

VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP

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When dealing with a crisis, organizations often focus solely on the company's infrastructure and operations while overlooking the role their leaders and staff play. This oversight can be costly because leaders' responses to crises (including Covid-19) impact both immediate and long-term employee and organizational outcomes. Decades of research show that leadership behaviours affect psychological well-being, employee stress, workplace safety, employee performance, and retention. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed how and where we work: Many employees are working remotely, thus changing the dynamics of leadership.

Virtual Leadership Challenges

Leadership tasks become increasingly challenging when dealing with a virtual workforce. Non-face-to-face communications may become primarily task-related, making it difficult to maintain social relationships with employees.¹ These types of communication have the potential to be misinterpreted through the lack of nonverbal cues and rich social information. Leaders can use technology and the basic principles of transformational leadership to help to maintain a strong team culture, ensure effective communication at a distance, reduce the ambiguity surrounding new work tasks and processes, and reduce feelings of isolation.

Top Virtual Leadership Tips

1. Support organizational & technology norms

Virtual leadership can be challenging because staff feel distanced from work, thus weakening the group norms/culture.²

- Reinforce organizational norms with staff working at a distance.
 - Identify the values that you as a leader want to communicate to your workers.
 - Identify how you can model these values to your staff.
- Support new norms around technology use by providing guidelines on how communication technology will be used. For example:
 - How can staff communicate with each other (and with you)?
 - What information should be shared and to whom?

- What hours should staff be sharing information?
- How can you avoid common email miscommunications?
- What are the key electronic communication etiquette guidelines?

2. Use virtual meetings to support leaders and staff

- Create virtual meetings to reach out to staff to help clarify work tasks (which may have changed) and help problem solve how to deal with ambiguous (or new) tasks or processes.²
- Although remote employees will have fewer opportunities to engage in spontaneous communication, virtual meetings will also help maintain previously developed interpersonal relationships.
- Take some time at the beginning of the meeting to check in on your staff. Having an open conversation about everyone's current condition will help to connect and understand how staff are faring.
- If you identify at-risk staff, or staff who are struggling with their new work responsibilities, provide them with organizational resources (e.g., online counseling) to help them cope.

3. Recognize and reward employees

Recognizing staff for their successes can increase employee engagement and happiness, and reduce turnover. However, when your staff are working from home, there are fewer opportunities to interact with them, talk about their work, and acknowledge their accomplishments and successes.³

- Think about how to create opportunities to interact with staff, discuss their work (challenges & successes), and recognize and reward their performance.
- Most staff expect face-to-face interactions and feedback on their work. If staff do not feel they are making a contribution, or their outputs are not rewarded, they may become demotivated.
- Try using thank you emails (or e-cards), an e-gift card, a virtual party or ceremony, etc.

4. Display transformational behaviours

Transformational leadership is important to increase positive staff outcomes⁴, and it involves

- inspiring/motivating staff by having a clear vision and goals
- challenging staff to grow
- being a strong role model
- treating staff as individuals

Transformational leadership is equally important during the Covid-19 pandemic: Leaders who were high in these behaviours also tended to have employees who had higher well-being, self-protecting, and social distancing behaviours.⁵

By incorporating the first three tips in this article (leveraging the norms, using technology & virtual meetings, and rewarding/recognizing staff), leaders are on the right track to becoming transformational. For example, setting clear objectives, recognizing different interpersonal needs, and modelling the expected behaviours are all part of being a transformational leader. It is especially important that leaders build those individual relationships with employees, because it will allow employees to feel more comfortable to voice their opinions during times of need during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Take-Home Messages

Although virtual leadership is challenging, and requires additional skill sets beyond the requirements of face-to-face leaders⁶ incorporating technology, a focus on key values, reducing ambiguity, recognizing staff, and incorporating the four key aspects of transformational leadership (being a good role model, developing a vision, encouraging staff development, and treating staff with respect) will help support both staff and leaders' success.

References

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