Chapter 8
Power in Online Leadership

Morten Fogsgaard
University of Aalborg, Denmark

Claus Elmholdt
University of Aalborg, Denmark

Rikke Lindekilde
Virtuel-Ledelse.com, Denmark

ABSTRACT
In this chapter, the authors explore how power processes can promote or hinder effectiveness in online leadership. The chapter offers a theoretical and empirical analysis of the power processes in online leadership, using the triangle of structural, personal, and discursive power as an analytical lens. The theoretical outset for understanding online leadership is the literature on boundaries and boundary-spanning leadership. The authors define online leadership as social influence processes mediated by technology to produce individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives. The chapter is empirically based on material from one of the authors’ PhD work on online leadership in a global Danish manufacturing company. The chapter illustrates how power can be used both constructively and destructively in online leadership.

INTRODUCTION
Alignment of expectations across locations is crucial. I think this part is generally underestimated. For instance, when managing introverted engineers at a distance, you need to know their individual expectations towards work and to you as a manager. Then you have to communicate your managerial expectations and align these in order to shape work and prevent deviance, no tool or groupware can help you on this.

These words were spoken by the manager of a global virtual team approximately 12 months after the team was established. The manager expressed his realization that, when managing online knowledge workers, his previous methods of supervising were not sufficient to achieve success and show that, given the constraints of technological interaction, online leaders and employees must develop team agreements for
how to interact and conduct their distributed collaboration. These agreements apply to various essential aspects of collaboration, such as the distribution of power in decision-making processes, when to send a query, how to communicate sensitive and personal feedback and even how to develop and maintain trustful relationships across distances. Whereas, in collocated collaboration, a number of social forces operate to ensure that both social information and activity information are exchanged, these forces are weak or absent in virtual teams. Therefore, leading a geographically distributed online workforce, such as those found in virtual teams, creates new demands for both team leadership and organization (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). The team leader no longer has close interactions with individual team members, and it is no longer possible to oversee employees’ everyday work or to have full knowledge of a given situation (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). The authors suggest that one approach for a geographically dispersed team to overcome these issues is to rely on a more empowering approach to leadership: an approach in which both the team members and the team take part together in the leadership activities (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997).

In this chapter, the authors explore the research question of how power processes can promote or hinder the accomplishment of effectiveness in online leadership of virtual teams. They define online leadership as the social influence processes in virtual teams that produce individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives. Research on effectiveness in online leadership has mostly addressed issues of technology, communication and leadership styles, largely overlooking the question of power. A recent search (31 May 2017) on the words “online leadership” and “power” using the search engine “Primo” revealed zero hits. Managers need to understand the role of power in organizations better in general, and in particular they need to understand the role of power in virtual teams, which is a different way of organizing and managing work activities. This chapter seeks to contribute to the sparse research on the topic of power in online leadership. A theoretical and empirical analysis of power processes in online leadership is conducted using the triangle of structural, personal and discursive power (Fogsgaard & Elmholdt, 2016) as an analytical lens. The authors’ theoretical outset for understanding online leadership is the literature on boundaries (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) and boundary-spanning leadership (Ernst & Chabot-Mason, 2011). The chapter is empirically based on material from one of the authors’ PhD work on online leadership in a global Danish manufacturing company. The chapter illustrates how power can be used both constructively and destructively in online leadership in a way similar to that used in face-to-face leadership. We will explore and discuss the potentials, challenges and pitfalls of power in relation to online leadership in virtual teams.

The aim is to create the basis for a constructive practical development of online leadership in virtual teams. The authors illustrate how increased awareness, analysis and discussion of power issues in online leadership can be constructive. It is thus a central point that power is not necessarily something that breaks down and represses, but that an explicit focus on power can be productive for leadership in virtual teams.

THE CHALLENGE OF BOUNDARIES IN ONLINE LEADERSHIP

Over the last 20 years, there has been an increase in people working physically distributed in virtual teams in knowledge-intensive industries. Teams working with, for example, research and development (R&D), product development or innovation are often distributed across the world to meet the demands for knowledge and expertise. They work in virtual teams in which team members use technology to