

Nicole Heimann: The Five Challenges of Virtual Leadership in the C-Suite - and How to Overcome Them



Now that the novelty of Zoom & Co has worn out and the pandemic continues, the importance of the social network and the culture that make a company truly unique becomes visible and apparent. It's hard to tap into this energy through working from home or even with hybrid working models. The challenges of the C-Suite now need to be dealt with in a new way: virtual leadership.

Advances in technology have allowed for multiple tasks and meetings to take place but even with flexible office work, several cracks have started to appear as a result of this 'new normal'. Leaders have found increasing numbers of issues such as poor communication, lack of motivation, and decreasing productivity.

Good virtual leadership will be crucial if companies and institutions are to succeed or even survive. **But what are the prime challenges facing virtual leaders in the C-Suite and what can be done?**

Challenge #1

Shift from defending what is lost to creating new possibilities for the future

What we hear from CEOs is that the executives are very focused on their own issues and well-being of their own people, but unfortunately this just strengthens the silo, brings a focus on the details and disconnects from the bigger picture.

The Antidote:

Reconnect to the bigger picture by aligning your team around a compelling vision. A Compelling Vision is a strong force that unites. The power of vision is underestimated by leaders and not shared enough. By tapping into the energy of your compelling vision you can realign your team and create the future in the present.

Why this is effective:

Cognitive research has demonstrated that positive coaching techniques, such as envisioning a desired future and connecting to purpose effectively activate important neural circuits and stress-reduction systems in the body. Vision work is an energizing process that aligns, brings people together and increases motivation.

Challenge #2

Shift from keeping together a dispersed workforce to fostering the sense of belonging no matter where we are

Working from home comes with a host of other problems. Homes can be full of distractions and people can find it hard to focus in what might feel like a 'non-work' environment. There might also be lower morale as people feel increasingly isolated. Managing a team and being 'the leader' can be challenging at the best of times and this becomes a lot harder from a distance. Our CEO clients report that the energy is going down and people miss the sense of belonging.

The Antidote:

Reactivate purpose with your executive team members and have them talk about it with their teams. Purpose is the emotional fuel in your organization. It's the motivation to get up in the morning and it gives meaning to life and to the work we do.

Why this is effective:

Our brains are wired to help each other. Purpose gives us meaning and focuses the attention on how we can contribute. Purpose helps us shift the focus from ourselves to others and this releases oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin in the brain. Neuroscientists call these the "happiness trifecta." Oxytocin supports empathy and social bonding. Dopamine plays a major role in motivation and movement. Serotonin regulates our mood.

Challenge #3

New ways of communication need new Working Together Principles

Arguably, the most crucial thing to focus on is communication. As we now all communicate differently using software for interaction, a lot of miscommunication arises. To work together effectively, requires leaders to be present. Virtual presence seems to be one of the biggest challenges. People are often distracted, don't activate their video, are multitasking, looking at their mobile phones and thus not really present.

The Antidote:

If you have a principle of "Respect, Listen and Care for each other", review your Working Together Principles and discuss what this means, now that we work together much more in virtual than in person. You might want to suggest that when working virtually, having the video function on is mandatory. If together in a conference room, it wouldn't be allowed to pull a paper bag over your head either. It also helps people to see expressions, allowing for increased empathy and taking care of each other.

Some of our clients also have a virtual coffee-corner hangout twice a day where every employee can check in. This seems to work well as the people who log in never know whom they will meet. By doing this, they are able to recover some of the spontaneous ad-hoc conversations.

Why it is effective

Fruitful and successful cooperation requires relationships based on strong principles. Common principles or rules help guide actions toward desired results. If we want to play a game together, we need to know the rules of the game. The same goes if we want to work together. They provide a sense of predictability and consistency for all, which creates an emotionally safe environment.

Challenge #4

Shift from reactive behaviors to authentic behaviors

There is no debating that the levels of stress and the number of working hours have increased for many. Finding a balance within an environment that is home but which has also become partly a work environment, has increased this experience of stress. The fear and uncertainty related to the pandemic adds to this. This impacts leadership behaviors and we will experience more reactive or distressed behaviors instead of creative or authentic behaviors. Reactive, distressed or unauthentic behavior creates mistrust and significantly reduces productivity in organizations.

Antidote:

Lean into a process of expanding more and more authenticity, work on self- and team-awareness, be reflective on self and team. Leaders need to “go inside” and learn to differentiate their authentic part from their ego- and sabotaging parts. Knowing both allows leaders to choose and shift back to their authentic essence. It is very powerful to do this together as an executive team. As we live in a world of diversity and people are different, they have different needs. It is extremely helpful to understand each other better and on a deeper level to experience the true sense of connection. This also holds true in a virtual world.

Why it is effective:

Authentic leaders are connected to their inner wisdom. From this place comes the ability to take the right decisions, which creates trust. The deeper a leader is connected to his or her authentic core, the more comfortable the leader will be with navigating through crisis and uncertainty. This authentic resilience, serenity and sovereign leadership is what employees need and ask for in today's world. The authentic leader must be available for his or her team at any time and the team members must feel accountable for their work while also feeling valued and appreciated for what they do and who they are.

Challenge #5

Shift from seeing the limitations of virtual leadership to seeing the opportunities, even if they are not conventional.

Mindsets are simply beliefs and important to investigate as they either limit or empower. What do we believe about leading virtually or hybrid? Do you, as a leader believe this will be at the cost of the culture? Do you believe you will lose touch with the people in the organization? What do you believe about virtual or hybrid leadership, really?

Antidote:

Do some mindset work. Investigate what you believe and how this steers your behaviors. Then ask yourself, what you need to believe for virtual or hybrid leadership to be successful. Share this mindset with your executive team. Make sure you are all aligned so that you can influence your organization with a shared and consciously chosen mindset.

Why it is effective:

How a leader thinks or what a leader believes directly affects his or her behaviors and outcomes, which makes mindset mastery at the C-Suite a vital force to look at. What you really want are interconnected mindsets. We call this a “Leadership Alliance Mindset”. Top Leadership Teams who are aligned around the mindset have a faster decision-making process and move faster.

Conclusion

Leading virtually is not primarily worrying about the virtual office, software and technology but about staying connected to the bigger picture and re-aligning what makes up and consolidates the culture in your organization. In our Leadership Alliance Culture Model, we work with five driving interdependent forces: a compelling vision, a shared purpose, working together principles, a leadership alliance mindset and leadership alliance behaviors. When these forces are not aligned, this impacts negatively the team cohesion and efficiency, the business results and the company culture. Leaders now have to care about their people and discover new ways of motivating their teams and keeping them aligned. (Nicole Heimann & Partners AG/mc/ps)

Nicole Heimann & Partners AG is a boutique advisory firm based in Zurich, focused on building strong and authentic leadership alliances at the top levels in organizations.