



Tele-leader are us? Social workplace

Working paper

(version 1.00 - 07.06.2020)

(henriquemartins.eu paper series)

(please quote this paper as follows:

Martins, Henrique (2020) "Tele-leader are us? Social workplace", working paper series
henriquemartins.eu, version 1.00, accessed on (date of access) at:

<https://www.henriquemartins.eu/visionspublications>

Abstract:

This paper will explore the concept of tele-leadership. It equally succinctly presents the concept of TVOs (Total Virtual Organizations). How do tele-leader differ from non-teleleader is object of superficial analysis. A deeper understanding of space and place typologies is sought and how leader can see social workplace and move in this dimension is outlined as a critical capacity in tele-leaders.

Key words: tele-leader, total virtual organizations, leadership, organizational behaviour, medicine, education

1. What is Tele-leadership?

This paper will explore the concept of tele-leadership. Teleleaders have never been so necessary. COVID-19 crisis, isolation measures and deconfinement phase have shown, and will confirm over next few months (hopefully during the so call “post COVID-19” phase), that there is a significant difference in people who are able to leader from a distance, and those who require physical presence, and face-to-face, or mask-to-mask interaction. The first are what I call – tele-leaders.

In a nutshell tele-leadership is the capacity to leader a team and/or an organization from a significant distance, during a significant length of time, without a need or a significant need for face-to-face interaction. This means that the leader will interact with his/her followers through technology either synchronously, or asynchronously.

If leaders in organizations have long used telephone, email, or occasional videoconferencing, were they not already tele-leaders? Leading using indirect artefacts like mission statements, engagement letters, job descriptions or more techy solutions such as corporate networks, knowledge-management software, has been around for quite a long time, is their use the equivalent to tele-leadership? Leaders implementing tele-medicine, tele-education, or tele-work in general, is this also been a tele-leader? This paper aims to say: NO. These can be somehow interrelated concepts. Sure, a tele-leader can, through its work style better inspire organizational change and its use of tele-work. Of course, a tele-leader can, like any other make use of advanced organizational behaviour control tools like upper mentioned ones, or corporate information technology solutions to enhance its capacity. And finally, clearly a tele-leader uses tele-working tools like non-teleleaders do. The difference is that tele-leaders maintain a capacity to lead even if no physical presence is foreseen or foreseeable in large stretches of months or years, or, as it would be the case for contexts such as are Total Virtual Organizations (TVOs). These are organizations that do not have or will have any moment where its members meet in the physical world.

2. How does tele-leadership concept relate with more traditional conceptions of leadership?

Many aspects of “traditional leadership” discussed in the literature do not get instantiated by their authors with reference to physical or non-physical interaction. They have been conceived in abstraction to this, however, they do reflect an embedded and embodied (Ref Nonaka) notion that leadership is exerted in daily life/routine, and organizational practices, which for the most part, have been happening in physical space for centuries and millenniums.

Even the concept of online companies, created, operated, providing services and being extinguished online only is relatively new. eCitizenship (Ref Estonia) and eCompany registries are relatively new possibilities. Again, this should not be confused with companies that have a massive online presence, provide eLearning, eCommerce etc. which, although being very digital are not necessarily virtual.

What this historical footprint means, is that for the most part, traditional concepts of leadership will need to be revisited when we accept a total virtual context.

How control is exerted without the possibility of “calling the person to your office”. How engagement with mission and the culture of the organization is boosted without company face-to-face meetings, or “day-outs” and retreats. How persistency, and a sense of belonging is ensured by virtual artefacts, online life, and cognitive and emotional bondage only.

3. How does tele-leadership relate with space, workplace and mobility?

The terms space and place are often used in a more or less synonymous way. Some authors however, distinguish between them. Giddens, for example, (p. 18 in (Giddens, 1990)) refers to space as the abstract, asocial conceptualisation of geographical location, while place refers to social inhabited physicality. In pre-modern cultures, he argues, the connection between geographic space and place was mediated by “presence” and localised activities. Now, however, geographic space can increasingly be conceptualised and thought of as detached from its roots in the enactment of place. This is because relations with “absent” others (human and non-human) have increased and at the same time we are able to think of geographic spatiality in its abstraction. Escobar also describes space as *abstract, universal, homogeneous, modern*, and place as *local, grounded, and traditional* (Escobar, 2001). When contrasted with place, space becomes an abstract field in which trajectories of history, political, economy, technology, and social relations are mapped, like those of work practices, in ongoing dynamic terms (Kelly, 2003). Place, on the other hand, refers to “*the experience of, and from, a particular location with some sense of boundaries, grounds, and links to everyday practice*” (Escobar, 2001). Kelly rearticulates this definition:

“place is the local, lived articulation of sense, body, identity, environment, and culture, a person is always in and of place. Place is captured in the intersubjective sharing of experience and social practice (...) places should be conceived as both produced by and productive of subjects” (cited in p. 2280 (Benabou, 1999))

Kelly’s definition of place has the advantage that it accommodates other conceptualisations of space such as Taussig’s (Taussig, 1997) *geographic imaginaries*, that describe how places become connected not only to real but also imagined social practices. Harrison and Dourish emphasise the importance of meaning in distinguishing place from space: a place is a “*space*

which is invested with understandings” (Harrison and Dourish, 1996). A house becomes home when a certain meaningful interpretation is assigned to it, interestingly not all houses become homes, and not all people residing in a house may consider it to be their home. This example serves to show how the concept of place is socially constructed from a given spatiality. Since work in its broadest sense can be seen as a human activity by the same token, **workplaces** are all those spaces where work occurs. The concept and how we can understand the workplace then becomes highly dependent on how the space/spatiality where it occurs is itself conceptualised.

To be able to differentiate it from other spatialities, I refer to “physical space” when space is conceptualised according to physical/Euclidian/geographic spatiality. This is the most commonly used concept of space in work and organization studies, in which work occurs in a physical space, thus one could say in “**physical workplaces**”. Alternative views on workplace could be suggested, however, departing from notions of social space (Mol and Law, 1994) which may be important for work done in collaboration between people located in different physical spaces.

3.1 Social spatiality, topologies of regions and networks

When talking about “the Social” Mol (Mol and Law, 1994) proposes, “*The social doesn’t exist as a single spatial type. Rather, it performs several kinds of space*”. She mentions two of these social spatiality topologies: regions and networks. Mol defines regions as “*the types of social spaces where activities, humans and objects are clustered together and where boundaries can be drawn, dividing those similar from those that are different*”. An example of this could be hospital doctors’ visits to their patients in a ward round. These social spaces can overlap with physical environments (eg. a specific room) and Mol suggests that, in this case. “*the understandings of the work and its organization hold their shape by fixating to the workplace*”. This means that, in cases of overlap, it is the practice of the work being carried out that helps to identify if it is “occurring” through social space (ie, it could be happening in another physical setting) or if it has roots in that specific physical location as well, in which case it argued as happening in both a physical and social spatiality.

For Mol, another form of thinking about social spaces is through the use of a network metaphor, for her: “*Networks are types of social spaces where distances between objects, humans and activities are defined by their relations rather than their physical location. The relations of similarity, rather than physical closeness, create proximity in networks*”(Mol and Law, 1994) Following this definition work can be identified as happening within a network, by looking at the “objects” involved (both human and non-human), their characteristics and those of their relations. According to Law and Mol: “*Objects in a network have stable relations between each other (...) these objects have been described as “immutable mobiles” since they are mobile in Euclidean space, but static in a network topology (immutable)*” (Mol and Law, 1994). For example, movement of two individuals in physical spatiality might mean they can be potentially static in their relation at the level of the social spatiality, for example, of a network if they keep unchanged their relations to a central individual acting as hub of the social network, or when they keep their social bond stable. This example highlights why these **social**

“spaces” are not dependent on Euclidian space. The opposite example is equally possible to conceive. Two individuals might move to, or occupy, the same physical location (for example a given meeting room) without that meaning any reduction in their social distance.

3.2 Location, position, dislocation and sense of motion

To understand mobility, Dix suggests, there is a need to think about location and position. If to move is “*to change in position from one point to another*”, then, as Dix *et al.* (Dix, 2000) highlight, the notion of mobility requires the notion of location/position within a given dimension. For physical space, in absolute terms, this means relocation from one geographical coordinate to another but there is still a need to conceptualise location and position in relation to other topographic elements/concepts. This is required not only for physical but also for other spatialities, if we are to understand movement between them.

According to Graham (Graham, 1998), for physical space these topographical concepts are relatively established and include: point in space, co-presence and outside/inside. Parallel concepts for social spaces remain undeveloped despite claims that they are equally necessary to understand mobility. Authors like Esbjörnsson and Vesterlind (Esbjörnsson and Vesterlind, 2002) and Green (Green, 2002), emphasise mobility through social time and space. Green (Green, 2002), for instance, argues that “*mobility means [that] people are able to retain continuity in their tasks and mental processes regardless of the physical separation and, to an extent, of time synchronization*”.

Mol (Mol and Law, 1994) and Esbjörnsson and Vesterlind (Esbjörnsson and Vesterlind, 2002) discuss dislocation towards and away from social regions or networks corresponding to an increase or reduction in the “sense of belonging”. Motion in relation to social spaces is, thus, relational. A second form of dislocation, however, is when people move between the relative positions they occupy in networks or regions (Mol and Law, 1994) regardless of their physicality. Someone who was peripheral to a group can quickly become central as he/she “moves” to occupy a position that involves dealing with the entire group. For example, a contributor who becomes editor of an academic journal or someone who gradually becomes more influential without necessarily occupying a formal position as such. This form of mobility within social space is termed “contextual mobility” by Kakiyama and Sørensen (Kakiyama and Sørensen, 2002) and is seen as being influenced by certain technologies (especially ICT). MICT have the potential to convey information and communication, which themselves are representatives and actors of specific social contexts, regardless of physical space. MICT thus enables certain contexts and information to become co-present, which would not otherwise, leading to context interactions that may be desirable or undesirable (Kakiyama and Sørensen, 2002). Conversely, using MICT can mean certain contexts of interaction are not discontinued when participants are forced to physically move thus ensuring a continuation of tasks being carried out.

3.3 Social workplace and tele-leadership

If a workplace exists, socially defined, and virtually supported, people “work” there. If they work there, they perform a task, develop a product or provide a service or all of these. They operate as a team thus they can be conceived as a virtual team. There is no team, that is highly effective without good leadership.

This leader needs to be connecting, directing, inspiring, engaging, motivating, etcetera – all of those attributes the vast, prolific and wordy academic and consulting leadership literature as allured to – from a distance and using technology to link him/her to the team.

A tele-leader is thus a Master of Social Space and of conceiving and maintaining a healthy social workplace.

Lastly, a tele-leader needs to be able to think in terms of social mobility, not between social classes or casts, but in the mobility that happens within and between social spaces. This is as important as visiting rooms and facilities was in the physical organizations. Invite persons for meetings and joining them up around an idea, a project or an organizational challenge. Now, in TVOs or in organizations that found themselves lock-down, this is to be achieved virtually. Social mobility can be thought in two ways:

- 1) Dislocation to/from – “sense of belonging”
- 2) Dislocation within - Changes in social position in relation to others and to the core of the region or hubs in the network

4. Conclusion

Tele-leaders need to start, and stop, at conceptualizing the “social workplace” they lead. Forging new ways to retain old leadership attributes, that were easy in the physical workplace, but need to be reconfigured to the social workplace. The first of such efforts is to think of the team/organization, be it a hospital, a university or an IT company, as a social network or a region. The second is to learn to navigate and master social workplace and time-space distantiation.