VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP

The challenges leaders aim to overcome

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 book 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.

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!

//Antoni Lacinai

Contact details at the end.

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PART 1. THE PROBLEMS WITH DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Analog communication and physical meetings are superior to digital communication and meetings. Five years of research have totally convinced me of this.

We are hardwired to sit around the campfire and meet people "in the flesh". The analog communication is richer and better. Period!

This chapter will outline the five main challenges of digital communication.

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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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Multitasking

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We create and read emails, chat or text messages while in a digital meeting. We also cook and eat food (or go to the bathroom). We do online shopping or gaming. Surveys show that people do all of those things when attending a digital meeting.

Not all the time. Not by all your people, but it does happen more often than you might know. Or actually you do know, since you yourself have done many of the things I just mentioned when you attend other colleagues' meetings…

We cannot do two cognitively advanced things at the same time. Forget it. The result will be poor. Multitasking doesn't work.

"Oh, but we are all grown-ups." an expert told me. "We can decide to listen with half an ear until it's something important."

"What a waste of time" is my response. (and what a poorly designed meetings)

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Reflect upon:

- Have you checked emails, texts or chat messages while in a digital meeting? Have you, yourself written messages?

- Why do you think that your team members should behave any differently?

- Do you know about each person's situation if they work from home? Do you know if they have small children that they need to attend to? Do you trust them to do their job when it suits them?

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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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"Zoom" fatigue

Why do you get so tired in a video meeting? Here is the reason: Your brain is constantly trying to figure out where people are in relation to you. Are they three meters away, or only half a meter? You need to know. It's a survival instinct. Your team members experience the same thing.

This cannot be done over a two-dimensional screen. We know this intellectually, but it doesn't help the brain that works overtime and hence make you tired. Of course, in a phone meeting with many people, we also get tired, trying to concentrate on what people say.

Our attention span is about 8 seconds (one second less than a goldfish). Our concentration span is around three minutes. Then we get bored or tired. And the digital meetings keep on coming…

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Reflect upon:

- Do you have meetings back-to-back with no time to breathe?

- Are your online meetings mainly for information, with little or no involvement?

- Or – do you make sure that there is air between meetings, as well as in the agenda? Do you take breaks if you have digital meetings longer than an hour?

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PART 2. THE ADVANTAGES OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

FINALLY, some good news!

I must admit, a few years ago when I started to research this area, I was skeptical. Not anymore.

I used to say that *"We don't have digital meetings instead of physical meetings. We have them instead of no meetings at all."* This is no longer the case. We are replacing loads of physical meetings nowadays and rightfully so.

There are quite a few advantages to meeting remotely and communicating online. We will go through six of them here (one more than we had on the problem side, so we tip the scale.)

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You save time

To and from the office.
To and from a client.
To and from other meetings.

We can save substantial amounts of
time if we stop travelling so much.

*I still remember traveling a full day to the US to attend a two-hour
meeting. Then I spent another day flying home. At the time I thought I
was cool. Now, I am almost too embarrassed to share this…*

Management teams that would meet every month at an airport will
perhaps do this every other month and meet each other digitally in
between those sessions.

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You save money

Flights
Trains
Fuel
Boats
Hotels
Conference facilities
…

During the soft lock-down in 2020, the Swedish government calculated almost **100 million Euros of savings in travel expenses alone.**

Sure, electricity costs something. Tech gear is not free of charge. But in comparison to the travel cost, it's what Swedes call a "piss in the river Nile". You get the idea, I am sure.

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You save the environment

Reducing the carbon footprint is a nice side effect for some of you.

But for many of you this is perhaps the single most important argument for digital communication.

Again, electricity doesn't come free of charge, even when considering CO_2 emissions, but it's nothing compared to the pollution we have in fossil fuel machines that transports us across cities and countries.

Employees who are heavy users of video meetings state that they are more aligned with the organization's sustainability goals.

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You are more productive

Even salespeople who love to meet their clients over a cup of coffee in the same room, have started to realize the upside of not traveling. They can now meet more clients or the same number of clients more often. It's not a bad trade off.

However - There is a downside to this that you as a leader should be aware of: If your staff work an additional two hours a day (one study from the US showed that home workers spent up to three more hours per day working because they're working during what's used to be their commuting time), you could potentially lose some great people to fatigue or burnout.

The same goes for you too, if you also work from home.

All in all, more can be done but be careful not "burn the candle at both ends".

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You get access to experts and talents

How likely is it that you get an expert or specialist to fly over to your meeting, for a quick 15-minute presentation, only to fly back home?
Not very.

By utilizing the digital possibilities, they are just a screen away. You can have your staff meeting, bring in the expert for those 15 minutes, thank her, and get on with your meeting. You don't even have to buy them lunch (although, that is normally a nice thing to do).
Companies are nowadays more and focused on hiring people for what they know, rather than from where they live. Things are happening and if you want to get talents coming to your company, you might want to think about that. Your competitors certainly are…

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You don't spread diseases

When I published the book Virtual meetings, back in 2016, this was not on the agenda at all.
Now, it is one of the most important benefits of digital communication.

Sure, there might be a computer virus or two trying to spread out, but we as people will be safe from diseases that are infecting people in close proximity from each other. We can be grateful that digital tools prevent us from severe illnesses.

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Bonus: Women get more power

A study showed that people care less about gender if the leader is "virtual". Women can assert themselves more easily in a digital context.

I personally am a bit appalled that physical height or whatever is still a criterion for management positions in the 21st century, but given that it is, I applaud women who can finally get some momentum going, by leading virtual teams.

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Reflect upon:

- Which of these advantages have the biggest impact on you and your team?

- Can you still find opportunities to meet face to face?

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PART 3. VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

Now, let's take a closer look at what the 500 virtual leaders said about their challenges. I have asked them mainly through menti.com where I asked them an open question with no pre-set options. Everything they said came from their own hearts and minds. This also means that if more than one person said the same thing, I give it more weight than if they clicked pre-selected choices.

For instance, when 8 people said that they really missed writing on the office whiteboards, it tells me that many more leaders feel the same, even if they didn't express it right then and there.

I'll start with external worries (about their people) and then present their internal worries (about themselves).

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WHEN YOU WORRY ABOUT THEM

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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Do they lack clarity around communication and information?

Working remotely, especially when working from home means that they can't just walk to a colleague and ask where they can find this or that*.

They can't just walk up to you and ask if you could clarify what you meant with your last email. This is unproductive and stressful.

What if you don't have well thought-through digital communication channels and easy-to-access information storage, so that everyone knows where to go when they need information or when to bounce ideas with someone? The risk is that we add more and more meetings to our already busy schedule. Not good.

*Whatever you do, don't say that it is on the server, or the intranet, or the cloud…

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Are they productive?

If you are a project leader or a line manager, much of your job is about removing obstacles and barriers, enabling your team to get the job done without too much trouble. You sharpen their digital machetes so that they can chop their way through the digital jungle.

Many of the virtual leaders worry about their team's productivity, and whether things are running smoothly. Technology is a fantastic enabler – when it works.

In spite all tech problems, only about 10 % explicitly raised concerns over this area. Still, out of 1000 answers, about 100 chose to address this issue, so it's not insignificant.

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Reflect upon:

- Have you agreed upon which communication channels you will use, how they should be used etc.? (with "agreed" I mean: did you involve the team in the decisions?)

- Do you have an easy-to-find-information structure in place?

- How can you make sure that each team member gets the relevant info that they need?

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WHEN YOU WORRY ABOUT YOURSELF

The virtual leaders' worries are mostly spent on their crew and they go out of their way trying to help them.

But then there are those who express concerns over their own capabilities as well.

They have realized that they need to put on their oxygen mask first, in order to better help their people.

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Do you lack 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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Are your digital meetings good enough?

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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How about your own engagement?

Just like the previous challenge about digital meetings, not that many leaders are directly saying that they too get tired, lose motivation and engagement, feel isolated and alone, having trouble with a proper workspace when working from home etc.

But it's there if you scratch the surface, at least to some extent. Perhaps not as much as their employees though. I assume it is because leaders feel good about their position and possibility to influence people, directions and processes.

Remember to put your own oxygen mask on as well.

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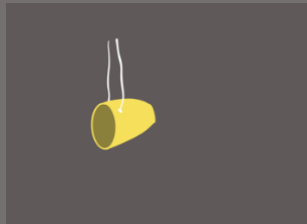
Reflect upon:

- Do you have a supporting boss?

- How can you recharge your own energy?

- Do you get enough rest?

- Can you delegate some of the tasks you do, that you really should leave to your team anyway, or because it will make them grow?

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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!
//Antoni Lacinai

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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

Email me on antoni@lacinai.com if you want the following cheat-sheets free of charge:

- 33 tips on how to present online
- 25 memory hooks so your audience remember
- 5 tips for a better workshop
- 7 difficult behaviors in a meeting and how to handle them
- 7 steps on how to deliver bad news

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

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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 about the concepts of

- The Holistic Communication Model:
  Communication > Motivation > Performance > Results
- The 3-step process of leadership communication:
  Engage > Energize > Execute
- The Effect-formula
  Effect = Efficiency x Energy
- The three superpowers of communication:
  Energy, Empathy and Clarity
- HAPPY goals – when you want to peak perform
- The simplest motivation formula on the planet.
  Motivation = Goals – Resistance.
- The Communication Culture Elevator. Where are you?
  Basement (-1), Entry level (1), 2nd floor, Top floor.

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