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THE FUTURE OF THE OFFICE
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LEAD WITH EMPATHY
Mimi Nicklin

COVID-19 UNLOCKING NEW WORK PARADIGMS





The future of the office

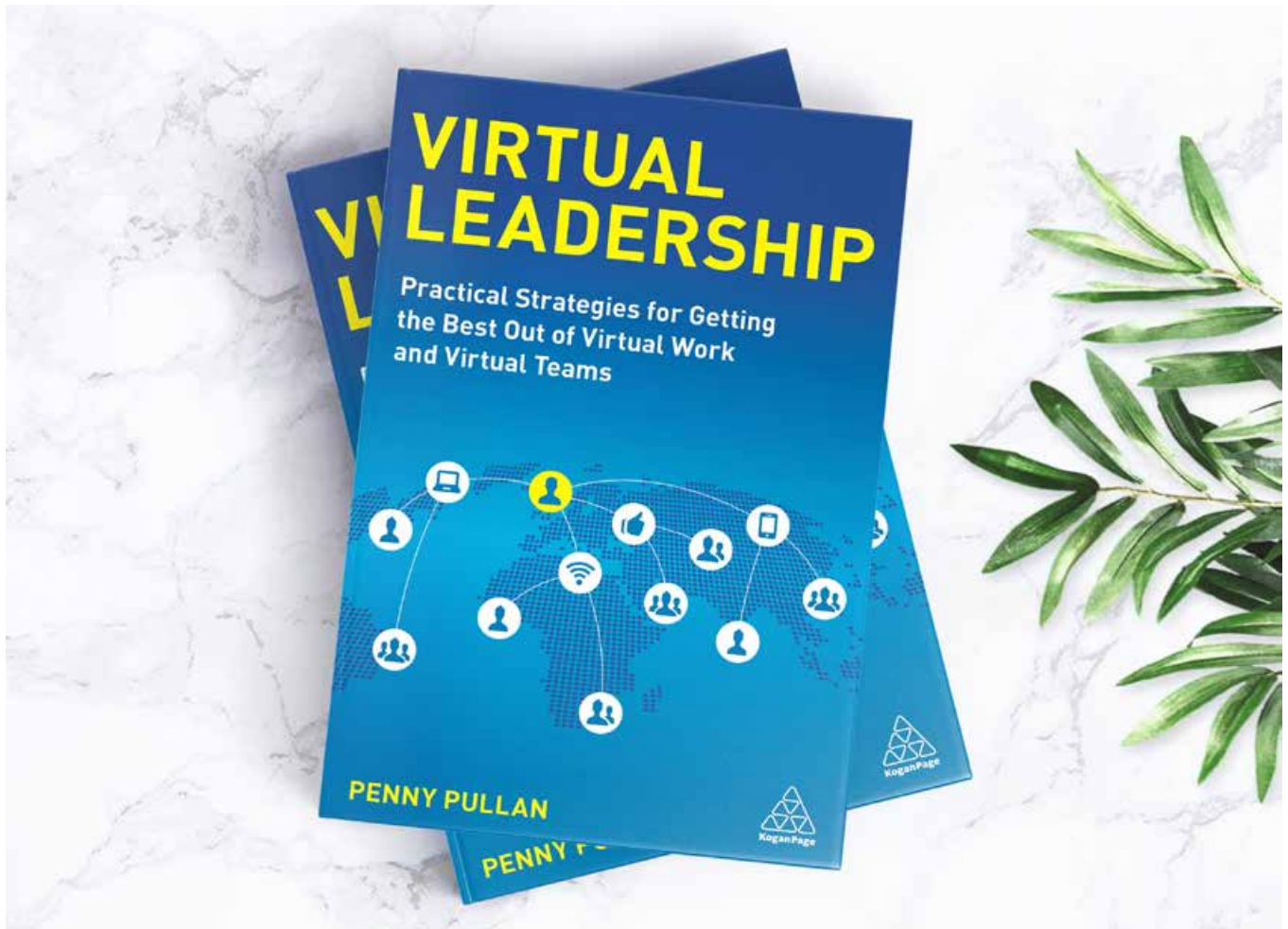
In the new normal that has emerged, it would make immense sense for smart managers to tap into the mix of hybrid working situations and ensure the best for the organisation as well as the employees.

◆ DR PENNY PULLAN, AUTHOR, *VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP*

Perhaps the first thing is to acknowledge just how much we have achieved and how far things have shifted in just a few short months. Think back to December 2019. Imagine that your CEO had put in a request that the company move entirely to virtual working. No doubt, this huge programme of change would have taken months, if not years, of planning and implementation. Instead, it happened in days. Despite this disruption, employees have achieved remarkable things, working in often sub-optimal conditions. This unexpected and, frankly, unwanted experiment in working remotely has proved that it is possible to do much without being in the physical office. Perhaps this is the silver lining of the COVID pandemic: the emergence of a whole new way of working? People can see that it is not necessary to commute to an office each day, with the accompanying detrimental effects on our climate and on the work-life balance of individuals. Organisations can see the possibility of reducing their office space, potentially releasing cash for alternative uses.

Now that we no longer have to have every single person in the office every day, what will the office look like? This office of the future is likely to include a mixture of people in the physical office and people dispersed away from the office. This mixture is likely to change from day to day, with different people coming in each day. It might make sense to come in to the office for a particular meeting or to catch up with others. It makes no sense to commute to the office to sit in front of a screen all day, which is just as possible to do remotely (and probably more productive). So, we are likely to need more meeting spaces in offices in this new paradigm, and perhaps fewer working spaces for individuals. It is likely that we will need less floor space than before, although physical distancing requirements will keep floor space needs higher than for the equivalent number of people prior to COVID.

Due to the sudden disruption of lockdown in spring 2020, workers who were able to work from home did so, often for months. Now that lockdown restrictions are eased, people are beginning to wonder about the future. What will the office look like? How will the physical office and the dispersed, virtual office, whatever that may be, mesh together? Will we return to how things were? Perhaps it might be possible to move to something better, for our organisations, our people, and our world.



How can we level this playing field? One way to do it would be to choose to hold team meetings virtually, with everyone joining from their desk, even those in the office. This removes the in-person advantage from those in the office and means that everyone has equal access to everyone else.

While working from home, as people did during and after lockdown, is part of the mix, there are other options for dispersed people, especially those without the luxury of dedicated working space at their own homes. With commuting on public transport to the office feeling risky, people may prefer to work closer to home in co-working spaces, keeping physically distant from others, of course, and

with high levels of cleaning and risk mitigation.

As well as thinking about the physical use of offices in the new hybrid reality, with people working from the office and others in dispersed ways, it is important to consider how to get the best out of hybrid teams, wherever people are based for work. The key challenge here is

to create a level playing field, so that everyone, wherever they are based, is able to contribute equally. Unfortunately, this does not happen unless it is planned for, with everyone working hard towards this goal.

Imagine a meeting where half of the people are present in a meeting room and the other half are joining via video. Those in the room will be able to glance around and see the body language of everyone else in the room easily. They will be able to pick up on the nuances and dynamics of conversation far more easily than those distanced via technology. They are likely to fall into side conversations with others in the room and, at coffee time, to share informal discussions that dispersed team members will be excluded from. There is no level playing field here. The people who are in the room together have an advantage over those who are dispersed. This is the big danger of hybrid teams and one which needs to be overcome.

How can we level this playing field? One way

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to do it would be to choose to hold team meetings virtually, with everyone joining from their desk, even those in the office.

This removes the in-person advantage from those in the office and means that everyone has equal access to everyone else. Another way would be to develop strong group norms around communications that take into account how the whole team works with one another. Levelling out the playing field is not obvious but can be done if everyone on the team is thinking about the team as a whole and aware just how important it is to treat people equally and fairly.

As a smart manager, I encourage you to develop and use your virtual leadership in a hybrid situation to help create a level playing field. In virtual leadership, the leader facilitates every member of the team to do their best, even when people are virtual from one another. This is even more important in this new hybrid office world. Leading in this hybrid context is not easy, in fact it is probably harder than when everyone was remote. But it 'is' possible. Remember the level playing field and work hard to keep things fair and consistent between all members of your team, while supporting each person to deliver great work.

Meshing together the physical and virtual offices, it makes sense to develop your own virtual leadership and that of others in your team. I have worked to develop this with teams for more than a decade, during which I have found several aspects to focus on. These include:

- Yourself as leader, and your own skills, preferences, strengths, and weaknesses.
- Others in your team and their own skills, preferences, strengths and weaknesses, creating ways that your team can work together effectively, building on each other's skills, strengths and preferences and covering up for weaknesses.

- Technology: able to use virtual working technologies effectively, and choosing an appropriate mix of live and different time (asynchronous) collaboration tools.
- Leading effective and engaging virtual and hybrid meetings.
- Working effectively in between meetings, using asynchronous collaboration tools to support those of your team who are dispersed.
- Overcoming complications such as differences across generations, cultures and languages and, potentially even the challenge of wide time zones.

Even once the threat of COVID has passed, either through a vaccine or through the virus fading away, it seems unlikely that offices will return to how they were pre-pandemic. We cannot put the genie back in the bottle. We now know that virtual working works on a large scale. Instead of trying to return to the old normal, it makes sense for smart managers to tap into the mix of hybrid working situations to come up with the best for the organisation and the individuals who work in it, through building on the achievements of lockdown, keeping a level playing field, and developing virtual leadership skills. **M**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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