

Remote leadership – a challenge and an opportunity

White paper – Petra Kornfeld-Wetzel and Dr. Till Reichert

The measures taken to delay the spread of the corona pandemic have given way to conditions in most companies and organisations that would have been unimaginable just a few weeks ago:

- working on site is only possible to a very limited extent,
- most of the staff and managers are working from home,
- with few exceptions, communication and collaboration have to be virtual.

Leadership is needed more than ever

The situation is extremely demanding for managers on all hierarchical levels as they are faced with manifold challenges. They have to clearly structure and focus virtual collaboration with their team, their peers, their internal partners and their external customers such that the performance currently required can still be provided efficiently.

Managers are the communication hub in this situation where their own existing networks and those of their staff are not functioning as normal. One essential task is to communicate the current corona measures and how they affect the company and the employees in an open, transparent way.

At the same time, they have to be the emotional support for their staff working at home who, in addition to potential problems with IT, have to organise their work at home together with partners and children in such a way that they can still perform effectively.

And, above all, at a time like this, they cannot lose sight of the strategic focus of their work. They have to anticipate today which strategic goals might change and how after the crisis and act accordingly. In so doing, they have to take their staff with them in their communication and, above all, let them participate.

Communication is key, albeit remotely – from their own home office.

Managers can overcome these challenges by observing four fundamental aspects which will help them navigate their way safely through the crisis with their team. This also presents an opportunity for managers and employees to start preparing themselves for the time after corona. Because one thing is certain: virtual collaboration, thanks to the experience made during the current crisis, will continue to prevail in our daily work routine – the “New Work” approach will spread nationwide.

Coaching and moderation are the critical leadership instruments

The virtual environment requires special leadership competence and methods. Classic methods that are based on monitoring and control among others are only applicable in the virtual environment to a limited extent. This is because it is more difficult to monitor staff in their home office. In order for virtual collaboration to be effective and efficient, coaching and moderation competence for managers in particular is of critical importance.

Coaching competence aims to integrate employees in self-organised work routines for which they themselves are responsible more than is normally the case. The main focus here is on creating the relevant mental framework for collaboration. Rather than waiting for input from management, employees should be encouraged and enabled to act more proactively.

What is crucial for the success of this concept is the intrinsic motivation of the employees to become more involved than has been the case to date. For managers, this means filtering out and including the individual motivators on the one hand, and being available as a sparring partner to discuss questions as opposed to being an advisor, on the other. The successful transition from “boss to coach” gives way to collaboration on equal footing. With solution-oriented questions rather than advice on the part of the manager.

Moderation competence is important for the expedient organisation of virtual collaboration. Virtual meetings are considerably more difficult to chair than those where all of the participants attend in person. This is because the interpretation of non-verbal communication is limited, even in video meetings. Virtual meetings thus call for clear and strong moderation.

In addition to good preparation including clearly communicated objectives and an agenda, unambiguous moderation, in particular, is relevant if the desired results are to be attained. Discussions require clear rules for the sequence of events; agreement on decisions taken is safeguarded by direct confirmation; the assignment of tasks is visualised online directly or documented shortly after every meeting and made centrally available to all of the participants. The moderator ensures that clarity prevails.

This leadership competence is particularly relevant for teams with little virtual collaboration experience to date. Clear moderation has the additional benefit that employees are quickly enabled to acquire this competence themselves.

You reinforce trust with open, congruent communication

It is at times of crisis that trust is a strong currency in collaboration. When the external environment is uncertain, the inner system calls for dependability and cohesion. For managers, this means adhering to the principles of crisis communication when it comes to imparting relevant information:

- Prompt – Communicate actively and in good time in order to be able to set the direction.
- Open – Be transparent and truthful with facts.
- Congruent – Be convinced of what you are saying.
- Understandable – It is important that you are understood; therefore be simple and brief.
- Dialogue-driven – Communicate your message and, above all, be open for dialogue.

In short: communicate with confidence, clearly and on a level playing field.

In order to further increase the cohesion and trust within the team, managers should encourage and initiate informal communication between the employees, e.g. over a 30-minute “virtual cup of coffee” every three to four days.

Continuous, appreciative feedback motivates

The combination of virtual work and the fact that all of those involved are in home office requires considerably shorter feedback cycles, the systematisation of feedback methods and adaptation to the current situation.

Brief, one-to-one feedback meetings (e.g. daily, at least weekly) between manager and employees are necessary in order to ensure the employee performance. These meetings should be clearly structured, focused on the current tasks and immediately required results and, along with constructive and appreciatively expressed criticism, include plenty of praise. The emotional component, in particular, should not come too short under these circumstances.

If this is done well, the short feedback intervals and resultant continuity increase the self-motivation of the employees. Furthermore, potential areas of conflict can be recognised early on and dealt with accordingly. Simple team feedback methods such as the start-keep-stop-system can also help increase motivation and reinforce cooperation in the team. They are easy to use even in a virtual environment and are effective instruments for receiving prompt feedback from other members of the team on the current tasks and for being able to react flexibly to changes.

Clear structures help you promote self-organisation and secure performance

Effective and efficient virtual collaboration is based on clear structures and rules – roles and responsibilities are unambiguously allocated, tasks are clearly assigned and focused on the current situation, meetings are clearly structured and moderated, the documentation and filing structure is unambiguous and centralised, communication rules are firmly agreed, feedback rules are clear, the use of IT tools is appropriately regulated...

A clearly defined framework helps managers to foster the self-organisation of their employees and ensures that work can be performed in a target-oriented manner. If, in addition, scope for small talk and informal sharing of ideas is encouraged and promoted, this strengthens the bond in the team and loyalty to the company.

Use this challenge as an opportunity!

We will be happy to support and coach you with your remote leadership

... in enhancing your personal coaching and moderation competence,

... in establishing suitable communication structures for virtual collaboration,

... in introducing useful feedback methods for the one-to-one and in the team,

... in structuring the necessary framework.

Have we aroused your interest?

Do not hesitate to contact us for a detailed discussion on remote leadership.

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