

POTENTIAL PHD RESEARCH TOPIC

The Intersection of Leadership and Ethics in the Context of Flexible Work

Supervisory Team

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Abstract

Flexible and remote work arrangements became widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic and many organisations have retained a degree of this flexibility as part of their 'new normal' way of working. Leaders today regularly engage with followers over remote platforms as their employees are working from home. Giving leaders a window into their followers' private lives has expanded the scope of their ethical responsibilities. What happens, for example, when leaders see evidence of unhealthy, chaotic, immoral, or criminal behaviour in the background of virtual meetings or in the demeanour of home-working followers? We are yet to fully appreciate the implications of these changes and more research is needed.

Further Details

Employers increasingly allow for flexible and remote work arrangements. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased the availability of flexible work options in response to lockdowns, movement restrictions, and isolation requirements. Organisations turned to flexible arrangements to continue their operations while employees were confined to their homes.

At a conservative estimate, around 30% of employees work remotely permanently and another 30% work remotely at least part of the time. Flexible and remote work arrangements seem here to stay, however, the leadership ramifications may take us years to fully appreciate. Flexible and remote work arrangements mean that leaders are physically removed from their followers and must rely increasingly on lower-context digital communication modes (e.g., video, phone, email, etc.). Video communication platforms are an increasingly popular form of leadership digitization, with critical and as yet underexplored ethical implications.

Leading remotely and giving leaders a window directly into the private lives of their followers raises complex ethical issues and blurs the boundaries of leaders' responsibility. Modern leadership approaches, such as authentic, servant, and ethical leadership, highlight the ethical demands at the core of the leadership role. However, research specifically regarding the ethical demands that arise from employees' remote and home-based working is underdeveloped. As followers work from home leaders may then find themselves responsible for what happens in such previously private spaces. Exposure to our followers' private lives therefore further extends leaders' ethical responsibilities and adds new job demands in the form of emotional labour in managing the experiences.

Remote and flexible work arrangements have the potential to significantly alter the ethical nature of leader–follower interactions, testing the viability of leaders' existing modes of ethical engagement, and presenting new challenging demands for heightened levels of ethical and emotional conduct. It remains unclear where leaders' ethical responsibilities start and stop when it comes to flexible and

remote work, and the implications of these new and hazy moral boundaries pose various research questions that are as yet unanswered.

The following are only a selection of the research questions that arise from the outline above that can form the basis of a PhD research project.

Research Questions

1. What are leaders' experiences of the changing ethical and emotional demands of leading remote and flexible workers?
2. How are the care or welfare aspects of leadership roles impacted by followers working remotely?
3. How are leaders attempting to respond to these changing ethical and emotional demands?
4. How effective are the strategies or accommodations that leaders are enacting to deal with these changing demands?
5. How do the findings of this research into the changing nature of the ethical landscape of remote leadership inform and develop existing theories of leadership ethics?

The research topic lends itself to both qualitative approaches (e.g., interviews, diary, thematic analyses) and quantitative approaches that look to test specific hypotheses (e.g., surveys, statistical analyses), depending on the nature of the final research questions.

The following articles help provide a backdrop of the literature pertaining to this field.

References

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