

HYBRID LEADERSHIP

The six challenges leaders face
according to themselves

By Antoni Lacinai

Hybrid Leadership. The six challenges leaders face.
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“What concerns or challenges do you believe a Hybrid leader will face?”

I asked that question to leaders from all over the world during the fall of 2021, in a “free text survey”. I wanted to do this survey since so little research has been done in this area and most of what I found was almost only focusing on distributed teams and the virtual leadership concerns.

Having analyzed the appr. 400 answers, I found six concerns for you to consider in your own hybrid leadership.

In the coming pages you will find these six challenges. You will also get some of my own reflections as well as examples of what the leaders said.

Enjoy ^_^

//Antoni Lacinai
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#1

15%

Of the answers showed concerns about how to **create and maintain energy and engagement in the team**

Reflections from me:

My belief is that this number should be much higher since everything a leader does should be about increasing engagement, hybrid or not, since that will lead to better performance, less sick leave, higher customer satisfaction, less errors etc.

If your team will be physically together a few days per week, this will be a great opportunity to deepen relationships again and create a trusting WE-feeling. This also means that inclusion will be the biggest task for any hybrid leader.

“How can we be creative?”

“It’s hard to align the team.”

“It’s hard to create a WE-feeling.”

“It’s a challenge to be spontaneous.”

“Is there a risk that the company culture will suffer?”

Reflect upon:

- How do you communicate with high energy to both in-office people as well as remote workers?
- What do you do if there is low energy in a half empty office?
- How do you make sure you don't favor the in-office employees?
- How do you foster a common culture regardless of where your team members are located?
- Can you gather your team in the office a few days per week? If not, can you do off-site meetings at least a few times per year?

#2

20%

Of all answers addressed a problem
around **how to organize the work and
the workplace**

Reflections from me:

I am convinced that this will be more challenging than leaders seem to expect. Too many managers will “forget” the remote workers and once again optimize work for in-office processes. The good ones will understand that remote work is not a plan B. It is plan A, on par with in-office work. Therefore, all communication processes with the team should be “Remote first” meaning that any meeting where people are scattered should be all-digital.

I also foresee a great challenge when some employers decide to reduce office space and take away any personal desks. People will not feel welcome to their own company.

“How do you furnish and build offices for hybrid meetings?”

“Should you have common office days for all? How do you agree on that?”

“The link between team, function, coworkers need to be secured since the risk is that it will deteriorate”

“Things should be either physical or digital”

- How will you secure optimal work processes for the hybrid workforce?
- What will your offices look like? Will you downsize, keep, or rebuild?
- How do you agree on the balance between working in the office and working from anywhere?
- Do you hire people based on where they live or based on the value they can bring?

#3

20%

Of the answers are about **interpersonal communication** (or lack of)

Reflections from me:

This number is way lower than the 66% who expressed worry about this in a 2020 study I did around pure remote leadership*. Perhaps we have simply accepted the limitations of the virtual workplace.

My belief is that this is a problem mainly for distributed teams where some people are almost never in the office, or if the organization decides to minimize office space allowing only some teams to be in the office at the same time, which will lead to lesser cross-functional communication. The problem of not harnessing the power of “accidental social contacts” is hopefully diminishing when we once again will meet each other in-person.

* I wrote a short book on this called **Virtual leadership – the challenges leaders need to overcome**. You can download it from <https://antonilacinai.com/downloadable-material/>.

“It’s hard to know how people are feeling.”

“I miss the chat by the coffee machine, or the knock on the shoulder.”

“How do we create a sense of belonging in the team?”

“Is there a risk that some people will feel left out?”

- How will you foster the informal, chat-outside-meetings-conversation going forward?
- How can you show empathy, curiosity, and compassion with your team members wherever they are?
- How do you encourage more cross-functional communication?

#4

10%

Of the answers are about the lack of
non-verbal clues

Reflections from me:

This number is the same as the 2020 survey I mentioned. Either the respondents are so stuck mentally in their current virtual leadership situation (I am writing this at while the world isn't fully recovered), or they bring this up because we will still do lots of digital meetings.

As I wrote before, if you meet with a hybrid team, everyone should participate in a virtual meeting with their own screens, microphones etc. This then will mean that the challenges of detecting body language will remain.

But – this should be less of a concern when we once again will meet many of our colleagues face to face.

“Huge responsibility for the coworker to be honest with their feelings”

“Hard to see how people are actually feeling?”

“How do I cheer people up in a virtual context?”

- Can you meet your team in all-physical meetings?
- How do you foster a culture where the video is on?
- Why not skip the body language and focus on only voice i.e., telephone calls when you have 1o1 meetings?

#5

15%

Of the answers are about the **how motivated people are coming back to the office**

Reflections from me:

This is naturally a new topic compared to my 2020 survey around virtual leadership. And rightfully so. Different studies and surveys show that people aren't that eager to bounce back to 2019. They rather bounce forward to hybrid.

Some 50-90 %, depending on which survey you look at, want to work full-time or part-time from home (or anywhere except the office). One survey had an even divide between working remote full time, working at the office full time or being flexible between the office and elsewhere.

Some 58% in one survey said that people will absolutely search for a new employer if their current one forces them back to the office full time. Also, short term, some employees might not be all that comfortable being around people, since Covid isn't all gone.

“Some people are afraid to return to the office.”

“How can I motivate my people to come back to the office?”

“How do I make it valuable to come to the office?”

- Will you involve your employees on what they think? How much will you listen to them and how much will you simply decide?
- Will you work from the office all the time, or will you too be flexible?
- How will you make sure you are an attractive employer?

#6

20%

Of the answers are about juggling
work-life balance

Reflections from me:

In the 2020 study on virtual leadership, quite a few expressed a distrust toward their people and if they would put in the work when being home. That attitude isn't present among the leaders I have asked this time. Leaders are instead worried that their team members will work too much. They also express concerns that people have a hard time separating work from their private life.

This should be the easier in a flexible work environment compared to an all-remote situation. During the pandemic, one survey showed that Americans worked three hours more per day when they didn't commute. The risk of burnout is obvious. This means that the focus should be on how to prevent people from burning out rather than chasing the very few who avoid work when nobody is watching.

As my friend Henrik Pallin, expert in young kids screen habits, say: "TRUST is the password"

“When you work from home, the boundaries are blurry”

“Without travel, there will be more free time”

“Coworkers will be distracted in their home environment”

- Do you trust your team?
- How can you help them with their individual needs for work-life balance?
- How about having all collaboration meetings during the days you are in the office (if possible) and let people produce/learn/read etc. when they work from home?

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Antoni Lacinai is an authority on **Workplace Communication**, working in the cross point of Leadership communication, Employee engagement and Customer service.

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