

Leadership Discussion Series

Meet the future leaders in the distributed office

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Do virtual and face-to-face environments favour different leadership styles? Well, it looks likely according to recent research and conversations with leaders in recent months. So what does that mean for developing team leaders for likely future distributed workplaces?



photo: EY Consulting

As our work organisation changes so will our leaders

Research on emerging leadership styles, highlighted by the BBC¹, compared traditional face-to-face (f2f) vs virtual workplaces. Findings suggest that classic leadership skills typical in a f2f, centralised head office may not be optimal in a more distributed workplace - be it virtually, geographically or some hybrid. Confidence, often over confidence, when it comes to many A types, with high IQ and extroversion may not be enough in a distributed workplace. The new emerging leaders appear to be the 'doers' not the big 'talkers'. They are keen listeners, organised and reliable types, who are taking on informal leadership roles.

These emerging leaders "help other team members with tasks, keep the team on schedule and focussed on goals" says lead researcher, Radostina Purvanana, associate professor of management, Drake University. We know leaders need to earn trust; here emerging leaders have done this via proving they can be relied upon to help the team get results. These practical, results focussed and sometimes quieter voices have become attractive replacing larger personalities. We all want to be productive so may gravitate to the reliable, well-organised types.



Anecdotally, this stacks up with conversations I've had with senior leaders who have thrived in the f2f world, relying on the 'drop in' conversations and the visual cues. Many are recognising including myself that we will need to more fully embrace the myriad of virtual collaboration tools

"Suddenly it is not just about who talks the most, but rather, who is actually getting stuff done." Barbara Larson, professor of management, Northeastern University's D'Amore-McKim School of Business

Is virtual more democratic than face to face?

In f2f, it can often be the loudest voices in the room that are listened to. We know we need to ensure the quieter voices are encouraged and heard. It appears anecdotally and from the research that many virtual meetings are often more democratic. Is this because we are all equally visible on the screen thereby tacitly expecting attention? Does a less formal setting encourage more participation? No one wants to leave anyone isolated as we focus on maintaining team cohesion and health. Additionally, in the 2020 lockdown period survey results by Atlassianⁱⁱ and KPMGⁱⁱⁱ pointed to over work and hyper-vigilance making sure we could prove ourselves in a virtual world.

"Everybody fits in the Zoom room"

The doers vs the cult of charisma

Lets do a quick dive into the research details. 'Leadership emergence' theory^{iv} discusses two pathways for emerging leaders —achievements (based on behaviours) and ascription (of their traits e.g. confidence). Furthermore, recent developments suggest that the context will influence emerging leadership. This study focused on the importance of achievements and ascription of a leader's traits to emerging leaders across low to high virtual contexts.

The surprise here is not the results but when the research was done and its detail. This study was conducted pre-pandemic lockdown in 2019 and focussed on emerging leaders - those perceived as leaders in each team and whose influence was willingly accepted. It tracked over 200 four-person teams across f2f, hybrid and virtual groups.

The f2f teams chose individuals based more on ascription of their leaders traits while the virtual teams ignored the 'cult of charisma' assessing their emerging leaders on their achievements. The virtual setting would appear to be a harsher judge of leaders by placing more weight on results!

A cautionary note from peer reviewers is that while the study included some interpersonal relationships, measures of task orientated actions were emphasised. They recommended future research to explore how the emerging 'doer' leaders maintained personal relationships overtime along with their results orientation. Meanwhile, the f2f preferring, gregarious types are reminded they can also be successful virtual team leaders by adjusting to a more hands-on delivery approach.

This study of emerging leaders reminds us that the social dynamics will differ with the context and so different leadership behaviours may prove successful. A future distributed



model will require broader thinking about leadership development and whom we perceive as effective leaders. *Does the rise of the doer leader resonate for you?*

Just as the car and mass transit systems allowed the suburbs to expand along with our longer commutes, fast tech networks and improved human skills will allow us to better master distributed work. Well organised distributed work will be a leading differentiator for the best talent in the knowledge sector.

Next time – winning in the future of distributed work.

- Who prefers f2f vs distributed, why and some tips to navigate?
- What does it mean for connections to people and purpose, productivity, maintaining culture and innovation?
- How to nurture these important organisational health benefits albeit in different ways?
- How are leaders and teams adapting?

ⁱ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200827-why-in-person-leaders-may-not-be-the-best-virtual-ones>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.atlassian.com/blog/teamwork/new-research-covid-19-remote-work-impact>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://home.kpmg/au/en/home/insights/2020/08/embedding-new-ways-working.html>

^{iv} Who Emerges into Virtual Team Leadership_Roles? The Role of Achievement and Ascription Antecedents for Leadership Emergence Across the Virtuality Spectrum. Journal of Business and Psychology. June 2020. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10869-020-09698-0>

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