# Visible leadership

## Accessibility is the name of the game

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Visible leadership has become increasingly important, particularly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic when employers and managers found unique ways to maintain presence when their teams began working remotely.

As the pandemic eased, integration into hybrid working arrangements led to a change in the way leadership teams maintained their visibility to employees and impacted their ability to influence.

Strategic Planning Consultant Donna Bates said leadership teams might not need to physically be in the room but they did need to be visible to their teams and have a presence.

"This means showing up to regular online meetings with the camera on, being prepared for the meeting, responding to requests in a timely manner and being consistent and clear with guidance and direction, particularly in regard to company policy," she said.

"Leaders need to have the ability to align and motivate their teams even when they aren't in the room.

"They should become the voice in their team's head, inspiring them to achieve and grow without micromanaging."

### Combating the double standard

Some leaders have opted to work remotely more than their staff while others have chosen to do the opposite.

As the hybrid working arrangement is perfected, this has triggered the question of whether there is a double standard on who is expected back in their office and how frequently.

Leadership and Workplace Culture Consultant Tammy Tansley said there were two important elements when leaders considered work arrangements.

"One element is consistency – if the team isn't allowed to work flexibly but the manager is, it can be problematic in terms of the message it sends," she said.

"Equally where a leader is in the office and working all hours known to mankind but tells their team it is okay to work flexibly, the reality is that actions will speak louder than words and the shadow of a leader looms large."

Being physically present isn't always necessary, with some organisations functioning successfully without the leader present because they maintain visibility and accessibility.

In some organisations, this can be the opposite – there is a leader who is in the office but may be seen as shut off from the rest of the team.

"There are leaders who may be physically present but who are behind closed doors or have such limited availability and access for team members that they may as well not be in the office," Ms Tansley said.

"Being physically present in the office is efficient if the leader is easily accessible for critical decision-making.

"It can also mean that spontaneous meetings, collaborating and problem solving is much easier.

"Dealing with crises can be easier if everyone is there – on the ground and hearing the same message."

However, Ms Tansley said what was more important, irrespective of whether the leader was onsite or offsite, was access, support for issues that arose and an active commitment to both building the team – wherever they are based – and developing the individuals within the team.

It's vital that leaders understand the way their team functions and adapt their leadership model to match and, for some, this means being in the office regularly.

"I was speaking to a leader who noted that the productivity did seem to increase when they were in the office, in part due to their strong personality and presence," Ms Tansley said.

"They felt their team was more energised when they were there and there was more clarity around what needed to be achieved.

"The answer is that if the leader isn't present, it's important to ensure this has been actively contemplated and designed, rather than hoping for the best."

Research shows that leaders often fail to recognise how their actions affect and are interpreted by others.

By working in the office daily, it can come across as though the leader tolerates, rather than encourages, virtual work.

This can signal to remote-working employees that the decision to work from home may mean they may have fewer career opportunities, and that their contributions are secondary to those in the office.

Ms Tansley said it was important for expectations to be laid out in a clear and consistent manner for people entering into or fulfilling leadership roles.

"I think there's often a case of do what I say, not do as I do, or an expectation that when you get to a certain level in the organisation, there is sufficient trust in you to get the job done as needed without needing to check in," she said.

"Ultimately, as with all flexible working, it comes down to clarity of expectations and outputs and ensuring the systems support flexible working to ensure high productivity and efficiency can take place."

### Maintaining leadership visibility when working remotely

For some leaders, working in the office isn't always an option, particularly for those running multiple teams or those who may need to work remotely to fulfil their responsibilities.

Ms Bates said she has had to work on the road and, during these periods, she ensured she maintained her presence with her team.

"I like to make sure I am physically in the room on a regular basis to ensure that conversations or approvals requiring a quick turnaround or in-depth discussion can be dealt with immediately and not over emails or multiple video conference calls," she said.

"Regular basis can mean different things to different industries and teams.

"If the leader is not available to the team for approvals and guidance on important matters, and that lack of visibility or availability is causing the team to not be as productive as necessary, it can start to affect morale, culture and eventually profitability."

Ms Bates suggested daily check-ins using short and disciplined conversations over the phone or via email were effective in ensuring staff feel validated and supported.

"Controlling the conversation to get the correct balance between personal empathy and business is also important," she said.

"Make sure staff know why you are calling every day and that you have a list of questions for your call.

"Do a daily huddle call of 10-15 minutes with your key team members, and then throughout the week, talk to each person for a similar time to see how they are going individually.

"Make sure the calls are structured and you achieve outcomes to keep everyone moving forward."

Ms Bates said being visible wasn't just about being physically there, it was about being truly present and authentic.

She said it was important for leaders to be curious and ask questions while maintaining personal integrity and accountability.

"A team won't follow a leader who doesn't live by their own personal integrity," she said.

"It shouldn't matter whether a leader is in an office or not, a good leader can build and maintain relationships, provide governance and oversight, and achieve the necessary project or corporate team goals through having strong personal integrity.

"To be aligned with your team means you need to live by the adage 'as goes the leader, so goes the team'.

"Some organisations need to effectively run without a leader at the helm, but this is highly dependent on both the industry, established workflows and lines of communication, and depth of supervision."

### So, what's best?

It's important that any decisions regarding a hybrid or flexible working arrangement should be made with care.

"It should be noted that where hybrid and flexible working has been well thought out and planned, there is lots of evidence around increased efficiency and productivity," Ms Tansley said.

"Don't just expect that a healthy work arrangement will happen – considered thought into the system's structures and processes that support effective hybrid working is needed.

"Things such as communication, approaches to effective meetings, collaboration, effective decision-making and technology to support not hinder, all need to be explicitly thought through.

"Consider why someone wants to come into the office and why not.

"Are there aspects of the in-person workplace culture that make it unattractive?

"What's positive about working in the office that can't be as easily or effectively achieved from working remotely?

"Emphasise the bits that really work in person and ensure the systems enable the other work to be effectively done remotely."

Ms Bates held a similar sentiment about setting standards of approach, saying it's important that the same policies, procedures and governance around workflow is upheld in or out of the office.

"Creating consistent workflow, good project management and timely personal accountability is paramount to ensure a healthy hybrid workplace.

"It's not hard to do this. It just takes being organised and additional attention to detail and ensuring everyone in the process has open and transparent communication.

"Being visible isn't just about showing up, it's about being really present and authentic."

### Influential Leadership

The University of Western Australia School of Psychological Science Work Psychology Lecturer and Leadership Researcher Darja Kragt designed the Influential Leadership course for AIM WA- UWA Business School Executive Education.

Dr Kragt said looking at leaders and who they were is at the core of the course.

"Leadership starts with oneself so, in order to be an effective leader, you need to learn who you are and what your values are, as well as how to build relationships with other people," she said.

Dr Kragt said visibility is extremely important in the workplace, particularly for leaders, and this is something she would be exploring in the two-day course.

"Part of what we do in the program is we talk about how to build relationships and influence within those relationships, not necessarily just as a leader with their subordinates but also with other leaders and your own boss," she said.

"It's all about positioning yourself in the workplace, but it starts from that clear idea of who you are and how you present yourself.

"If an employer is looking for someone to step up, or someone for a promotion, it goes back to maintaining that visibility amongst colleagues."

Influential Leadership is experience-based, where participants do a lot of self-assessment and exercises around trying to understand themselves as leaders.

"We do a lot of group activities, group discussions and group role play, so there's a lot of interactive elements," Dr Kragt said.

"There's a lot of trying out the things you're learning straight away.

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This two-day transformational workshop enables you to identify who you are, your core beliefs and what you are capable of as a leader. It also builds your capacity to translate this into deeper, more influential relationships.

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"One of the unique aspects of the program is that it has peer-to-peer coaching, so we're paired up in the program with a peer and a lot of those people maintain their relationships beyond those two days and continue to support and help each other throughout their development."

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**About Donna Bates**

Donna Bates has worked in corporate settings for more than 25 years and has a passion for working with corporate leaders. She has unique insights into how integrity plays an integral role in the decision-making process of leaders. You can connect with Donna on LinkedIn

**About Tammy Tansley**

Tammy is a leadership and culture specialist with more than 25 years' experience enabling great leadership and introducing cultural change in organisations of various size. She is a former columnist for The Sunday Times and an author. You can connect with Tammy on LinkedIn

**About Darja Kragt**

Dr Darja Kragt has developed and mentored over 1000 leaders across the globe and in various industries. She has a passion for supporting leaders to find their true potential and helping them to improve employee engagement and empowerment, as well as improve their leadership competencies and behaviours. You can connect with Darja on LinkedIn