

The way we live and work is being transformed by the hybrid

We are moving inexorably into a hybrid world. One where the virtual world becomes more closely integrated into the physical world. One where many of our relationships are conducted through the medium of technology and others through the intimacy of human connections. One where we work in front of a screen and others where we collaborate, communicate and connect through deepening interpersonal relationships. What we are witnessing is the relentless drive of the digital revolution, which was already well underway before the virus struck, but which has been vastly accelerated as a response to the global pandemic. We are experiencing its impact on the way we live, work, learn and play and more broadly on the way we relate to each other on this planet and in our societies and local communities.

The world of work is also being transformed by the hybrid. In a practical way this makes sense as some things work well in the digital form, whilst others work best through the collective expression of human relationships. Through the health crisis, people have been quick to embrace remote work and work from home. What was once considered impossible, simply happened, and what was once improbable became standard practice over-night. It's amazing how quickly the barriers of the past were swept away by the crisis and the burning platform so urgently sought by change leaders in the past was accepted without debate.

It has become clear that what we are dealing with is something which doesn't respond to the quick fixes of the past. We are dealing with fundamental change that relies on the collective action of large numbers of people. These are not technical challenges; they are challenges for humanity. These are not crises where there are clear lines of expertise; these are existential ones which need the people concerned to be involved in the formulation of the problem, the shaping of the response and the collective execution of the solution.

Adaptive leadership, which has been embraced by many corporations, and grew out of the work of Ron Heifetz at Harvard University, differentiates between technical and adaptive challenges. The former where there is a well-defined problem with an established solution and the latter where there is uncertainty and ambiguity and there is no solution precedent. Heifetz cautions that applying technical leadership to an adaptive problem is a recipe for disaster. Adaptive problems require change in people and necessitate the active participation of people in the solution. They can no longer be resolved by the resident expert with the technical fix. We are in all in uncharted waters and unique solutions will need the participation of all.

It is clear that in a hybrid world we are encountering something different to what we have experienced before and resolution of these challenges will require emergent solutions and emergent solutions developed by the players involved. The quick fix approach engineered by authority figures in the past won't cut it. Leadership by the few and the passive acceptance by the many didn't deliver the results expected of "transformational projects" in the past and there is no reason to believe that they will be any more successful today.

A fundamental of leadership psychology is that accountability for execution comes from ownership of the solution and this in turn is an outcome of involvement in the process. As we reimagine what living and working are like in a hybrid world, we will have to invent the solutions together. This calls for human ingenuity on a scale that is unprecedented – a mobilization of people to define, refine and personalize solutions that will take us to new places, but ones that we will have reimaged and created together.

There will be clear technical challenges which can be addressed with "tried and true" solutions delivered by resident experts – digital tools that can connect us seamlessly to boost performance working remotely. There will also be aspects of office-based work that can be practically addressed – logistical and cultural conditions for effective collaboration and serendipitous learning when the office is a forum for learning, connecting and supporting. It is becoming clear that the magnitude of the change in conventional thinking and practice we see, will provide vast opportunities for shifts in the way we live, work and learn together.

Globally, we are in the midst of the 4th Industrial revolution – the seamless integration of the physical and digital worlds. The adaptive challenge of living and working in a hybrid way provides a small window into the bigger picture of the impact this will have in all aspects of our lives. How we deal with these challenges can usher in the most significant advancement in the democratization of leadership that we have yet seen, if we seize the opportunity to develop the leadership capability in all people to transform in a real sense the lives we lead and the work we do, not only in our homes and workplaces but also within the communities in which we live. This is a time to renew the human spirit, break with the inevitabilities of the past and forge a new trajectory for human well-being and for a real transformation of the world of work and its holistic integration into the lives we want to lead.