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When teleworking questions the meaning of work: Managerial lessons from the Covid-19 crisis

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Abstract

As lockdown exit begins cautiously, as companies reopen their doors and as employees prepare mentally to return physically to their workspaces, it is time to draw the first lessons of this unprecedented crisis from a managerial point of view. In this article, I propose to consider the crisis as an accelerator of managerial transformations¹, and as an opportunity to reinvent management in the post-industrial era.

Keywords: Telework, Remote management, Work transformation

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¹ Dejoux C., Léon E. (2018). Métamorphose des managers à l'ère du numérique et de l'intelligence artificielle, Pearson

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We have learned through this crisis to work and manage differently. So be it. But this involuntary learning has been done in a hurry, under stress and sometimes even painfully. Such a drastic change in our work habits could only be made under duress. This is a far cry from the progressive teleworking projects, with pilots, feedback, etc., which have been implemented in the past. Besides, can we really talk about teleworking? In a matter of days, employees who were able to do so, found themselves pursuing their professional activity at a distance, confined to their homes, installed as best they could in unsuitable workspaces (dining room table, sofa, kitchen counter), equipped or not with tools enabling them to work at a distance, and surrounded by their families living in the same situation. Overnight, a new segmentation between professional and private life had to be invented. In less than 24 hours, we all became experts in remote work and management...

The primacy of managerial maturity

The crisis has highlighted a key element in the digital transformation of organizations: it is less a question of tools, however sophisticated they may be, than a state of mind. Of course, a minimum level of equipment and connection is required to function properly at a distance! However, a company's digital maturity is measured first and foremost by its ability and willingness to experiment with new, more open, more horizontal ways of working. The last few weeks have made it possible to clearly distinguish between digital maturity (at company level) and managerial maturity. Faced with a sudden, brutal and full-time shift to remote work, it is first and foremost managerial intelligence and maturity that we need.

I propose to distinguish here three postures adopted by remote managers: the first concerns those managers who have tried, against all odds, to do "the same at a distance", the second refers to those who have not been able to cope with the distance component in managing their collaborators, and the third relates to those who have been able to successfully adapt to the situation.

Managing with blinkers

Our first manager is the one who has tried, whatever the cost, to continue practicing his or her activity in the same way as in a face-to-face environment. One concern: to conceal geographic distance. Let's take the example of managers who are used to spending their lives in meetings, and have continued to do so, at a distance. It didn't take them long to realize that face-to-face and distance meetings are significantly different. Remote meetings require more concentration², as it is much more difficult (and sometimes impossible) to decode the non-verbal communication of the participants. It is also more tiring because you are online all the time, without any breaks. It provokes anxiety because everyone is constantly confronted with his or her own image as it is displayed on the screens of their managers, colleagues or co-workers. And this anxiety is accentuated by the fact that, in these difficult times, family interruptions are frequent and difficult to control, especially for people with young children at home. Nevertheless, the manager who does not want to

² <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting>

change will continue to maintain the same rhythm of meetings, will generously allow 45 minutes for the lunch break, and will only see distance as a constraint, without ever seizing the opportunities that it may bring. Finally, in this case, proximity appears to be a lost paradise.

Managing in anguish

The second case is that of the anxious manager, because even though teams can exist without a manager, can a manager exist without his or her teams? From this point of view, remote management creates anxiety, and this is one of the reasons why it has been so hard to implement teleworking in France. In order to manage distance as well as possible, and to maintain his/her legitimacy as a leader, this manager will amplify "micro-management" behaviors, wanting to know about everything that's going on, as well as trying to control all the interactions. The explosion of remote surveillance software in the United States is a perfect illustration of this. Some software can take a photo of the employee and his or her computer screen at regular intervals to check that he or she is "working"³.

For some managers, distance generates an almost pathological need for reporting. And if remote employees understand that, they will try to quell this anxiety by informing their managers of everything that is going on, by copying them in on all their emails, by calling them all the time... If the managers feel burned out, they will only have themselves to blame! This category includes managers who have not understood that attendance time is only an indicator of... presence, and not of the work actually done. These are the same managers who will insist that the team meeting should take place every morning between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m., and will also expect a review every evening. This, of course, at the precise time at which the employment contract gives the employee the right to log off. Have they understood and heard the needs and expectations of their employees during this complicated period? This is certainly a legitimate question.

Managing in a different way

The third case is that of the progressive manager, who quickly understood that lockdown required new working methods and who decided to take advantage of this unusual period to progress and develop his or her teams. This manager has abandoned all forms of supervision of the team's working hours. When working from a distance, management by objectives must take precedence. However, this means being able to clearly define these objectives and monitor them over time. You also have to learn to trust. This is the key word in a long-distance relationship, whether professional or personal. Unfortunately, it is often an empty word, sometimes used to make managers feel guilty for not delegating enough. But trust does not exclude control! It seems useful at this stage to distinguish two types of trust: trust in skills, and interpersonal trust. You can trust an employee's skills, which means that you have confidence in his/her ability to keep his/her professional commitments... while knowing that he/she will be the first to divulge information that you consider confidential. You can also have complete trust in a person's discretion... and judge them to be totally incompetent for the tasks at hand. The semantic confusion that reigns around the theme of trust is not conducive to effective distance management.

³ <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/4/2/21195584/coronavirus-remote-work-from-home-employee-monitoring>

In a typical teleworking situation, confidence in professional skills is the most valued, as it will be the key to achieving results. In fact, classic leadership grids have long since taught us that delegation works if - and only if - the employee demonstrates real professional autonomy. But, once again, we are not living in a classic teleworking situation! In the case of the lockdown, it is first and foremost the manager's ability to maintain or create a relationship of interpersonal trust that will have made the difference. Caring managers, who listen to the needs of their teams and the individuals within them, and who are able to organize work not only according to their own constraints but also those of their employees, are the ones who will have been the most appreciated during this difficult period. In a way, the crisis will have highlighted the interest of "servant leadership"⁴, a leadership at the service of one's community and one's team.

Management in the post-industrial era

What if Covid-19 could be construed as a rapidly-induced learning opportunity, to adopt a management style in line with the changes that are happening in the world?

The end of the industrial era?

For a long time, work has been assimilated to time spent in a place. This logic, inherited from the industrial era, was imposed when presence was synonymous with production, as in the case of assembly line work. *Call centers* are typical modern illustrations of this type of logic since all activity is both measurable and measured. But the world has changed. We live in a time when working no longer means being in a dedicated space-time all the time, especially for those *knowledge workers* who manipulate above all symbols, to use Robert Reich's expression⁵, and not objects.

That being said, this industrial logic still carries a lot of weight in the current representations of work⁶. The reluctance to allow employees to work remotely is evidence of this. While a study by the Concorde foundation considered that 26% of French employees were eligible for part-time teleworking⁷, according to INSEE (France's national statistics institute), only 3% of them were regularly teleworking in 2017⁸. Research conducted in the United States by Elsbach, Cable and Sherman sheds⁹ new light on this issue. In this study, the authors show that physical presence in the workplace is perceived as a sign of reliability and being present beyond working hours as a sign of commitment. It is therefore not a uniquely French prism, contrary to what we often hear!

An opportunity to reexamine our certainties

Over the past few weeks, we have come to understand that working remotely is not the same as working face-to-face. Distance is an indicator of managerial shortcomings. It does not tolerate improvisation. As far as managers are concerned, it is no longer their charisma that is at work, but the availability and responsiveness they show towards the demands of

⁴ Van Dierendonck D. (2010), *Servant Leadership: A Review and Synthesis*, *Journal of Management*

⁵ Reich R. (1997), *L'économie mondialisée*, Dunod

⁶ Galambaud (2014), *Réinventer le management des ressources humaines*, Editions Liaisons

⁷ <https://www.fondationconcorde.com/etudes/accompagner-la-mise-en-place-du-teletravail/>

⁸ <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4238573?sommaire=4238635>

⁹ Elsbach K.D., Cable D.M., Sherman J.W. (2010). How passive "face time" affects perceptions of employees: Evidence of spontaneous trait inference, *Human Relations*, 63(6), 735-760

their employees. An organized, reactive manager, attentive to others, listening to the needs of his /her teams will be more valuable from a distance than a charismatic leader. Remote meetings are proof of this. In a face-to-face environment, the late arrival of some people attending a meeting allows those present to have informal exchanges. In a virtual meeting, waiting several minutes for the remote connection of those who are late irritates those who are "on time". While many meetings in person are held with an agenda that is approximate to say the least, a remote meeting requires a precise schedule, dedicated speaking time, and advance preparation of those who are going to speak (and therefore need to know that they are going to do so). While many people, when in face-to-face environments, wonder why they are in the meeting and who subsequently spend part of their time managing their emails, the remote meeting - in video format - deprives them of any freedom to do anything else. Therefore, managers need to make sure that everyone who is there... really needs to be there.

Are we now going to see a new business model emerge where teleworking is the norm and office presence the exception? PSA's latest announcements¹⁰ are pointing in this direction. However, we will have to be all the more attentive to what happens when we are close to each other. Coming to the office today is like taking a risk. If we have to take that risk, what happens in the office has to be worth it. So, we're going to have to be particularly vigilant about all the things that a context of proximity takes for granted: non-verbal communication, socialization, informal exchanges, sharing of tacit knowledge, to name a few. It is now time to reflect in depth on the working methods implemented at a distance, on the modes of communication used, on the standards of behavior to be adopted both face-to-face and at a distance. We have learned to work, and to be effective through teleworking. But we are only at the beginning of the learning process...

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¹⁰ <https://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/automobile/psa-fait-du-teletravail-la-regle-pas-lexception-1201054>