

INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP DURING PANDEMIC

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***Abstract:** The last two years have significantly influenced the evolution of companies and the leadership styles applied by managers. Work from home, downsizing, technical unemployment, reduced production capacity and all aspects of the pandemic have led leaders to adopt innovative team coordination strategies, involving changes in communication style, coordination, motivation, and evaluation of employee outcomes. The role of leaders changed significantly during the pandemic, the innovative ways in which they positioned themselves at the team level being the success factors in most cases, the most significant qualities being organizing via a network of teams, displaying deliberate calm and bounded optimism, making intuitive decisions amid uncertainty, demonstrating empathy and effectively communicating.*

***Key-words:** Leadership, innovation, remote teams, online meetings, communication.*

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1. Introduction

The leadership concept reflect the ability of an individual or group of individuals to guide followers and to influence them in order to achieve a goal. This ability involves creating a transparent vision, establishing realistic goales and providing to followers all information and tools necessary to aachieve those goals. Leadership means vision, encouragement, enthusiasm, love, energy, passion, obsession, consistency, the use of symbols, being attentive to the priorities of others, the real drama (caused and management), creating heroes at all levels, training, effective walks through. Also, leadership is a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who choose to follow. A leader has the ability to make people happy with what they do and helps people feel that their work helps them achieve the long-term goal of the organization. A leader challenges employees to go beyond the basic level of efficiency and try to reach their full potential; they strive to get the best out of employees. A leader is one who recognizes the accomplishments, successes, and rewards the people he or she deserves. One of the most important traits of the leader is that he treats mistakes as learning experiences. Leadership is an art and also a science. There are leaders who end up in management positions and fail to get results due to lack of knowledge and management tools. On the other hand, a manager who does not have the qualities of a leader will always have problems with the motivation and the formation of a team that will work well together.

2. Leadership skills

One of the most important skills of a leader is **emotional intelligence**. This individual ability helps leaders to recognize and manage emotions in themselves. Emotional intelligence helps people to be aware of their and others strengths, weaknesses and emotions, to manage feelings in different circumstances or levels of stress, to manifest empathy and to manage relationships with others. By increasing their emotional intelligence skills, leaders are more capable to efficient communicate, motivate team

members, delegate activities and can better communicate, motivate their teams, delegate tasks, and making intuitive decisions amid uncertainty and demonstrating empathy.

Another important skill consist in the ability to **effectively communicate** with team members. Communication consist in several skills, such as: adaptability (refers to the capacity to adapt communication approach related to different circumstances and audiences), active listening (consist into the ability to be focused on the topic, remaining involved during conversation, taking into consideration verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal communication), transparency (promoting company's strategy, directions, opportunities and challenges to team members in transparent manner), clarity (simplifying messages so that the audience can understand exactly the demand and the expectation, but also providing all details in order to motivate team members to take action), empathy (the ability to identify emotions and feelings of team members and adapt your actions and communication accordingly) and body language (manifest open body language that increase self-confidence and makes others feel comfortable sharing opinions).

The ability to **bring out the best performance** is another skill that leaders should have, including strategies as building a culture of trust, delivering honest feedback, manifest empathy, fostering open communication, being purpose-driven and supporting growth opportunities.

In order to properly lead a team, a leader has to have a healthy level of **self-awareness**. This ability allows leaders to recognize and control emotions as they can perform duties, helping to remain effective during stressful situations.

Resilience is another leadership skill that leaders should have, including the reflection and options assessment before taking any step or decision, striving to continuously learn and improve yourself and your team, keep the focus on goal even during stressful situations and cultivating a strong relationship with colleagues and mentors.

3. Leadership during pandemic

The last 2 years have been unexpected for all of us. It was a time of many unknowns, many questions and uncertainties. It was a time when each of us tried to find solutions so that life before the pandemic could be transposed as easily and better as possible in the context of the pandemic. Among leaders, the pandemic required team repositioning, rethinking leadership strategies and redesign of leadership styles, all of them being built on basic leadership skills. In a pandemic context, every leader had to do whatever it took to keep businesses afloat so that post-crisis recovery would be as easy as possible. They had to find tools and ways to collaborate with the team so that business remain productive. The management of remote teams it was a necessity in the current conditions, but, fortunately, technology helped us to move from working remotely easily by removing some of the difficulties. Suddenly, tens of millions of people around the world woke up the next day to work from home. Companies have rushed to adopt fast remote work solutions, consisting mainly of video and tele-conferencing platforms, along with phone, chat, WhatsApp, email and collaborative solutions. Thus, each leader had to be innovative, to use all available tool and processes and find the best way for his team to achieve exceptional results and to remove as much as possible the barriers of communication through the screens.

3.1. Leading remote teams

Virtual teams need the same things that every team needs: a well-defined goal, a clear set of roles and responsibilities within the team, communication options that meet all the needs of the team, learning options, and change of direction.

The role of the manager is to help the team learn how to be a team at a distance and more than ever to find ways to make the work of the team effective. The role of the

manager is to build and build trust in the team he leads. Trust is the foundation of successful relationships and a crucial element in the success of a long-distance team. Returning to the managerial role, learning to lead a virtual team means understanding more about people and the process of collaboration between them, and not just focusing on technological skills.

Leading a virtual team has the following challenges and disadvantages:

- ✓ There is *no direct contact*, even if it used visual communication, even if it is used the camera is not the same thing.
- ✓ The *emotional distance appears*, even if a leader can call his team at any time, this involves an action; in the office the contact is default, the leader don't have to ask permission to communicate with you and nor the team member to talk to the leader. Basically, there is a limit to the extent to which technology can replace human contact. It is clear that once the emotional distance increases a lot, the relationships must be compensated, the leader must take positive actions to maintain teamwork and contact between people.
- ✓ *Lack of skill*, and the necessary technology, or technical problems, which affect the way we communicate

All of this raises barriers between sender and receiver that change the ability of the two to communicate.

3.2. Strategies for leading remote teams

Managing remote teams can be a challenging task since you have to create/maintain remote organizational culture. In order to create a successful remote team, there are some initiatives can be applied, as follows:

a. *Define and promote clear and detailed outcomes*

In times of normality and with collocated teams, with communication loops and immediate feedback, targets can be set more broadly and recalibrated later, some managers avoid giving instructions in too much detail, precisely to avoid micro-management. But for remote teams it is better to give more detailed task descriptions, with examples of what the end result should look like. Give team members the freedom to execute tasks as they see fit, but not with few instructions that can be a source of potential misunderstanding and frustrations in case of failure.

b. *Overlapping working hours*

Find out other constraints of team members (part time activities, family) and identify at least three to four hours a day when most of the team is online at the same time. Common meetings with all team members must be in that period of time.

c. *Create a professional working environment*

Professional appearance and a distraction-free work environment are part of any organizational culture. In addition, setting professional standards contributes to efficiency and gives people the right and positive mind set.

d. *Adapt to the people you work with*

Not everyone can easily adapt to work remotely and not everyone is equally suited to this way of working. Assess how well people fit into the team and identify the optimal way of working.

e. *Establish a meritocracy system*

Meritocracy - or the process of rewarding and recognising people on the basis of their skills - encourages people to work harder and better. Be sure to set up reward systems to keep your team motivated and to better identify team members who can take on more responsibility.

f. *Schedule regular meetings*

Scheduling current meetings at the same time on the same day of the week helps create a routine. Routines give the team a sense of calm, familiarity and predictability. This allows team members to feel comfortable and reduces stress. Video calls are one of the best ways to maximise the effectiveness of meetings as they recreate office routines, thus reducing the feeling of alienation for remote teams.

g. Define working systems

Different people have different ways of doing tasks. Setting standards can shorten the time it takes to achieve the expected result. By setting standards and defining repeatable work systems, the team generally has fewer questions and knows how long it should take to solve certain tasks. These work systems must be both standardized to allow for maximum efficiency and tailored to allow the freedom needed to complete the task to the best of one's ability.

h. Use project management tools

Project management tools can be ideal for tracking deadlines. Also, send out alerts and reminders for deadlines and make a quick daily, weekly or monthly overview of what needs to be done, by whom and when. File-sharing tools and time management apps are a big help.

i. Motivation and sense of belonging

An organized work environment is not only disciplining but also motivating. It helps people to do their job consistently day in, day out, 8 hours, that's how they progress. But beyond discipline (that would be the stick, the element of strength), there is also motivation (the carrot, the positive element). It is motivating to see others working side by side with you, not giving up, pulling in the same direction, even if each at their own tempo. People inspire each other, motivate each other, when we are low on energy, the others motivate us to keep going. Here's an element that many are missing. They will emotionally walk away from projects in the works because people are emotional beings and not machines. It matters that individuals believe in what they are doing and feel the pulse of others around them, it's like an outlet with energy and motivation there that a simple email or phone call can't supplement.

j. Define multiple communication tools

Using multiple communication tools has the following advantages. First, your team has a way to immediately communicate something that is urgent to the right person. Second, it unifies processes, such as what to use for conference calls, screen plays, and so on. It's clear that using the same tools helps create a sense of belonging and connection.

In parallel to phone, chat, WhatsApp, email, Google Docs, One Drive there are collaborative solutions and specialized platforms on a case-by-case basis, which have easily and quickly proven their usefulness:

Zoom - a more complex tool than Skype, ideal for multi-user conferences and presentations. The number of users doubled earlier this year with the spread of Coronavirus.

Google Drive - a sharing system with options for document, table or presentation files, where you can track the activity of all contributing users, save previous versions and use the whole suite with the whole team.

Google Hangouts Meet - ideal and simple for online meetings, with or without a video camera, where two or more people can pass an invitation to their Google calendar and then talk, write and share files.

Monday.com - a collaborative planning and activity management platform. Helps you work with speed and adapt quickly Monday.com allows team members to work in a unique way tailored to the specific needs of each member while gaining the agility to adapt to the specific speed of business development.

CRM - a useful CRM platform for administering and managing customer relationships. Provides you with the technical support you need to make the most of opportunities. Transparent, efficient and incredibly simple. Helps you capture contact information no matter where it comes from: email, documents, business cards or web pages.

Microsoft Teams - a platform developed by Microsoft for proprietary business communication, as part of the Microsoft 365 family of products. Teams is offering workspace chat and videoconferencing, file storage, and application integration. Also, can be added different add-ons that can help people organizing better their work.

k. Trust investment

Dispersed teams that are working remote as virtual teams often struggle to build and maintain trust, because of lack of physical proximity, reducing the cohesion feelings and also cultural differences. In order to increase the trust of team members, are recommended virtual “face-to-face” meetings, keeping the team members informed about company’s strategy, long term organizational changes and consequences, asking for team input on organizational issues and celebrate short-term victories by reinforcing the team's joint effort.

l. Define roles and respect procedures

In case of remote teams, roles are very important. Each member of the team needs to know who can help him with an issue, who is accountable for some action or to whom needs to report a status. Leaders need to pay attention to establishing roles in the team. They need to define clear roles in virtual teams as well, primarily related to communication and information strategy. These roles can include technical support for people who need it; people responsible for archiving information, people who will monitor results and so on. Also, procedures create the background that each company must has and needs to be very well known by each team member. The leader should reinforce procedures and be sure that each team member is up to date with procedures updates.

4. Conclusions

The leader’s role is to help the team learn how to be a remote team and more than ever to find ways to make the work the team does effective. Also, his role is to build and strengthen trust within the team he lead. Trust is the foundation of successful relationships and the crucial element in the success of a remote team. More than that, learning to lead a virtual team means understanding more about people and the process of how they work together, and not just focusing on technological skills. Managers leading virtual teams need to be present, consistent, and plan well to keep the team motivated, engaged, and performing, using all the tools available. Innovation is an important asset of any leader, which help leaders succeed in managing remote teams. There is no one right way to correctly coordinate remote teams. Each leader must use his or her intuition, experience within their team build on previous experiences and identify the most innovative method of coordinating remote teams, with the strategies and actions presented in this article as a background. By practising, each leader identifies the best methods of coordinating remote teams, depending on their response.

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