

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

LEADERSHIP IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19 – SOME REAL-TIME REFLECTIONS FROM MANAGERS

INTERVIEWS REVEAL WHAT CHALLENGES 34
SWEDISH MANAGERS FACED WHEN THEIR
SITUATION SUDDENLY CHANGED



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When the crisis of COVID-19 hit Sweden in late February and early March, large parts of society had to adjust in order to protect people from getting infected, and flatten the curve of infection. Those who could were encouraged to work from home and travel was reduced to a minimum, if not banned entirely. From one day to the next, leaders and managers found themselves in a situation where new challenging demands made existing organizational practices obsolete and expectations of clear leadership became more pressing than ever.

Based on a series of interviews with 34 managers in different industries, carried out from the end of March to the end of June 2020, we are now able to present some real-time reflections on what happens to organizational work and leadership in times of radical change. Guiding questions were: What are the major challenges for leadership? What does radical change do to leaders' self-perception? What kind of leadership practice is evolving when remote work becomes the new normal?

Findings clearly show that in times of radical change, reorganizing work, reinventing organizational practices and upgrading leadership have to take place simultaneously. Still it is possible to identify phases in change behavior and leadership practices. While the overall crisis caused by COVID-19 created a strong need for reorganizing work and contextually driven contingency plans, remote work paved the way for promoting new leadership practices. Collective leadership models were put to the test, and for some organizations, this resulted in encouraging results.

From intense crisis management to managing remote work

In the initial phase, most managers focused on three things. Firstly, preventing employees from getting sick and thereby contributing to flatten the national infection transmission curve took place. Efforts were taken to coordinate safety measures and install crisis management

teams to provide accurate and updated information regarding new regulations and routines. Secondly, reorganizing work to meet the requirements of remote work, and making sure that everyone had the equipment needed to work remote occurred. Digital platforms were put to use to a wider extent than ever before. While some organizations already had a high digital maturity, others had to work hard to adapt to the new circumstances. Either way, digitalization took a big leap because everyone connected and developed working routines that fit with overall requests. Thirdly, managers spent a lot of time developing contingency plans and different scenarios. Within a few weeks, a massive amount of information gathering, status reports and activity plans were produced. Changes that used to take up to a year or more to implement were up and running within a few weeks. Initially, the majority of managers believed that the extreme situation would be over, or at least subside by summer.

In the second phase, the initial crisis management had slowed down. At this point in time, the number of meetings had been reduced from everyday meetings to meetings two to three times a week. New procedures and routines were in place and managers found themselves in a "new normal". A surprising number of managers indicated that the digital transformation of work life was working well. Employees had picked up on Skype, Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Everybody seemed to understand how to use the mute/unmute button and also saw the value of having the camera on. There was also a growing understanding that the situation would not soon be over. Many managers realized that this was only the end of the beginning of a bigger crisis that would probably not end before 2021. The workload, despite these new routines, was still extreme for many managers.

However, in several parts of Sweden, managers had prepared their staff and their organization for a virus attack. But the virus did not spread to those areas. Was it because of all the cautionary measures taken or were there other explanations? No one seemed to know, but in the meantime, everybody kept following the recommendations

provided by the Public Health Agency and the government. The main challenge now was to keep up the good work and make sure that the willingness to comply with regulations didn't fade away. "It is about holding on and not getting sloppy".

After four months of rather extreme conditions and hard work, a third phase was identified. The "new normal" was more or less accepted, but managers saw signs of exhaustion and mental illness among employees. They also expressed that they were getting bored themselves. Even though work was productive and efficient, socializing with colleagues and co-workers was reduced to a minimum. In some industries, managers noticed that employees were already starting to turn up at work. In other sectors, managers expressed worries about peoples' willingness to get back to work.

Major challenges for leadership

In the early phase of the crisis, management teams had meetings every day, sometimes all day. As digital meetings were the prime channel for communication and interaction, the number of meetings was numerous. This new way of working puts a lot of pressure on managers. Many managers found themselves in back-to-back meetings from early morning to late afternoon. Some managers held meetings from 6 am to 10 pm. The notes, preparations and other work had to be done before or after the meeting sessions.

Not only did managers have to lead remotely using virtual distance tools, they also oversaw people who were scattered in different working environments. Informal talks did not flow easily in the beginning, and the lack of physical interactions and absence of social chitchatting was disturbingly missed. Worries and challenges of different kinds surfaced; the quest for information was never-ending, some employees demanded to work from home, while others started to show signs of depression from working remotely.

After a number of weeks, the meetings became shorter and more to the point. The negative side of this was that the informal communica-

tion was played down even more. Soon virtual group meetings had to be complemented with individual talks and individual follow-ups.

When the most intense period of crisis management had slowed down, managers took on new roles and had to build relations and trust digitally with executive management teams and co-workers. This was a totally new experience for most managers. Some managers were thriving in the new normal. "We get things done without bureaucracy". Others had a harder time to adjust: "So many meetings... I don't see this working mode as a sustainable solution. It takes a lot of effort and endurance. It is exhausting and people need time to recover."

Later, a new challenge was surfacing concerning how to keep the process of innovation and continue improvement. Virtual communication seemingly worked well for updates and weekly check-offs, while worker engagement around strategy development and innovation was harder to implement.

Changes in leaders' self-perception

Many managers testified about the excitement of taking on a new challenge and pride in getting the work done: "We actually managed to do this transformation and do it successfully in a very short time. We are able to do things we didn't know we could!"

What previously was only a trend for many managers now turned into a viable strategy on sustainable and flexible work modes. And some of them managed to take the strategy to the next level, thus aligning organizational practices with personal values: "I am leading a project to work out a backbone plan for how we can work from home and travel in 2021, with local adjustments in every country. What used to be a trend is now a reality, and what we need now is a though structure for flexibility and better ways of working sustainably."

How to build trust in a digital setting was a topic of great concern for many managers. The everyday coaching and informal talks had to be replaced by other means. For managers, taking on new roles was framed as the most difficult part of being a leader: "I am the new one in the

equation. Taking on a leading position, I was dreading having to get to know everyone virtually, to build relations, to get some understanding of what we are supposed to do, to understand their perspective etc. I didn't think it was going to work. But it has worked out remarkably well! I had to challenge myself and take risks in trusting people.”

Evolving leadership practices

New circumstances generate new demands for leadership. In situations of radical change, leaders have to develop and implement new practices simultaneously. The issue of trust, and trust building is at the core of leadership, and working remotely truly challenged managers' ideas of how to build trust. As shown by previous research, tacit communication does not transmit well in virtual meetings (1). Managers, in this study, repeatedly indicated this observation. In addition to that, and perhaps more important, is the loss of informal interactions and the social chitchatting in everyday work. While flat, non-hierarchical organizations are particularly sensitive to everyday interaction, this loss was a common experience among the managers.

Previous research also indicates that discussions, lobbying and decision-making to a major extent takes place in informal talks (2). Take those occasions away and leaders have to find new ways of practicing leadership. Evidence from this study suggests that managers can be quite successful in constructing new practices and put them to work. The use of virtual meetings works surprisingly well in running a business as usual, but strategic work and processes for innovation did not meet expectations.

In general, managers seemed to struggle with their own role and their view of leadership. On the one hand, they wanted to encourage co-workers to be independent, to take initiatives and to be self-motivated, and on the other hand, they seemed to suffer from not having a live overview of situations and the ability to read people in on-line conversations.

Trust-building through activities on-line was crucial, and trial and

error eventually paved the way for some progress. Since most managers have not yet developed a holistic view on what virtual leadership entails there is still a gap to fill.

In the initial phase of the crisis, most managers slipped into a more hierarchical way of organizing work relationships. Time and energy was put into producing new processes and routines for communicating and interacting. In a later phase, where initial crisis management slowed down and the new normal was established, managers expressed disappointment over inactivity and decreasing motivation among coworkers. The shift from a more traditional view on leadership to a more collective and agile view of leadership can be discerned (3), though many managers struggled with how to create a common understanding of what needed to be done and their own feeling of losing a grip.

Already before the COVID-19 crisis, there was a tendency for managers to struggle with their workload, separating their work from private life and building routines for being sustainable for themselves and their organization was difficult. These challenges seem to be intensified during the crisis. For some managers, this meant spending more time with family, while others felt that working from home put extra pressure on the family and especially the kids who had to tiptoe around the home in order not to disturb on-line meetings. However, the time saved from not commuting to work and no business travelling seemed to transform into new work habits rather than allowing more time to re-energize.

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