does not make any difference. What does make a difference though is that people have to focus very hard on themselves (how do I look on the camera?) and on other people's eyes (people feel that they need to have permanent eye contact online). As Leighton (2021) describes in her analysis of four causes for 'Zoom fatigue', in a face-to-face meeting people would not watch themselves

in the mirror all the time, nor stare at other people all the time. No wonder they get tired. Under such circumstances, people will not be able to establish the deep connection with the issue holder and the other set members that I was describing above.

Finally, I would like to mention one recent outcome of my research on power in the virtual space that I believe is very relevant for VAL. The more minimalist the connection channels, the stronger the neutralisation of differences such as gender differences. When cameras are not used, people are less biased by the physical appearance of a person and concentrate more on what the person actually says and does. Some very interesting and important research findings are shared by Yong-Kwan Lim, Chidambaram and Carte (2008, 5). They claim the following:

... we argue that such technologies [computer mediated technology] offer a more level-playing field for minority members, i.e. females. As such, we discuss the idea that, in a setting characterized by a high degree of reductive capabilities, females are not as obligated to engage in impression management strategies that are in line with femininity and are free to break away from gender stereotypes.

The shadows of the voice connection

Having shared the strongest arguments for an audio connection only, I would also like to share my experience of the shadow sides of it. In the virtual space, some psychodynamics might arise quicker and get stronger. For example, if I am not sufficiently grounded, it could be that my 'buttons get pressed' and I do not realise it. I might project or introject and not be aware of it. I have experienced that particularly the phenomenon of confluence is more likely to happen virtually than face-to-face. There is a very fine line between 'being in the flow' and 'being in the grip', the latter being very problematic regarding our responsibility as VAL Facilitators. In order to minimise this risk, I always start my VAL sessions with a so-called 'focus exercise' of around eight minutes. The exercise is a yoga-based exercise that I invite participants to do with me. The more they are grounded in the awareness of their own bodies, the lesser the risk that they get in the grip. While this is a healthy practice for all set members, it is in my view an absolute must for the VAL facilitator who needs to be well grounded in his/her own body awareness to hold the whole set in a safe place.

I would like to conclude on the aspect of camera use as follows: if VAL facilitators are prepared to challenge the status quo of the common use of cameras, they will be amazed by how much quicker and deeper connections can be in their virtual sets and they will experience intense and impactful VAL work with the set members. This will require heightened awareness of themselves in preparation and during the session.

Let's now look at a very powerful enabler in VAL work: silence.

(3) Let silence speak up

Most of the time silence is pregnant with a lot of data, and this is particularly true in the virtual space. If VAL facilitators manage to tap into silence, they will be able to bring deep and often new insights to the surface from the set members. This statement is not only based on my own experience of facilitation throughout the years, it is also based on well-known theories. I would like to mention two key names in this respect. Foulkes

(1948) developed the concept of 'social unconscious' linked with the theory of a so-called 'matrix'. With 'matrix', he meant the web of unconscious connections that developed between the members of a group when they come together. With 'social unconscious' Foulkes meant the internalised social world that each of us is not aware of, as well as the characteristics of the external world that each of us carries in ourselves without being aware of it either.

Weinberg (2014, 131) builds on the concept of 'social unconscious' and shares his wide experience of working with internet groups; he reveals the power of the 'social unconscious' in the virtual space and shows how one can be at the same time physically alone in a room, in front of a computer screen and at the same time completely immersed in the social unconscious of the group that one is joining on the internet. Weinberg (2014, 140) writes

[...] we can say that it resides in the potential space between people. The inter-subjective field is a co-creation of the psyche of the people involved in the interaction, meaning that it is not the simple result of the people's unconscious but a new co-unconscious (Moreno 1934/1978) belonging to neither of the participants.

One can find oneself suddenly merging with the unconsciously imagined group, plunging into a role that is infused with projections and introjections – and these phenomena are particularly intensified precisely because they happened in a computer mediated environment.

At this stage, I ought to mention that Weinberg works mainly with word-based internet groups, where people communicate and interact only with words and not with camera or audio connection. I would nevertheless claim that every aspect mentioned above by Weinberg also applies to group interactions with audio connection. This means that silence in a VAL session is an invaluable source of information regarding the set members, and each single member or the set at the same time. When facilitators develop the skills to tap into this source of information, they can easily bring to light unspoken and even unconscious aspects of the set. So doing, virtual set dynamics can be explored at a deep level and this will help the set to develop fast very deep levels of connection and high levels of maturity.

The key principle is: *Feel the silence, don't fill it!* This means that instead of trying to interrupt the silence by asking questions to help the set move forward, one should normalise the silence by saying something like: 'I notice the silence and will leave the space on purpose for people to reflect and speak up, if they so wish' – this is important to reassure people that the technical connection is not broken – and then feel one's own intuition in order to sense (rather than think) what this silence might be about. After a while, if nobody speaks up, you share with the set what your intuition tells you: for example, people might be confused about the last part of the exchange, or they might feel stuck in the process, or they might simply need to take a break. By sharing what your intuition tells you, you are connecting with the set members at a deeper level, you actually tap into the 'social unconscious'. Sharing what you feel (with your intuition, rather than what you think) will enable somebody else to resonate with it and share as well. So doing, you are 'turning the silence inside-out'. Should your intuition not tell you anything, then after a while, if nobody else speaks up, you might simply ask: 'I wonder what this silence tells us?' and invite others to share how the silence feels to them.

One last remark about silence in VAL: we have explored the power of silence in the whole set and how to turn it inside-out. Obviously, this skill comes on the top of the skill to work well with the silence of the issue holder and the discipline of holding the other set members (the ‘helpers’) to work well with this silence, which in itself represents a whole additional chapter in its own right.

I would now like to go over the fourth lesson that I have learnt over the years: the need to integrate the awareness of one’s own voice into one’s sense of identity as VAL facilitator in order to maximize one’s own power.

(4) Become friends with your voice!

When I run VAL facilitation training programmes, I am still surprised by how few facilitators ever ask themselves what image their voice is projecting about their presence in the virtual space. Facilitators should put their energy into two essentials. First, they should ensure that the quality of their communication logistics (internet line and quality of their audio connection) is excellent. I often meet with facilitators who, when confronted with the fact that they are hard to hear in the virtual space because of bad equipment, have nothing better to say than: ‘But I can hear everybody very well!’. Paying attention to your audio equipment before you start facilitating a VAL set is like making a conscious choice of the clothes that you want to wear when you meet face-to-face. Second, facilitators should regularly record themselves in order to integrate the awareness of their voice as an inherent and essential part of their identity. I still hear participants tell me: ‘I hate listening to my voice. I sound horrible’. The fact that we do not hear ourselves in the same way as others do is due to our physiology and it is therefore particularly important that we know how others hear us if we want to maximise our impact on them. In this effort, before judging your voice, it is important to embrace it as it is, to *become friends with your voice*, because this is the voice that has served you so far and you ought to integrate the awareness of this ‘friend’ into your own sense of identity. Once you have become friends with your voice, you might want to consider the following aspects: the pitch of your voice, the degree of articulation (how clear and how sustained it is), the colour of your voice (is it bright or dark) and the level of variation or monotony that you might notice in your intonation, pitch and speed of speech. It is then up to you – and you alone – to decide what you might wish to change – or whether you wish to change anything at all. Stay away from voice engineering and cultivate voice awareness instead!

Finally, let’s look at an absolutely essential role of the VAL facilitator that I find much more critical in the virtual space than face-to-face.

(5) Establishing the container

More than ever, I am convinced that the most fundamental part of the role of the VAL facilitator is to establish from the outset what I would call a ‘container’, i.e. a safe space based on a jointly agreed set of rules of engagement and logistic requirements. One example to illustrate the latter is that people should not be on mute during the sessions so that each can intervene spontaneously. Hence they need to be in a quiet space where they will not be disturbed.

Given the fact that VAL belongs to a different paradigm compared with face-to-face, where communication and interaction have their own idiosyncrasies, we have as VAL facilitators the responsibility to help the set members navigate interaction through the virtual space in a way that all feel held and safe. This means that beyond the necessary contracting upfront with the VAL set members (I always start a VAL process with an initial briefing and contracting session of one hour as a separate session) – even more than in a face-to-face setting – VAL facilitators need to concentrate on the process and interaction between the set members and hold these to high standards of engagement, challenge and support. This includes, for example, practicing different ways of asking questions because the typical coaching questions learnt face-to-face might soon become disabling in the virtual space. In addition, my experience is that as a VAL facilitator I might lose quickly the strength of the container if I intervene too much or too often as participant and start, for example, asking questions to the issue holder.

Concluding remarks

There are many more learning points that I could share about my practice of VAL and many more VAL facilitators will, for sure, have even more to share and potentially or probably different viewpoints based on different experiences. Based on my nineteen years of practice and on the feedback from many VAL facilitators and virtual coaches that I have trained in the last fifteen years, my own conclusion would be: Minimalistic communication technology and highest standards of facilitation in complete sync with the idiosyncrasies of the virtual space make for high impact VAL.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Dr. Ghislaine Caulat has been specialising in the areas of Virtual Leadership, Virtual Action Learning and Virtual Coaching since 2003. In the meantime, she has worked with over 29 global organisations and trained over 2,900 managers to become effective virtual leaders. She has also trained over 100 VAL facilitators. Her most recent research will be published as a book with the title *Powerful or powerless in the virtual space – the choice is yours!* by Libri Publishing in July 2022.

Previous publications include

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