VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP

The challenges leaders aim to overcome

An executive summary by Antoni Lacinai

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ARE YOU A GREAT VIRTUAL LEADER?

This is a guide for You who want to improve your virtual leadership skills. You will probably fall into one of these four categories:

1. The NO CLUE. Here are leaders with no competence in leading remote teams. They are either scared or unconsciously incompetent. A disaster.
2. The SOME CLUE. These leaders have started the journey, do video meetings but lack the skills to engage and excel.
3. The ALMOST GOOD. Leaders here have experience and things are going pretty well, but they still don't feel that the engagement and productivity is the best. It's just ok.
4. The **OUTSTANDING**. Leaders engage, involve, set common goals, know how to present online, respect each remote team member and get the best out of them. Productivity is high.

If you belong to any of the categories 1-3 then this is for you.

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I have asked **500 virtual leaders** the same question: "*What challenges do you experience with virtual leadership?*" This is the summary of their 1000 answers.

A more comprehensive version can be ordered at [Amazon](#)

You will also get reflection questions on how to create more engagement and better results in your team, as well as generic pros and cons of digital communication. There are tons of models, lectures and processes behind those questions. Take time to answer them.

This is book is short and to the point. I hope you will find it valuable! Let's get going!

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Now let's dive into the findings!

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It's harder to interpret people's intent

In your brain, you have a radar constantly scanning for threats. When you meet someone, you always try to figure out what intent they have. This is really hard in the digital space.

In a video meeting we lack real eye contact (and we look mostly at our own image). In a phone meeting, we miss out on the body language.

In a chat or email we lose all non-verbal communication. When we're unsure, just to be on the safe side we tend to interpret things negatively. None of this helps us understand others better.

12% of virtual leaders who took part in the survey said that they had problems interpreting people's body language – and that it was a challenge for them to show enthusiasm and motivation through their own non-verbal communication. 12%! That's 120 answers out of the 1000 that were submitted!

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120...

...out of 1000 answers from virtual leaders, explicitly said that they had problems interpreting people's body language

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" Hard to read facial expressions."

"I can't read the person I am guiding."

"I need to listen more actively when I can't see so much body language"

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Reflect upon:

- Are you fostering a culture where you have your video on?
- How can you excel when all they see are your shoulders and your face?
- Can you use your hands and arms as well?
- Do you mirror your gestures, so it makes sense to the participants?

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Tech Hassle!

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The number one most irritating thing when it comes to digital communication is the problem with technology. A bumpy broadband connection, pin codes that don't work, bad picture quality, poor sound quality, people sitting in darkness, your team members being kicked out of the meeting etc. It's annoying and stressful.

We have all experienced this, and be honest: sometimes it was your fault, because you lacked knowledge of the most basic functions in the IT-system or meeting platform. But sometimes it's just bad tech or an unstable connection that is the challenge. Regardless of why, your team will be stressed out and perhaps even blame you. You will then feel that it is so unfair and be equally stressed out. The beginning of a vicious circle…

However, only 100 answers were directly linked to technology problems. That's 10%. Perhaps we are more forgiving early on, or the platforms have improved. Or we have low expectations…

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10 %

Out of 1000 answers from virtual leaders, 100 of them pinpointed technology being the real challenge

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"…that all staff members have the same technical competence"

"We put so much time into learning the technology!"

"Getting participants to use the camera"

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Reflect upon:

- Can you and your team handle the 5-10 basic features in the technical communication platforms you use?

- Are you equipped with high quality microphones, cameras, lights and backgrounds? Are your staff?

- How do you handle a situation where some people are gathered in a conference room and some are dialing in remotely? Who is most important? How does that show?

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Efficiency, efficiency, efficiency

Some leaders have this idea that everything must be efficient – to the point where **efficiency** becomes the mantra. This is a recipe for a poor one-dimensional leadership.

Goals, processes, tollgates, milestones are important things for sure, but they alone will not give us motivated employees. If your view is that people are *functions* or *production assets* rather than *people*, you have a problem

Many people forget the human side when they work in a digital context. (Perhaps that's why there are so many hateful people online?)

Such an environment has an exceptionally low degree of engagement, even if the goals are being met. It leads to boredom, mental health problems and perhaps even burnout

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140 answers from 500 virtual leaders were about problems with how the digital work-processes were organized.

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" It's not possible to do all tasks remotely."

"Projects take too much time to coordinate."

"Working overtime is too easy. One colleague kept working 70 hours per week. "

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Reflect upon:

- Are you strong when it comes to setting concrete goals, checking off agenda points, reaching toll gates etc.?

- Are you equally strong at communicating a higher purpose, instilling a playful and engaging atmosphere, and high energy and enthusiasm in the team?

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Missing the human touch

One of the most significant results was that most virtual leaders miss the human connection and the ease of building relationships face to face. There is no corridor, coffee machine or water cooler to have that valuable chitchat, and they really miss it.

An astonishing 66% share of the virtual leaders flagged this up as a concern. Remember, no pre-set choices. This is the number one worry that virtual leaders have.

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66 %

660 answers from virtual leaders out of 1000, addressed real **concerns** around human connections, relationships and mental health risks.

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" Hard to know how people are feeling."

" No space in the agenda to build relationships and hang out.

"No spontaneous tap-on-the-shoulder communication."

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Reflect upon:

- How do your people cope when working remotely? Do you know? How can you find out if you don't?

- Are you fostering a sharing culture, where members can talk about what they like and dislike in their cooperation with others?

- Can you replace the water cooler or coffee machines with something else?

- Do you take digital coffee breaks or cyber-AWs? Do you have a chat channel only for stuff outside work?

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Are they engaged?

Building on the previous challenge, around one third of the answers brought up **engagement** as one of their main concerns.

Virtual leaders feel that they don't know how their people are coping, how they feel, if they are isolated, demotivated, disengaged. They feel lost and lack the tools to find out.

Communication, engagement and performance go hand in hand. If leaders can't tell whether their teams are engaged, how can they tell if they're feeling low or stressed? More stress leads to worse decisions and bad communication. Bad communication will for sure lead to demotivating employees and they will underperform. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The vicious circle is spinning and can potentially get out of control.

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1/3

Around 30% of all virtual leaders explicitly highlighted that they worry about their team members' **engagement** levels.

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" Getting people engaged and inspired enough to act."

"Hard to convey enthusiasm and create engagement through a screen."

" Keeping the engagement high – both for my team and myself."

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Reflect upon:

- In what ways can you all build strong relationships and a team-spirit even as a virtual team?

- What can you do to keep people motivated?

- Are you communicating the strong purpose of why you exist as a team, and how you can improve the world (customers, colleagues, the planet?)

- Can you connect the long-term goals and your purpose, to weekly goals that keep the momentum going?

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Lack of control

When analyzing the answers, many virtual leaders do express – indirectly – that they lack control. "Are they engaged?". "How do they feel?" etc.

But only a few of them said it directly. 3 % of the virtual leaders said that they felt a clear lack of control and even had a suspicion that their *subordinates** would try to work less and take advantage of the fact that their boss could track their every movement.

*I chose that word deliberately for this problem since it set the hierarchical tone for their worries.

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"Employees can sneak under the radar."

"Hard to trust that things will get done."

"Easier for less engaged colleagues to skip work or do less."

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Reflect upon:

- Is your need for control and possibly micro-management anyone else's problem other than yours?

- Why don't you trust your employees?

- Do you treat everyone the same? Is that smart?

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Boring digital meetings

Surprisingly few said straight out that their digital meetings sucked. At the same time, after I ran one of my virtual leadership programs with my friend Mia Liljeberg, the leaders claimed an 80% increase in the meeting leadership skills after the course was completed… How could that be?

We have to look indirectly at all the answers and then it is easy to realize that **almost all of their responses are applicable to digital meetings**. It is implicit and not explicit.

It is hard enough to run an effective physical meeting. It is much harder to run an effective digital meeting.

If there is one place where the practical leadership is on show, it is in meetings. Leaders and managers spend about 50-80% of their time in meetings. There is some low-hanging fruit here if you only train yourself to run a digital meeting that will be both efficient and energizing.

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Reflect upon:

- Have you ever taken any training on how to lead effective meetings in general, and digital meetings specifically? What would happen if you did?

- Do you have common ground rules on how to behave in your meetings?

- Are you involving more than you are informing?

- How long are your digital meetings? Why?

- Do you make it easy to access your digital meetings i.e., do you provide the right links, pin codes etc.?

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WRAP-UP

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We have led people remotely for thousands of years. That in itself is nothing new, although I believe that those leaders adopted a more commanding "Do-what-I-say"- style in their leadership communication.

My first remote management role was in the mid 90s. It was tough. Some years later and another management position, a woman called me from New York, saying that I was her new boss due to a recent re-org. I had no idea… Many mistakes were made.

I am writing this is in 2021. I am in my office where I have spent most of my work time for almost a year, with very limited traveling. The Covid19 virus is still ravaging. We have gone from approximately 2% home workers to around 50%. No wonder many leaders and managers feel overwhelmed by the challenges they face. But understanding the problem is half the solution. There are solutions, tools and techniques that you can use. I hope that this material has shown you that you're not alone and that it will help you become a great virtual leader!

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If you want to improve your own skills, or inspire your team better, then get in touch with me. I coach executives and teams around the world, and I deliver keynote speeches at conferences and kick-offs, both analog and digital. I love to contribute. You will find all my contact details on www.antonilacinai.com

Best of luck!
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Antoni Lacinai

Antoni is a Keynote speaker, MC and Communication coach to executives from around the world. He is also an author of 13 previous books and a columnist at various leadership magazines.

He helps leaders and organizations communicate better, whether it is analog or digital communication. Antoni focusses on Leadership communication, Employee engagement and World Class Customer service.

In the digital communication space, Antoni helps leaders create engagement in remote teams. He gives interactive speeches and deliver training sessions on the following topics, often as a program:
- Virtual leadership
- Digital meetings
- Online presentations

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Bonus material

Check out www.antonilacinai.com where you will find downloadable cheat-sheets and recorded interviews with virtual leaders from around the world.

Books from me on Amazon, in English:

Employee engagement – 20 keys to outstanding workplace communication
Virtual meetings – Set them up. Lead them well. Reach your goals.
Understanding body language. 51 gestures and what they signal
Virtual leadership. The challenges leaders want to overcome

More: I have created numerous models and formulas in order to help leaders like you go from the No clue, Some clue and Almost good, to the Outstanding category. Contact me if you want to know more.

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