



**AGILE CHANGE**  
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# Virtual leadership as a cultural change

## Author

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## Introduction

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All organisations have moved to a virtual model for their “knowledge workers” – those in the back office who make the organisation run smoothly. In some cases, the entire organisation is a “knowledge” organisation so consultancies, research companies, audit firms and IT support are all moving to home working as the new normal.

This paper explores the pressure this places on leaders to maintain an effective team culture, and to ensure everyone feels informed, included and that their contribution is recognised.

## Defining the problem

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Anecdotally we know that this is causing us stress, even if we are not calling it out explicitly. I have heard from many people across the world (these issues are not country specific) in different industries, and their main concerns are:

- “Just doing my normal work is harder – is it because I have to concentrate more in meetings, or is it because I am sitting more in one place?”
- “I miss the easy social catch-ups that made me feel like a human being, now I feel like I am part of an unstoppable production line.”
- “I am working very hard, but not very smartly. I am on-line the whole time, so am interrupted frequently by the arrival of new messages across many different platforms.”
- “I never knew how much my commute gave me “personal mental space” and I am finding it hard to re-create this thinking time at home.”

Perhaps one of the reasons why this is so stressful, is that we haven’t had the time to step back and realise that we are managing this additional change for ourselves and our teams. I hope by setting the challenge in the context of best practice in achieving culture change, I will discover some answers for myself, and I hope they will help you too.

## Defining cultural change

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Culture is often defined as “the way we do things around here”. Using this definition, it is easy to see that the virtual working practices that we have all been forced to adopt in the last couple of months are a cultural change.

It is not only “the way we do things” that has changed, but “around here” has also changed, as our homes have become our offices, and the wide variety of places we used to work: train; coffee house; office etc have shrunk to become our kitchen table.

It is part of my job to create deliberate cultural change for the organisations that I work for, so I am interested to discover if the techniques that I use for these transformations can be applied to this enforced change.

I have several favourite models of cultural change, including the work of Professors Bridges and Schein, and the ideas of management consultants Trompenaars, Hampden Turner and Taylor.



Using the framework from Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, culture begins with a set of core beliefs about what is important, what is valuable and what is the right thing to be doing. These core beliefs are often tacit, not expressed by individuals on a day to day basis, but are there, nonetheless. They form the basis of the "feeling" we have about an organisation, its personality, and its priorities.

In strong cultures, these beliefs drive the processes, standards and performance measures for success. Effectively, all the structures that define "how" an organisation gets things done are fully reflective of these beliefs.

Finally, if the culture of the organisation is truly propagated through every level and every activity in the organisation, sitting on top of the "how" is the "what". This is characterised by the behaviours exhibited by leaders and the stories that people tell to explain their organisation and what happens within it.

## Establishing the core beliefs

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As a consultant, I deploy my "outsider" status to objectively review the prevailing norms within an organisation, to detect what the core beliefs are. When I have done this, I start to socialise my findings across all levels of responsibility and experience to verify if I have captured the essence of the organisation.

Once we have this baseline, we can use it to design how we would like things to be in the future. By using this technique, I want to propose that many of us (up to the first few weeks of lock-down) had the following deep-seated beliefs about virtual working:

### Face to face

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A belief that virtual is inferior to physical, face to face time together. There is research to support this, Albert Mehrabian in his work in the 1970s identified how humans communicate:

The majority of messages are through non-verbal communication:

1. Words (the literal meaning) account for 7% of the overall message
2. Tone of voice accounts for 38% of the overall message
3. Body Language accounts for 55% of the overall message



Albert Mehrabian (1971)

I think our disquiet about virtual being an inferior experience is because we cannot detect all the body language, so we are only getting some of the message.

## Substitute

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It is a substitute to real meetings so I don't need to take it as seriously, which in the past has led to a feeling of relief or celebration when we are able to dial-in to the meeting, followed by a realisation that we concentrated on that, and forgot that we also needed to prepare our content in order to make a substantive contribution!

## Timing

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Online meetings get booked for 30, 60, 90 minutes etc, so the emphasis is on filling the time to meet the agreed schedule.

## Inform

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Online meetings have often been used for information sharing, just to keep everyone up to date, when the real creating, negotiating and decision making were done in the corridors before and after the meeting (or in bars and coffee houses).

## Formality

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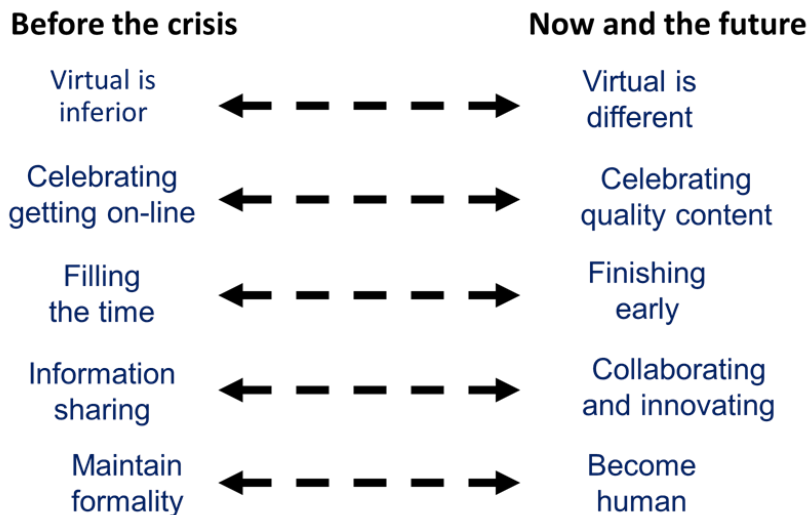
Before this crisis hit, how many of us dressed up for meetings, panicked about noise from the rest of our home being heard, or lived in terror of child/pet/elderly relative walking in on the call? Up until about 8 weeks ago, I still felt mortified after a webinar 2 years ago suffered from the barking from my over-excited Labrador, when someone asked in the chat function "what is the dog called!"

These negative views have had to be squashed, and put aside as we grappled with the new "all virtual" existence that has been forced upon us (the stress we discussed earlier is starting to become less of a

mystery, clearly many of us are having to put aside how we really feel to make the best of the only alternative we have!)

## Re-define our views

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## Creating the new structures

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This paper is a work in progress, I don't have all the answers but I thought it would help if I described some of the practices which I and other colleagues around the world have adopted to live up to the new beliefs that are needed for us to keep going.

To establish them as cultural norms they need to be embedded in whatever your structures are, from Staff Handbooks to your Quality Management System, and then role-modelled by all those in positions of leadership – hierarchical leadership and those natural leaders which others willingly follow.

## Content and timings

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One of the things I have noticed that is common to my most effective on-line interactions (and is clearly missing when I have meetings that go no-where or talk about the "wrong" things) is my level of preparation. I have found I need to be super organised in advance of on-line events. My top tips are:

- In advance, create a detailed agenda, of all the things you want to talk about, so that you know you can assign time to each issue. BUT I do MoSCoW this list of items, putting the Must Haves first, and leaving time at the end for things we might talk about, depending how the meeting has gone. This means I have a contingency, and in these times of stress, this gives us all the opportunity to use some time for caring for each other.

- If someone is hesitant in the meeting about an issue, I know there is no chance for a “corridor catch-up” so I try to give them more time to share in the meeting. This isn’t to say I wouldn’t follow up one to one afterwards, but it is just about time to share which comes from a flexible agenda.
- I also do my preparation about who is invited to the meeting, trying to walk the tight-rope of inviting all those who will feel they need to be there, whilst respecting that they have so many calls on their time that I will not use up their good-will unnecessarily.
- Sometimes I have made quick calls to explain who I am meeting with, and why I didn’t invite them, so they have the option of joining if they want to, but not wasting their time if they don’t want to be involved and are not essential to my outcome.

### Collaboration and new ideas

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I am making more and more use of break-out rooms and interactive white-boards so that everyone can share “their slice of genius” (thanks to Professor Linda Hill for this phrase!). This also has an impact on my agenda because I am putting in activities so that people have a clear question or hypothesis they can debate. I have found this gets more sharing of perspectives and a greater level of creativity than just going round the table asking if anyone wants to contribute.

To maximise participation, where possible I am sharing ahead of time what the questions are, so that even those who don’t like to contribute verbally in meetings have had time to think things through and have something to say.

### Become human

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My actions here are very close to my heart because they are directly linked to reducing stress and looking after the mental health of all of us. I always like to have time at the start of any meeting to share video of where we are dialling in from, welcome the introduction of children/pets/parents to say “hi”, and to talk about how we are coping before we get started.

In the last week, I have been joined on calls by 11 dogs, 5 cats (less because I think cats are too self-involved to join Zoom!), 3 children and 1 parent (my Dad, who is 85 and sees his role as bringing me a cup of tea to keep me going!).

### Conclusion

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As I said, this is a work in progress, I am sure that when I re-visit this paper in a couple of months, there will be more to add. To help with this, please share your comments via email

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## About the author

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I have been responsible for the successful delivery of effective change and for creating environments that support transformational change for over twenty years. I have an impressive track record of successful consulting assignments and I am an acknowledged thought leader in Change Management.

I am the Chief Examiner of the Agile Change Agent qualification from the accreditation body, APMG-International. I am also the UK Country Lead Change Management Institute and a respected author of text books and articles on change, project and programme management.

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