

The Future of Team Leadership Is Multimodal

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The pandemic has accelerated a pre-COVID-19 shift in how individuals and teams do intellectual work. Companies have learned that routine tasks involving transactions and coordination can be done purely virtually, while work requiring true team collaboration (collective learning, innovation, building a shared culture) is still best done face to face. We envision that the post-pandemic future of teamwork will be a purposeful hybrid combination of virtual coordination and in-person collaboration.

Effective leadership in this new hybrid world requires different skills that go beyond traditional team leadership. Specifically, organizations will need leaders who can operate well across two distinct modes. For much of the time, they will operate in *virtual coordination mode*. This means establishing goals, monitoring progress, driving information sharing, and sustaining connections among colleagues working remotely. When their teams periodically come

together to engage in true collaboration, leaders will need to operate in *face-to-face collaboration mode*, fostering deep learning, innovation, acculturation, and dedication.

The nature and mix of team tasks will dictate the modes in which those teams operate. Tasks that involve working interdependently but without much integration — reporting, performing administrative tasks, making simple decisions, sharing information, drafting documents, and performing financial analyses — will mostly be done virtually. Likewise, our research and experience have shown that most one-on-one interactions, including some coaching, between leaders and their reports can be accomplished effectively through virtual means.

However, essential tasks that require team members to integrate their knowledge, create safe spaces for dialogue on difficult issues, and form emotional connections cannot be done productively while working virtually. For example, team efforts to achieve breakthrough innovation, solve complex problems, build culture, and manage conflicts are still performed much more effectively in person, given the current limitations of technology. (See “The Future of Work Survey” for more about the research.)

These complex tasks are challenging to perform virtually because they involve four dimensions of impact that are better served through in-person interactions:

- **Collaboration**, which is not just about content collaboration and coordination but also building a shared

understanding, relationships, and trust.

- **Innovation**, which requires brainstorming, knowledge integration, and shared learning, for which trust and time together in a nonstressful environment are essential.
- **Acculturation**, which requires extended periods of face-to-face connection to develop mutual understanding, reinforce norms, and build a shared identity.
- **Dedication**, which comes from having a shared sense of purpose, feeling like part of a community, and having opportunities to grow professionally.

The implications for the future of leadership are profound. The multimodal workplace is changing the types of skills required to lead teams virtually and in person successfully. In particular, there are four roles that leaders will need to play as they adapt to managing a hybrid workforce. Their relative importance will depend on the extent of team coordination and integration.

Conductor. A mostly virtual team leadership role, the Conductor ensures that plans, decisions, information, and accomplishments are shared to coordinate and motivate team members. The role is akin to that of an orchestra director, who ensures that musicians play well individually and in harmony. In the Conductor role, leaders manage goal setting, simple planning, decision-making, work coordination, and progress tracking while sustaining connection, trust, and engagement with team members.

For success in this role, leaders must strike the right balance between demonstrating genuine care and engagement and micromanaging, which saps morale. The pandemic has highlighted how exhausting endless video calls are, requiring Conductors to be highly efficient and engaging in their orchestration of virtual team time.

Catalyst. When meeting in person, the Catalyst stimulates collaboration, spurs creativity and innovation, creates a shared culture, and fosters dedication. To accomplish this, these leaders must build trust and create an environment of psychological safety. Doing so allows them to facilitate in-depth dialogue and encourage creative conflict — but

not harmful personality clashes — when sharing ideas. We use the term *catalyst* to indicate that the focus here is on enabling others to shine and facilitating collaboration processes.

Coach. When working one-on-one with their reports virtually or in person, leaders need to play the role of Coach. This means focusing on helping their people achieve peak performance while building trust and focusing on their well-being and professional development. Playing this role effectively requires a high degree of emotional intelligence and the ability to establish a balance between showing empathy and encouraging people to push beyond their boundaries. When done well, coaching can enhance connections, as well as engagement and productivity.

Champion. Whereas the Conductor, Catalyst, and Coach roles involve managing individuals and teams who report directly to a particular leader, the Champion role requires leaders to advocate externally for their teams. It requires leaders to secure team resources, tap into essential information sources, communicate accomplishments, and build trust with peers and other key stakeholders both in person and virtually. The Champion role, therefore, requires skills in negotiating, influencing without formal authority, and building alliances.

A central theme linking all four roles is the need for leaders to build and sustain connections and trust. Many companies did not embrace remote work before the pandemic because they lacked trust in their employees to be productive at home. At the same time, there were concerns about managers' ability to monitor performance. However, building and sustaining trust is essential to multimodal leadership, especially when the team is operating virtually.

Fostering trust shows up in each of the 4-C roles in distinct ways. In the Conductor role, leaders encourage trust by sharing achievements so that everyone knows their colleagues are contributing to the team's success. In the virtual world, we are often suspicious that peers are slacking off, and emotions can run high in a crisis. Another way to strengthen trust is to personally check in with your team members to see how they are coping, how their work is progressing, and what help they might need. This is one of the central themes of emotional intelligence, and it can also

strengthen team spirit. Checking in at the individual level is also an essential element of the Coach role.

These trust-building methods work well online, but when teams come together in person, leaders will want to channel the Catalyst role, where trust plays an essential role in spurring innovation and creativity. After all, people need to feel safe to experiment and share moonshot ideas without fear of being judged. Therefore, the Catalyst role requires leaders to create healthy, safe bonds with teams by playing more of an enabling rather than a directive role. This requires managers to balance confidence with an appropriate degree of humility and social awareness.

For example, when we work with teams of leaders at IMD, we often have executives share some of the highs and lows in their lives, creating connection and trust through the experience of shared vulnerability. It brings people closer together and opens up the possibility for greater collaboration. But we have found that sharing personal issues is not something all participants would feel comfortable doing on a Zoom call. Creating a trusting environment is critical to the roles of both Coach and Catalyst, along with emotional intelligence that can be honed through working on one's self-awareness, self-care, social awareness, and relationship management.

The higher up in an organization you rise, the more critical the Champion role becomes. The matrix organizational structures of many companies require leaders to rely on organizational influence rather than authority to obtain the necessary resources for teams and contribute in a

meaningful way to the company's overall goals. In the Champion role, we build trust with our peers by showing interest in their aspirations and by putting organizational goals ahead of our own team's objectives.

Leaders need to recognize that they might need help themselves to provide support to their teams as they play these four roles. Most leaders are already proficient in the Conductor role because it requires many traditional management and leadership skills, such as monitoring, delegating, decision-making, and motivating. In contrast, the Catalyst and Coach roles need different sets of skills and attitudes. Here we think especially of facilitation skills, emotional intelligence, and humility.

To be successful in this new era, team leaders must learn to adapt the four roles of multimodal leadership: Conductor, Catalyst, Coach, and Champion. These four roles provide a framework for leadership effectiveness in the post-pandemic world of work.

About The Authors

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The Future of Work Survey

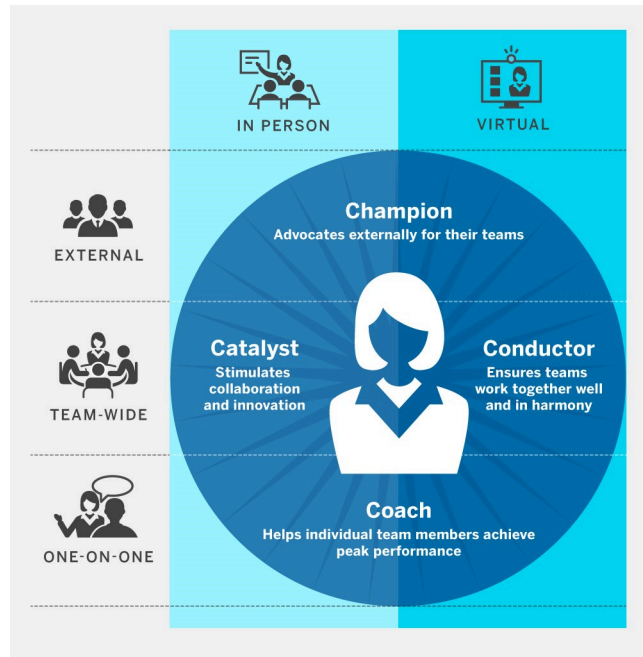
We surveyed 40 executives globally in November 2020 and found that three-quarters of them were working virtually for at least 60% of the time and two-thirds more than 80% of the time. They expected to continue working at least 50% virtually beyond the pandemic, suggesting that COVID-19 has driven a permanent shift in how we work.

When asked what work can be done effectively virtually, 45% of respondents mentioned transactional team activities such as reporting, giving updates, performing administrative tasks, and making simple decisions; 25% pointed to participating in one-to-one meetings and having similar types of interactions, such as interviews and one-on-one coaching.

In a related question about which work cannot be done effectively by virtual means, 40% mentioned integrative work in teams, including innovating, making strategic decisions, or solving complex problems. Additionally, 15% pointed to building relationships and networking, while 13% identified negotiating and having difficult conversations.

Multimodal Leadership Roles

The amount of time team leaders work with their teams in the virtual Conductor role as opposed to in-person Catalyst will depend on the extent to which the team's work requires the integration of members' knowledge and perspectives. The greater the interdependence, the more time the leader will have to act as Catalyst. The extent to which leaders will do coaching in person likely will depend on proximity.





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