

The art of long distance LEADING

How to lead in a virtual environment

A major change is affecting the way people work and it has happened almost overnight. The move is on from same-time, same-space working to virtual working, and it is challenging our assumptions about the nature of work and how leaders need to lead in order to get things done. From home-working to off-shoring to regionalisation and now globalisation, business leaders are faced with the task of raising performance through people whom they rarely meet, and hollow slogans such as 'work smarter, not harder' provide little insight into what they should actually do. We are struggling with a profound – some say maddening – paradox: as technology expands to increase the number of options for keeping people connected, our organisational strategies and structures are driving people apart.

At The Chaos Game, we work with time-and-distance strapped leaders in complex organisations to enable them to develop the skills they need to lead others in this new world. We believe that there are five key skill areas which are important to all leaders but are essential in virtual environments.

Creating Strategic Purpose. Your primary focus as a distance leader, with staff in different places and perhaps in different time zones, is not the day-to-day business of getting things done. It is neither possible nor appropriate for this to be so. Your focus should, instead, be on guiding your organisation into the future.

As coaches and educators, therefore, our first task is to help our clients to map their 'system', paying particular attention to the external forces that are acting upon it. When they are clear about the nature of this system, they are able to create their leadership agenda, their strategy for moving their part of the business forward. This will, necessarily, involve delegating much of the responsibility for 'doing' to subordinates. For some leaders, this may raise issues of control, or of trust, or of self-doubt and so on – but being able to 'let go' is an essential aspect of distance leadership.

Demonstrating Courage. In the new environment when you are leading into the unknown, and, as is often the case, leading when you are not sure, it is essential that you have a good understanding of who you are as a leader. To that end, we help our clients to identify their strengths, those capacities that represent the platform for their leadership. They may, for example, be visionary thinkers, or they may inspire great followership or they may be able to energise people to overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers to success. We also help them to identify their weaknesses so that they can make informed and realistic choices about how to be more effective. In some instances this may involve refocusing their personal development effort; in others it may involve helping them to manage around their weaknesses.

We all have strengths, we all have weaknesses, and we all have fears,

too: we may fear conflict, we may fear failure, we may even fear being fired. And our fears are magnified, of course, when we are leading across distance, when we have even less control over what is happening than we had in traditionally designed organisations, and when there are fewer people available to us to help us work through these fears.

So, as skilled executive coaches, we help our clients to develop a deep understanding of themselves: when they can lead from their strengths, when they can address or manage around their weaknesses, when they can combat their natural fears, they can take the courageous decisions that are often required to lead their virtual organisations into the future.

Creating Ownership. In the new environment, where you cannot oversee the people who work for you, it is essential that you create alignment (so that everyone knows what is expected of them) and that you invest in your relationships (because nobody will put your requests to the top of their 'to do' list if you fail to demonstrate your commitment to them). Meantime, it is also essential that everyone in the team delivers on the performance promises that they make. This requires excellent engagement skills on your part and, as practice does, indeed, make better if not perfect, our favoured approach is to use a range of experiential learning methods to help our clients to communicate a compelling vision of the future, to co-create a change plan, to listen to understand, and to develop more open, trust-based relationships of challenge and support. There really is no alternative to 'practising it for real'!

Executing Across Boundaries. One of the great opportunities for everyone working in the global world is to recognise, value and draw upon the differences that are inevitably present in all geographically dispersed groups of people. It makes good business sense for you to foster this awareness. It is also, of course, the right thing to do. So we help our clients to understand the social and cultural imprints that have shaped their view of work and leadership behaviour, in order to increase their capacity to promote more meaningful 'contact' amongst and between those who work in their organisations.

Distance leadership is a human not a technical endeavour: technology enables but leaders, through their actions, make the difference.



Virtual leadership requires new skills, then, but it also requires the new application of old skills. The ability to communicate, coach and manage under-performance are in the standard kit bag of any organisational leader but you need to be aware that old ways of performing these essential activities are unlikely to be serviceable in the new, virtual world. So you need to learn how to communicate across cultures, you need to coach using non-directive methods and you need to be able to conduct difficult conversations (which are, by definition, never easy) without the advantage of being face-to-face. We work with our clients to refresh their repertoire of these basic skills – and, again, we favour an experiential approach to this kind of learning.

Influencing Upwards and Outwards: All organisations are political environments. This is the reality of organisational life – it was ever thus but now, in more networked environments which are more complex and less hierarchical, it is essential that you develop sophisticated strategies for influencing those who lead you and those who do not work for you. Your default approach will be helpful to you in certain situations but it is unlikely to be sufficient in all. By helping leaders to develop a wider range of influencing strategies, we prime them to be more effective in a wider range of business scenarios.

In summary: Distance leadership is frontier stuff. Leaders and educators alike are still trying to understand the challenges of the globalised world and to develop solutions to them. But what is already clear is that we do need to lead differently if we want to succeed. In the words of Fisher and Fisher, authors of *The Distance Manager*, "...the distance managers who do it well offer a tremendous competitive advantage to the operations they lead. Those who do not may watch the unravelling of both their organisations and their careers".

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OUR OFFERING

At The Chaos Game, we offer one-on-one executive coaching to distance leaders. In association with The NTL Institute for Applied Behavioural Science, we also offer two formal development programmes:

Leading Across Distance™: a five day programme (integrated with one-on-one professional coaching sessions) which addresses the five themes identified in this article – creating strategic purpose, demonstrating courage, creating ownership, executing across boundaries, and influencing upwards and outwards. The programme leaders are Dr Richard C Harris, former Managing Director (Great Britain) and Head of Global Research for The Forum Corporation, and Kate Cowie, a Member of The NTL Institute and Director of The Chaos Game.

ntglobalab™: a four day intensive group technology which enables leaders from different cultural, social and business contexts to develop understanding, attitudes and behaviours that support meaningful and powerful relationships across their differences. The programme leaders are Dr Fred Massarik, Professor at The Anderson School, UCLA, Dr Ted Tschudy, NTL Member and former NTL Board Chair, and Kate Cowie

The Chaos Game is a network of international consultants who specialise in the design and delivery of innovative, business-driven and research-led leadership development programmes, in association with The NTL Institute for Applied Behavioural Science.

The NTL Institute for Applied Behavioural Science has been the premier source of experiential learning since it was founded in 1947. It has a well-deserved reputation for creating compelling learning opportunities which fully engage participants and bring theory to life. Since NTL first began its work, its member trainers have shown more than 100 000 people how to be more effective in their professional and personal lives.

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