**Leading virtually**

We know that leadership is tough at the best of times. But leading virtually, without direct physical human contact is even harder. And then add to that having to lead virtually in a time of global crisis where fear and uncertainty pervade everything (combined with the practical logistics of working from home with children). Leading today is even more demanding than before. Leading virtually sets the bar of leadership even higher, where any mediocrity may be more exposed.

This morning we will explore a bit some of the different challenges of leading virtually. We will see that it requires:

* very different, specific skill sets and ways of leading
* yet the same core character and attitudes – only more so.

**CARER Leadership**

Before we look at leading virtually in general, it’s worth recognising the particular challenges of leading in the COVID pandemic and learning from **neuroscience** – how the brain functions. As we discussed in our first session in December, at the moment, in many parts of the world people are worried, uncertain and in many cases scared. People’s brains react neurologically to a high threat response. It affects people’s motivational needs. A couple of really interesting papers (put references in chat) highlight the importance of leading effectively by considering five human motivational needs.

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/virtual-team-leadership-insights-from-neuroscience-jon-pratlett/> <https://www.inc.com/bill-murphy-jr/want-to-be-a-truly-exceptional-leader-neuroscience-says-do-these-5-simple-things-right-now.html>

They use the acronym CARER

**Certainty** – Strive to create certainty. "*When you give people any information at all, it activates the reward networks in the brain because the brain craves information. Any kind of ambiguity, on the flipside, creates a threat response*." So give people giving people even a small amount of certainty as simple as knowing the time of a meeting or when you will respond by - “I’ll get back to you on that before 11”. Then let people know if you have no news then rather than not saying anything.

**Autonomy** – At a time of uncertainty, when someone has agency or choice they are more likely to experience “toward” emotions, rather than “away” emotions”. So try and offer unexpected autonomy and flexibility – don’t just react. It is interesting that being seen to come up with solutions is viewed as positively as the flexibility itself. Even giving people the option of choosing a time for their performance review might reduce some threat!

**Relatedness** (Belonging) – humans are social beings. So as leaders, “*if we take a genuine interest in our people, in who they are, their goals and dreams, what’s going on at home, increases empathy and understanding and encourages transparency and effectiveness in spite of the virtual environment*.”

**Equity** – At times of uncertainty, we need a sense of fairness in how we and others are treated. So it is worth emphasising shared goals and cooperation. The reality is that some people will be more productive, others will be less (can you expect the same from somebody living alone as someone home schooling two at the same time as working). Watch out for a ‘crisis of fairness’.

**Recognition** – Working virtually we need recognition more than ever at the moment. Parts of our brain, like the striatum, are reward-related. We need to feel recognised, appreciated, even by being asked for our opinions. Also when giving essential feedback recognise that people are especially sensitive right now to cues that their status has gone up or down.

*Pause for a moment now and consider what one or two things could I do differently to increase my staff’s sense of*:

* Certainty
* Autonomy
* Relatedness (belonging)
* Equity (fairness)
* Recognition

**Three keys to leading well virtually**

1. Technology
2. Talking together
3. Trust
4. **Technology - Become Tech-savvy at least**

With virtual teams, you need technology to connect. To lead well virtually you have to become very comfortable with technology. Develop an interest, be curious, even if you have none before. You can’t use the excuse that I’m too old. If you are too old for technology, then you may be too old to lead in a digital age. You don’t have to become a geek, but at least work closely with one!

You will need to learn what technology works best and use it appropriately. Some great collaborative software exists nowadays – at INTRAC we use Mural or Jamboards. But there are many others. I’m surprised that you can get some really good discussions going virtually.

Keep your virtual meetings short and sweet. There’s plenty of research that says that after 50-minutes our brains need a break for a few minutes (and not to catch up on emails!). Otherwise productivity will fall and boredom will rise.

We live in a world of what is called ‘digital interference’. If you really want to concentrate in a meeting, then hide your phone. A message notification comes and your brain will automatically disconnect. For me I have to close down BBC Sport App, otherwise the temptation is too great. If you can still see it or hear it, your brain will be thinking about it.

With the multitude of online meetings we all know the phenomenon of getting Zoomed Out. So it might also be worth considering having asynchronous meetings. When our new CEO at INTRAC gave his initial assessment feedback on us last week, he put up headlines on Mural and asked us to add our comments as he spoke. It took less than an hour. But then he left this up for a week for people to continue to respond to by adding ‘post-it’ comments in their own time, after they had had a chance to reflect or perhaps finished home-schooling the kids. Asynchronous working can be an interesting addition to the usual video calls.

It is also about using the right technology to set the tone. We have an excess of technology at our disposal — but like Ecclesiastes says there’s a time and a place for each mode of communication. Different methods work better for different purposes:

* **Email** is good if you need to communicate something to be referenced later on, like long, detailed messages or directions.
* **Video** works well for the 65% of people who are visual learners or those who like seeing a friendly face.
* **Phone** Conflict resolution and sensitive conversations that can’t be done in person should always be done over the phone.
* **Instant messaging** Programs like Slack or Quip and Google Chat may be good for quick communication needs, like checking project statuses, asking questions, or coordinating schedules. They also work if you want to share a friendly “Hello!” or share a funny meme, or you might want to set up a staff WhatsApp group.

Think of technology a bit like electricity. You need electricity to make a house light, warm and comfortable, particularly in a Swedish winter, but on its own it does not make a home. So if technology is necessary, but not sufficient, what else do we need?

1. **Talking together – frequently, clearly and creatively**

As a virtual leader the worst thing you can do is fail to communicate. Particularly at times of uncertainty, to make sure everyone understands what is happening, you may need to feel you are overcommunicating. Good virtual communication to teams is:

* frequent and often
* clear and concise, setting expectations and outlining plans. So it needs careful preparation and also checking back that people have understood.
* honestly recognises that you do not know exactly what the future holds but clearly communicate the steps you are taking to navigate the team through that uncertain future. But that this plan will adapt and change as you learn.
* personal – we have found breakout rooms really helpful in all staff meetings, just for five minutes to connect with and check in on a few people. Good virtual communication listens and recognises emotions.

But it is not only about teams. One-to-one conversations are even more vital when leading virtually. Some leaders arrange a schedule for these, others set virtual office hours, to replace the informal office chats; others just let people know which days or times of day are best for them. *How to you ensure your staff feel you are ‘present’ as a virtual leader?*

1. **Trust - Cultivate it and give it away**

Trust is always the foundation of all good leadership, in fact all healthy relationships. In the context of virtual leadership, it is even more important. But trust does not develop naturally or by accident. To create and give more trust you have to work at it, intentionally. The good thing is that at times of adversity like this, we have even greater opportunities to build trust.

In a virtual setting, cultivating trust is about:

**Autonomy** - Leading virtually forces us to give people more autonomy to make decisions. In one sense, we have no choice but to trust our staff more. So virtual leadership requires more distributed leadership. It is clear that a command and control style does not work virtually. But virtual delegation requires creativity. Maybe now is a good time to think about processes that perhaps can be suspended. How can you be more flexible? Indeed, the fact that you're clearly trying to come up with idea to offer people more flexibility than they imagined possible, can have as much positive effect as the flexibility itself. In addition, giving people greater autonomy can help manage stress: “*As long as people feel they can execute their own decisions without much oversight, stress remains under control*”.

**Empathy** - As well as giving greater autonomy, leading virtually in a way that builds trust requires people to feel we are on their side (even when tough decisions have to be made). As leaders we have to really try to understand people’s situations, their anxieties, their worries, their mental health concerns. It is not about us fixing them, but at least empathising with them. So we have to be extra understanding of people’s domestic responsibilities and concerns when they are working from home. Management writers talk of a more pastoral approach to virtual leadership.

And of course all this pre-supposes we are OK ourselves. We can only lead well virtually when we bring the best of our selves to our work. People do not expect you do be perfect, but perhaps to be as good as we can be at this time. To be a good leader we have look after our own physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs. As we discussed last time, in Leading with Hope, we have to be disciplined about creating rhythms for our lives that bring life, energy and hope.

So as we go into groups now, I’d like you to think about:

* Becoming tech savvy
* Talking together, frequently, clearly and creatively
* Trust – both cultivating and giving

**Group discussion**

1. How has your leadership had to adapt to a virtual world? What have you found most challenging?
2. What specific tools or methods have worked well for you? Any tips to pass on?

**Useful Resources**

Virtual team insights from neuroscience

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/virtual-team-leadership-insights-from-neuroscience-jon-pratlett/>

The 5 key skills all virtual leaders need and how to develop them: <https://www.arielgroup.com/virtual-leadership/>

Podcast:

<https://www.tablegroup.com/hub/post/35-the-five-dysfunctions-of-a-virtual-team/>

Blogs:

<https://www.inc.com/bill-murphy-jr/want-to-be-a-truly-exceptional-leader-neuroscience-says-do-these-5-simple-things-right-now.html>

Nine tips for great virtual leadership: <https://diversityq.com/9-tips-for-great-virtual-leadership-with-or-without-a-pandemic-1509748/>

How cognitive science says you should lead virtual teams: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2020/08/20/how-cognitive-science-says-you-should-lead-virtual-teams-in-a-crisis/>

The 50-Minute Rule Makes Virtual Meetings More Productive, According To Neuroscience: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2020/09/29/the-50-minute-rule-makes-virtual-meetings-more-productive-according-to-neuroscience/>

The neuroscience of leadership and change: <https://stories.ulethbridge.ca/the-neuroscience-of-leadership-and-change/>

While We All Work From Home, Cozy Up to Cognitive Capacity: <https://neuroleadership.com/your-brain-at-work/cognitive-capacity-work-from-home/>