



Leadership Presence **in a Virtual World**

Leadership Presence in a Virtual World

Dr. Nick Morgan & Dr. Vince Molinaro

We've all been thrust into virtual communications because of the coronavirus in a make-or-break way that raises a question most of us haven't had to think hard about before: *How do we project our leadership presence through virtual means when many employees have become remote workers?*

Whether it's a phone call that didn't go as planned or a miscommunication over email, or an embarrassing moment on a video conference, we haven't had to think deeply about what went wrong virtually in the past. We've been able to shrug it off and keep going. The bottom line? We rely on technology to help us connect more than ever, especially now, but we're doing it badly. Although we know instinctively that talking with someone virtually is not the same as connecting in person, we don't know how to compensate for the difference. But the cost in fractured relationships, missed opportunities, and lost connections is immense. One of the authors of this piece (Nick) had an introductory meeting scheduled with a potential client for a significant piece of business. As it happened, the meeting time was noted wrong, and I was about 10 minutes late joining the conference. Then there were a few technical issues such as often can happen on a video conference, so by the time the meeting really started, it was fifteen minutes into the session. As a result, the meeting was rushed. But more importantly, I could see that the prospective client had formed the impression that I was a technological incompetent. No amount of effort at that point was enough to repair this impression, and no work resulted.

It's not just that the world has gone virtual, but that the world is in a global pandemic, and an economic meltdown, and thus the degree of uncertainty and ambiguity has increased exponentially. These are all challenging enough in themselves for leaders to deal with face-to-face, but now we must address them in a virtual way. Leaders need to communicate strategic clarity, to show empathy for employees who are fearful of losing their jobs, to bring people together and align them towards a common goal, and to instill a sense of purpose, optimism and confidence in the future. All of this was already hard enough in the past. Now you need to do this all virtually. For some, these new expectations will represent a significant stretch in their leadership capabilities.

Leaders at all levels will need to quickly understand this new virtual world and be able to effectively step up to lead their teams and organizations when it matters most. That's what this eBook is about. First, we will share what you need to understand about working and leading in a virtual world. Second, we will present a way of how to think about your leadership role at this time, to help you recommit to being the best leader you can be.

Leading Virtually – The Challenges and Opportunities

It wasn't that long ago that the majority of interactions leaders had with others were face-to-face. Let's go back to that world for a moment. *You look at your opposite number on the negotiation team. He's sitting across the big wooden conference room table from you, and you're waiting for him to say something. Over the past four weeks, as the complicated negotiations have gone on, you've gotten to know him well. You know his tells, his nearly invisible body-language signs about what he's really thinking underneath that impassive exterior.*

Finally, he says it: “I think we should go ahead.” But something is nagging at you. You know his body language well enough now to pick up on subtle discomfort. You know that he’s not entirely satisfied with the deal. So instead of saying, “Great, welcome aboard,” you pause.

“Is there anything we haven’t talked about that is making you uncomfortable?” You know there is; you want to give him a chance to voice his reservations.

And so he does. Later on, when you’ve ironed out the problems that were indeed still there, just beneath the surface, he confesses that he had been about to put the deal on hold and let it quietly die. He had grown to like you in the month you had been negotiating together, and he was uncomfortable with sharing what seemed like minor problems. But added together, they had become one big deal killer. If you hadn’t given him the opening, he would have been ready to leave the table. Your reading of his body language saved the day.

What is that sensory feedback, and why is it so important to us humans?

Implicit and Explicit Feedback

There are two kinds of feedback, implicit and explicit. The implicit kind is illustrated by the example above. It’s the sensory feedback that our unconscious minds give us 24-7, the sights, sounds, smells, touches, and tastes of our world of experience. In addition to the five senses that we’re all keenly aware of, neuroscientists debate a number of others, such as thermoception, proprioception, and others we’re just learning about.

Explicit feedback is the running commentary that drives individuals, teams, and organizations to get things done from day to day. In the face-to-face world, the two kinds of feedback mix in a way that usually feels effortless. Our words are conveyed to other people—and theirs to us—with a welter of largely unconscious sensory data that automatically goes with the words. We smile, frown, draw back, lean in, laugh, and cry. Our senses are at work all the time, creating both context and emotional meaning for our daily lives.

Sensory Deprivation

Put us in the virtual world, and almost all these senses are deprived. Now, when the multichannel sensory system that is the brain is deprived of one or more of those senses, the neuroscientists tell us, it hates the vacuum. So, the brain fills the empty channels with assumptions, memories, and fake data. It's a built-in negative bias. The result is, not surprisingly, all the misunderstandings we're so familiar with in the virtual world. The email that conveys a sarcastic tone the sender didn't intend. The phone conference that left everyone believing that the project was dead in the water. The videoconference that made you feel less comfortable about joining the team. Trolling. And so on.

And one more thing: exhaustion brought about by the stress of videoconferences that require us to be always-on. Virtual communication carries with it negative bias that means by the end of the day we are subtly stressed out in ways that are very hard to articulate and yet very real.

Put us in the virtual world, in short, and we're short-changed on the implicit feedback that is so important for getting us through our days. Remember, in evolutionary terms, we humans are fragile creatures and so have developed extraordinary prediction skills and pattern-recognition abilities. We put those two skills together to keep ourselves alive. Take away the

data that allows us to predict and to recognize, and we feel lost, unsafe, and confused. That's the virtual world in a nutshell.

But the issues go further. Explicit feedback relies on implicit feedback much more than most people realize. So, when we're asked what we thought of that presentation, that meeting, or that town hall session, we can offer a mix of explicit and implicit feedback. The mix allows us to soften the harsh messages and toughen the soft ones. We may only say, "It was fine," but our body language—the implicit feedback—conveys that we really thought the session was a disaster. Or the reverse. We can deliver some tough words but soften their impact with a touch or a smile that says, "It really wasn't that bad." And there are, of course, a whole host of shades of meaning possible in between.

Take out the implicit feedback on which the explicit messages depend, and you get confusion and alienation. So how do we project our leadership presence through virtual means when all employees have become remote workers?

Changing Leadership Expectations

This shift to a virtual world is not new. Many of us have been working in a blended world for some time, using both traditional in-person and remote ways of working. **What COVID-19 has accelerated shifts** that had already been happening across society. So, for now, and the near future, the majority of interactions will be virtual.

One risk for leaders is failing to pause and consider the changing expectations this shift has caused for their roles. If you approach your leadership role simply as business as usual, you will not be as effective as you need to be.

In many ways, the leadership contract has changed for all leaders. The context is demanding new and different ways of leading. For some of you this will be completely new. For others it will be a more familiar leadership challenge.

As a result, it is important for each of us to pause and reflect on how the leadership contract has changed for us at this time.

There are four terms of the leadership contract and they provide you with an effective way of thinking about your role in a virtual world.



Leadership is a Decision – Make it.

When your world has been upended, as ours has, you need to pause and reflect on how the expectations of leadership have changed for you. You must then fully commit and make a visceral and deliberate decision about how you need to show up as an accountable leader for the people you lead and your other stakeholders. A crisis will challenge you in ways that you can't imagine. You can't be ambivalent; you must be deliberate. In many ways, what we need from leaders has not changed. Your people need you to provide strategic direction, generate excitement for the future, hold high standards of performance – these haven't changed. What has changed is how you are being asked to deliver on those expectations. You must set the tone for everyone else to follow by demonstrating full accountability and ownership. Here are some questions for you to think about in relation to this first term of the leadership contract:

- In what ways will you commit to be the best leader you can be in our virtual world?
- How do you intend to inspire confidence and bring a sense of optimism to the people you lead using virtual technologies?
- How will you project a positive tone and energy in all your virtual interactions with your teams and colleagues?

Leadership is an Obligation – Step Up.

It is also important to reflect on your primary obligation as a leader. Many are counting on you: your customers and employees, your colleagues, your organization, your family and friends, and the communities in which you live and do business. You must support their success in the short-term while paving the way to a positive future when the crisis diminishes.

You must ensure the safety and well-being of your teams. You must work with fellow leaders to drive business continuity. Here are some questions for you to think about in relation to your leadership obligations:

- What is the most critical leadership obligation that you must live up to at this time?
- What do your teams, customers, family and other stakeholders need from you right now?
- In what ways can you inspire others to step up and demonstrate personal ownership to deliver the results that matter?

Leadership is Hard Work – Get Tough.

Being a leader has never been easy. The role demands resilience and resolve. This becomes even more critical in times of adversity. You will need to find a way to rise above all the stress. You need to be a calming and reassuring force and provide others with faith in the future. As a leader, you need to work on managing your own emotions, anxiety, and fears that you may be experiencing. These are all legitimate feelings. But it is imperative for you to manage your own reactions because that's what the best leaders do in a crisis. Author C.J. Redwine nicely states in her book *Defiance* that losing your head in a crisis is a good way to become the crisis. Here are some questions for you to think about in relation to the third term of the leadership contract:

- How will you demonstrate courage, resilience, and personal resolve in the face of adversity?
- In what ways will you demonstrate care and compassion for your team members and colleagues?
- What hard work will you need to tackle at this critical time?

Leadership is a Community – Connect.

A crisis like we are experiencing now can either serve to bring your leaders together or can tear them apart. You will need to be constantly thinking about how to build community and culture in our virtual world. You will need to find ways to connect with your team on a regular basis. Instill a sense of fun where possible and strengthen the connections your team has with each other. Here are some questions for you to consider about the fourth term of the leadership contract:

- In what ways will you rally your colleagues and fellow leaders to come together in the face of adversity?
- How will you support your peers and colleagues who may be working remotely?
- How will you strengthen the bonds and connections your team members have with one another?

With the world in the midst of unprecedented stress and crises piled on top of crises, the need for great leadership has never been more urgent. Consider your leadership contract, think about how it needs to change in a virtual landscape, and decide how you are going to meet these formidable challenges. The world needs you as a leader now more than ever!

About Dr. Nick Morgan

Dr. Nick Morgan is one of America's top communication theorists and coaches. A passionate teacher, he is committed to helping people find clarity in their thinking and ideas – and then delivering them with panache. He has been commissioned by Fortune 50 companies to write for many CEOs and presidents. He has coached people to give Congressional testimony, to appear on the Today Show, and to deliver unforgettable TED talks. He has worked widely with political and educational leaders. And he has himself spoken, led conferences, and moderated panels at venues around the world. His latest book, on virtual communication, is *Can You Hear Me?*, published by Harvard in 2018.

Nick's methods, which are well-known for challenging conventional thinking, have been published worldwide. His acclaimed book on public speaking, *Working the Room: How to Move People to Action through Audience-Centered Speaking*, was published by Harvard in 2003 and reprinted in paperback in 2005 as *Give Your Speech, Change the World: How to Move Your Audience to Action*. His book on authentic communications, *Trust Me*, was published by Jossey-Bass in January 2009. His book on brain science and communication, *Power Cues*, was published by Harvard in 2014.

Nick served as editor of the Harvard Management Communication Letter from 1998 – 2003. He has written hundreds of articles for local and national publications. Nick is a former Fellow at the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. After earning his PhD. in literature and rhetoric, Nick spent a number of years teaching Shakespeare and Public Speaking at the University of Virginia, Lehigh University, and Princeton University. He first started writing speeches for Virginia Governor Charles S. Robb and went on to found his own communications consulting organization, Public Words, in 1997. Nick attributes his success to his honest and direct approach that challenges even the most confident orators to rethink how they communicate.

About Dr. Vince Molinaro

Vince Molinaro, PhD, is a global leadership adviser, speaker, and researcher on leadership accountability. As the founder and CEO of Leadership Contract Inc., Dr. Molinaro travels the world helping organizations build vibrant leadership cultures with truly accountable leaders.

Vince experienced a defining moment early in his career when he saw a respected colleague and mentor succumb to cancer that she believed was the byproduct of a stressful, toxic work environment. As a result, he has made it his life's work to boldly confront mediocre and unaccountable leadership.

At the age of 27, Vince launched his first business focused on helping leaders be the best they can be and step up when it matters most. Over his career, he has held a variety of entrepreneurial and global executive roles.

Today Vince calls out the global leadership crisis and thoughtfully lays out the strategy to address it head-on. His unique combination of provocative storytelling, evidence-based principles and grounded practicality has leaders at all levels stepping up to fulfill their obligations to drive the success of their organizations.

He is a New York Times best-selling author and has published several books including *Accountable Leaders* (Wiley, 2020), *The Leadership Contract* (3rd ed., Wiley, 2018) and *The Leadership Contract Field Guide* (Wiley, 2018). He has also co-authored two other books: *Leadership Solutions* (Jossey-Bass, 2007) and *The Leadership Gap* (Wiley, 2005).

Vince lives leadership accountability every day as an entrepreneur and global executive. His research and writing on leadership accountability are featured in some of the world's leading business publications. He also shares his insights in his Gut Check for Leaders blog and through the Accountable Leaders App available from the Apple and Google App Stores.

Vince and his family live near Toronto, Canada.