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Introduction

Increasing digitalization and globalization have fundamentally transformed the way businesses operate in recent years (Baldwin, 2019). This transformation has been further driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, as not only internationally operating but also traditionally regionally operating companies have been forced to rethink and adapt their work processes and structures (Kniffin et al., 2021). The accelerating shift to remote and hybrid working models is challenging traditional understandings of leadership and placing new, complex demands on managers (Bartsch et al., 2020; Gilson et al., 2015).

In this new world of work, the ability to lead virtually, regardless of time and place, is central (Malhotra et al., 2007). Virtual leadership, defined as the management of teams that are not physically in the same place at the same time and that interact primarily through digital means of communication, is fundamentally different from traditional leadership. The lack of direct, physical interaction requires new strategies and leadership approaches to ensure communication, collaboration and motivation (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003).

Virtual leadership is not a temporary phenomenon but has become an integral part of the modern workplace. Its relevance goes beyond the pandemic, as it provides organisations with access to a global talent pool and enables flexible working models that are increasingly demanded by employees (Bartsch et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). At the same time, virtual leadership requires managers to deal with additional challenges such as physical distance or technological challenges (Cascio, 2000; Wiesenfeld et al., 2001).

For managers, the move to virtual leadership often means less direct control, more tasks and increased stress. In addition to their own challenges, they need to resolve strategic crises and interpersonal conflicts to prevent emotions from leading to resistance and failure in times of change. Managing emotions, both one's own and those of others, becomes a success factor.

Emotions play a central role in virtual leadership as they influence behaviour, decision making and social interactions within a team (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005). In virtual environments, where physical presence is absent and non-verbal cues are reduced, leaders need to manage their emotions and those of their team members particularly carefully to avoid misunderstandings and maintain positive team dynamics (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Hambley et al., 2007). Communication media such as email, videoconferencing and instant messaging limit the range of information exchanged, especially the transmission of non-verbal signals such as facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice, which are crucial for understanding and managing emotions (Derks & Bakker, 2020; Kock, 2005). When leaders fail to regulate their emotions, these challenges can not only affect their personal health, but also negatively impact the performance and well-being of their teams (Raghuram et al., 2001; Yang et al., 2022).

The increased flexibility brought about by virtual working environments also carries the risk of a double burden. While flexibility is generally viewed positively, unclear boundaries between work and private life can lead to constant availability, which increases the risk of burnout and emotional exhaustion (Allen et al., 2021).

Consequently, managers are regularly confronted with emotionally stressful events at individual, group and organizational levels. To lead effectively, managers must not only maintain their own resilience and work-life balance, but also support their teams in achieving this balance. This requires a high level of self-reflection and the ability to recognise and respect one's own emotional boundaries (Kossek et al., 2012).

Through targeted emotion regulation, leaders can maintain their own stability and at the same time create an environment in which their employees remain engaged and motivated despite physical distance (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020). Fostering this skill is therefore central not only to the wellbeing of leaders themselves, but also to the success of the whole team and ultimately the organization (Bandura, 2004).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical underpinning of this work is based on a broad and robust literature that draws on the concepts of emotion regulation, self-regulation, emotional intelligence and emotional labour. These concepts are central to understanding the challenges and opportunities of virtual leadership.

Emotions are complex psychophysiological responses that include cognitive appraisals, bodily states, expressive behaviors and affective experiences (Gross, 2014). They play a central role in leadership as they significantly influence the behaviour and decision-making processes of individuals (Ekman, 1992). In leadership contexts, emotions shape the way leaders communicate, make decisions and motivate their followers (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011). This is particularly evident in situations of crisis or change, where a leader's ability to recognise and regulate emotional states is critical to success (Humphrey et al., 2015).

Emotion regulation refers to the processes by which people influence what emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express those emotions (Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Gross, 2015a, b). It can occur intrapersonally (regulating one's own emotions) or interpersonally (regulating the emotions of others) (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014; Gross & John, 2003) and affects both negative (anger) and positive (happiness) emotions (Giuliani et al., 2008). The concept recognizes the inherent adaptability of emotional responses to the demands of different situations and highlights the interplay between intrinsic emotional experiences and extrinsic environmental stimuli (Gross, 1998).

From an action control perspective (Webb et al., 2012a, c), emotion regulation involves three phases: (i) identification (of the need to regulate), (ii) choice (of whether to regulate and which strategy to use), and (iii) implementation (of the chosen strategy). In the identification phase, the decision is made whether there is a need to regulate because there is a discrepancy between the current and desired emotional state (Tamir et al., 2020). In the selection phase, it is decided whether and how the person can and wants to regulate. Awareness of one's own emotion and the context helps in deciding whether and how to regulate the emotion (Barrett et al., 2001; Farb et al., 2014). In the implementation phase, the chosen strategies are carried out. Gross (2015) proposes an additional phase in which monitoring and decision-making determine whether the strategy should be continued, abandoned, or switched to another strategy (Dorman-Ilan et al., 2020). The goal determines whether the experience and expression of emotion should be increased, maintained, or decreased in duration and/or intensity.

Emotion regulation **strategies** then determine the means to achieve the goal (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014). They refer to the un-/conscious processes by which individuals maintain, modify, or redirect emotional responses (Gross, 1998, 2008, Gross et al., 2011). They serve to influence the nature, intensity, duration and experience of emotions. In addition to the situation itself, attention, appraisal and response can also be modified (Gross, 2008). Situation, attention, and appraisal can be regulated in advance, before emotional experiences are fully activated

(Gross, 2002), to prevent an overly negative or positive emotion from occurring. In contrast, reaction modification is used once an emotion has occurred (Gross, 2002). Accordingly, Gross distinguishes two main forms of emotion regulation: Antecedent-focused strategies come into play before the emotional response is fully formed. They include techniques such as situation selection, situation modification, attentional control, and cognitive modification. Reaction-focused strategies are used after the emotion has arisen and usually involve modifying emotional responses, both internally (e.g., by suppressing or reappraising the emotion) and in the way they are expressed externally.

People with better interpersonal skills are happier, better able to cope with stress at work and healthier (Aldao, 2013; Brackett et al., 2004; Gross & John, 2003). However, not all emotion regulation strategies are the same. Some are adaptive and lead to positive outcomes for psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships, while others may be maladaptive and contribute to negative outcomes. For example, cognitive reappraisal is generally considered to be an adaptive strategy that reduces emotional distress and promotes well-being. In contrast, suppression, in which the expression of emotions is inhibited, may be maladaptive and lead to increased stress and decreased social connectedness (Hu et al., 2014; Ochsner & Gross, 2005; Torrence & Connelly, 2019; Troy et al., 2017).

Affective, cognitive, motivational, individual and sociocultural factors influence our motivation for emotion regulation and our choice of strategy (Matthews et al., 2021). Affective factors include the valence and intensity of the target emotion, the level of arousal, the nature of the emotional event, and the specific emotion being regulated. Cognitive determinants include the opportunity to use specific regulatory strategies, cognitive effort, the level of abstraction of thinking, and the presence of a default strategy. Motivational factors are represented by different goals, such as temporal, directional and situational/instrumental goals, and the nature of the task or interaction at hand. Individual determinants include demographic factors such as age and gender, mental health status, personality traits such as neuroticism, and attitudes towards emotions. Finally, socio-cultural determinants include a sense of belonging and political ideology.

A foundational model in emotion regulation research is Gross's process model (Gross, 1998, 2014), which identifies five key stages in which emotion regulation can occur: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive reappraisal, and response modulation. This model provides a framework for understanding the different strategies that individuals use to regulate their emotions, from avoiding stressful situations to reappraising the

meaning of emotionally charged events (Gross, 1998). The specific strategies are discussed next.

To increase the likelihood of finding oneself in a situation that evokes desired emotions, one can consciously approach (or avoid) a situation. The strategy of **situation selection** requires prior knowledge of one's own personality and needs in order to assess in advance the emotions that a particular situation is likely to evoke (Gross, 2008; Loewenstein, 2007). When faced with the confrontation, one decides to face the situation despite possible negative emotions – possibly in the hope of long-term benefits. If this is not the case, the alternative is avoidance, which can have negative long-term effects on well-being and health (Aldao et al., 2010; Penley et al., 2002; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). Often, leaders do not have the option to consciously choose the situation but must deal with it.

The strategy of **modifying the situation** includes actions that aim to change the emotional impact of the situation, e.g. by changing the situation directly, seeking support and resolving conflicts. It is therefore about changing the external features of the situation that cause the emotion, rather than managing the emotion itself. Changing the situation directly by taking practical steps that have a direct impact on the situation (e.g. rehearsing the next speech) usually leads to less stress, a more positive mood, improved well-being and/or health (Aldao et al., 2010; Penley et al., 2002; Riley & Park, 2014). This strategy is used when situations are perceived as changeable and controllable (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000), which requires a degree of emotional knowledge and understanding (Connelly et al., 2014; Joseph & Newman, 2010).

Attention deployment involves modifying emotions by selecting the information we pay attention to through distraction, rumination or mindfulness. Distraction involves shifting attention away from the emotional aspects of the situation or the situation as a whole – both physically (looking away) and mentally (focusing on positive things). This strategy reduces negative emotions (Webb et al., 2012b). Rumination refers to the prolonged focus on the event to which the emotions are attached, which increases the duration and intensity of negative emotions (Bushman, 2002; Morrow & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990) and the risk of depression (Robinson & Alloy, 2003). Mindfulness focuses on the present moment in a non-judgmental way by observing the internal (thoughts, motives, feelings) and external world. Studies show an association with increased feelings of happiness (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010) and reduced stress, anxiety or risk of depression (Brown & Ryan, 2003). However, the mindfulness strategy is only effective if it is followed by action (Webb et al., 2012b).

In the **cognitive reappraisal** strategy, we un-/consciously change the way we think in order to change the emotional meaning of a situation. This can relate to appraisals of self-efficacy, threat or challenge, and positive reappraisal or acceptance. Self-efficacy describes a person's confidence in their ability to cope with a situation (Bandura, 1997). Evaluation as a challenge or threat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) refers to the perceived gains and losses in an unfavorable situation. A situation is perceived as threatening if the individual perceives it as exceeding their own resources and/or focuses on the potential/actual losses associated with it. We evaluate situations as challenges when they are perceived as resource-consuming, but the individual recognizes the potential or actual losses – which distinguishes them from unrealistic optimism – and focuses on the potential or actual gains. Positive reappraisal may involve, for example, seeing the silver lining in the situation, putting things into perspective, or interpreting ones negative emotional response as normal given the circumstances. Studies have shown that reappraisal (compared to suppression) leads to a reduction in the experience and expression of negative emotions (John & Gross, 2004; Webb et al., 2012b). Acceptance involves accepting the situation and/or one's inability to cope with it. It is particularly useful in situations that cannot be easily changed or reappraised.

Cognitive reappraisal leads to more positive and fewer negative emotions (Gross, 2013, 2015; Gross & John, 2003), improved cognitive functioning (e.g., memory; Richards & Gross, 2000), higher performance and better social functioning (Gross & John, 2003). It appears to be a particularly functional strategy for leaders, as this form of regulation is aimed at evaluating and judging emotionally charged events. By broadening one's perspective on a situation, a leader can improve his or her understanding through reinterpretation and perspective taking. This process not only serves to moderate the leader's emotional experience, but also improves his or her ability to cope with the situation at hand. Furthermore, cognitive reappraisal is categorized as a goal-directed strategy, suggesting that these actions are likely to be aligned with task and interpersonal priorities.

Reaction modification involves the inhibition of emotional reactions after the emotion has been activated. It can affect the experience of the reaction (sharing emotions with others; Rimé, 2007) and/or behaviour (aggression, concealing the emotion). Suppressing emotions changes observable behaviour, but rarely the experience of the emotion (Gross & John, 2003).

Most studies focus on the strategies of cognitive reappraisal and suppression (Torrence & Connelly, 2019). They conclude that cognitive reappraisal generally leads to better affective, cognitive and social outcomes than suppression (English et al., 2012; Gross & John, 2003;

Richards & Gross, 2000). Suppression is ineffective at reducing the experience of emotions (Gross, 1998), negatively impacts social functioning (Butler et al., 2003), requires more elaborate processing and is negatively related to task performance (Richards & Gross, 2000). Managers who constantly suppress their emotions are less effective and may experience higher levels of stress and burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Torrence & Connelly, 2019).

To fully understand the concept of emotion regulation in a leadership context, it is necessary to consider related concepts that are closely linked to it. Two particularly relevant concepts in this context, which also have a significant impact on leadership effectiveness, are emotional intelligence and emotional labour.

Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to perceive, understand, manage and express one's own emotions and those of others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). It encompasses both awareness of one's own emotions and the ability to use emotional information effectively to manage behaviour and social interactions. In leadership contexts, emotional intelligence is seen as a success factor because it enables leaders to motivate and inspire teams through a deep understanding of emotional dynamics (Goleman, 1996). Leaders with high emotional intelligence are better able to interpret non-verbal cues in (digital) interactions and respond to subtle emotional signals (Mayer et al., 2004) that are easily overlooked in virtual environments.

Emotional labour refers to the need to show emotions in certain professional contexts that are desired or expected by the organization, regardless of the actual feelings felt (Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild distinguishes between surface and deep acting. In surface acting, the outward display of emotions is adapted without changing the feelings, whereas in deep acting, an attempt is made to change the actual feelings in order to make the outward expression appear authentic. In virtual leadership contexts, emotional labour is intensified because leaders must communicate their emotions through digital media, which increases the risk of emotional exhaustion (Grandey, 2000). In contrast, deep acting can appear more authentic and may be a more effective strategy for leaders to maintain integrity and trust in their leadership style.

The concepts overlap considerably: although emotional labour has been defined as an independent concept, various researchers (e.g. Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011) have shown that it is ultimately about emotion regulation in a professional context, especially in the service sector. Deep acting and surface acting can also be seen as forms of cognitive processing and suppression. In addition, several researchers have emphasized that the ability to regulate emotions is an essential component of emotional intelligence. Peña-

Sarrionandia et al. (2015), Barrett and Gross (2001), Barrett and Salovey (2002) and Matthews et al. (2002) argue for a stronger integration of emotional intelligence and related constructs. This seems reasonable, as the ability to perceive emotions and to recognise when emotion regulation is needed is a necessary prerequisite for the effective application of emotion regulation strategies.

Research gap

Virtual leadership is becoming increasingly important in the modern world of work. However, research on the specific challenges of emotion regulation in these contexts is still limited. While traditional leadership approaches are based on physical presence and direct interaction, virtual leadership requires new strategies to effectively regulate and communicate emotional states. These differences represent a significant research gap that has not been adequately addressed in the existing literature. In the following, the specific challenges of emotion regulation in virtual leadership contexts and the resulting research gaps are discussed in detail.

The distinction between traditional and virtual leadership is central to understanding the challenges for emotion regulation in these different contexts. While traditional leadership is based on physical presence, direct interaction and immediate feedback, virtual leadership is based on technologically mediated communication channels, which bring a variety of new challenges. This fundamentally changes the dynamics of leadership and has significant implications for the way leaders regulate their own emotions and those of their team members.

In traditional leadership contexts, leaders have the opportunity to directly observe and respond to non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures and posture of their team members. These cues are essential for effective emotion regulation because they help leaders to recognise and respond to their employees' emotional states (Humphrey, 2012). However, in virtual leadership situations, these direct nonverbal cues are missing, making emotion regulation significantly more difficult. Therefore, leaders need to develop new strategies to interpret and manage emotional information through digital communication channels.

Another important difference is the physical distance between the manager and team members, which often leads to a sense of isolation in virtual contexts (Golden et al., 2008). This isolation can put both the manager and team members under emotional strain and weaken the sense of belonging and cohesion that is less common in traditional, face-to-face teams (Gilson et al., 2015).

Humphrey et al. (2008) and Gooty et al. (2010) also emphasize that emotion regulation in virtual teams is often influenced by the technological means used for communication. These technological barriers can obscure the fine nuances of emotional expression, making it difficult to provide authentic and empathetic leadership. In traditional leadership situations, these technological challenges play a much smaller role, which means that findings on emotion regulation from these contexts may not be directly transferable to virtual leadership (Bartsch et al., 2020).

A key gap in the existing literature is the lack of a clear picture of cause-effect relationships in virtual leadership. It remains unclear which specific factors lead to negative emotions in leaders and to what extent and how these are regulated. Furthermore, the influence of contextual factors on emotion regulation in virtual environments has not been sufficiently explored.

In summary, the differences between traditional and virtual leadership represent a significant research gap that needs to be addressed. Previous research on emotion regulation in leadership situations has not sufficiently considered the specific challenges associated with virtual leadership. It is therefore necessary to examine emotion regulation in virtual contexts separately to develop a deeper understanding of the specific demands and strategies required for effective virtual leadership. Without such differentiation, knowledge of emotion regulation in leadership remains incomplete and potentially ineffective when applied to virtual leadership contexts.

Emotions are central to social interactions and, in leadership contexts, directly influence the behaviour and decision-making of leaders and their teams (Humphrey et al., 2015). Despite their obvious importance, emotional processes are often neglected in research on (virtual) leadership. The focus is mainly on communication, technology use, team cohesion and performance, while emotional aspects are rarely considered (Bartsch et al., 2020; Gilson et al., 2015). However, virtual communication limits the transmission of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and gestures, which can lead to misunderstandings and emotional distance. This distance can in turn affect trust and cooperation in the team, which can lead to ineffective leadership behaviour and lower team performance (Spreitzer et al., 2017).

Stuart (1995) also criticized the fact that business schools rarely teach the human side of change, yet this emotional side is crucial to understanding and successfully implementing change. Gilley et al. (2009) highlight that nearly half of Fortune 1000 companies report that their management development and training programmes are outdated, indicating an urgent

need to pay more attention to the emotional dimension of leadership. Ashkanasy and Daus (2005) emphasize that emotions are an integral part of human interactions and that leaders' ability to use emotional information is critical to leadership effectiveness. Clarke et al (2007) add that the overemphasis on rational aspects has obscured the emotional experience of leaders, which can have negative consequences for organisations, especially in times of change.

In particular, modern leadership theories such as charismatic-transformational leadership emphasize the importance of emotions in communicating a vision, creating a strong sense of unity and motivating employees (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Conger, 2011; Halverson et al., 2004) and strengthening the relationship between the leader and employees (LMX; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Schriesheim et al., 1999). To do this, leaders need not only work resources such as autonomy and job security (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), but also social and personal resources such as emotional intelligence and emotion regulation (Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015; Troth et al., 2023).

Failure to address these needs means that more and more managers are becoming exhausted. One survey found that 72% of managers in the US reported being burned out (HR Executive, 2021). Self-control, emotional intelligence, emotional dissonance and energy transfer are particularly resource intensive (Liao et al., 2021; Muraven et al., 2006). Leaders must constantly project positive emotions, even when they are exhausted (Gardner et al., 2009; Morris & Feldman, 1996), which further depletes energy resources, leads to feelings of inauthenticity, and promotes burnout (Andela & Truchot, 2017; Avolio et al., 2004; Baumeister & Alquist, 2009; Humphrey et al., 2008; Kenworthy et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2011).

In summary, the neglect of the emotional component in (virtual) leadership research is problematic because virtual work environments pose specific emotional challenges that do not arise in the same way in traditional work models.

One reason for the neglect of emotions in virtual leadership research may be that emotional processes are more difficult to measure and quantify than, for example, technological or organizational factors. Emotions are often subjective and fleeting, making them difficult to capture and analyze systematically (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005). As a result, emotions are often treated as an afterthought in many studies or replaced by other, more easily measurable variables.

This may also be due to a lack of qualitative research on emotions and leadership (Bryman, 2004; Conger, 1998; Gooty et al., 2010; Stentz et al., 2012). The fact that the complex

challenges of organizational reality are not adequately addressed in theories and studies (Zaccaro & Horn, 2003) may be one reason why leadership research findings are regularly not applied in practice (Day, 2001; Hülsheger & Maier, 2008).

Another significant shortcoming of leadership research to date is the dominance of studies conducted primarily with student samples and in artificial laboratory experiments. While these methodological approaches provide valuable insights, they often fail to reflect the complex reality in which leaders actually operate. Real-world work environments and the direct experiences of leaders are often ignored, resulting in limited applicability of research findings to practice.

Overall, the research to date does not provide a sufficient basis for deriving practical emotion regulation measures for leaders in virtual contexts. Quantitative approaches reach their limits when it comes to capturing the complex and nuanced emotional challenges in virtual teams. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, allow for deeper insights into leaders' subjective experiences and capture the specific contexts and meanings that are essential for developing effective emotion regulation strategies. Therefore, this research adopts a primarily qualitative approach – albeit within the framework of a mixed methods design – to fill this research gap and to develop practical recommendations for the emotional competence development of leaders in virtual environments.

Aim of the research

Against the background of the research gaps described above, this research aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the intrapersonal emotion regulation of managers in virtual contexts. Both theoretical foundations and practical implications will be explored. In particular, it examines the specific challenges managers face in virtual environments, the techniques they use to manage emotional distress, and the frameworks that support them. By identifying and analyzing specific strategies used by managers in virtual contexts, the research aims to contribute to the development of leadership theory and at the same time develop practical recommendations for managers. In the long term, the research aims to promote effective and resilient leadership practices that meet the demands of the modern world of work.

The central **research question** is: How do managers cope with emotional challenges in virtual contexts, and what techniques and conditions are helpful?

This central question has three sub-questions as follows:

- *Challenges*: What specific challenges do managers experience in virtual leadership?
- *Techniques*: What emotion regulation techniques are particularly relevant and effective for virtual leaders to counteract emotional distress?
- *Framework conditions*: Which individual and organizational framework conditions have an impact on the perceived emotional stress and/or influence the ability and willingness to regulate emotions?

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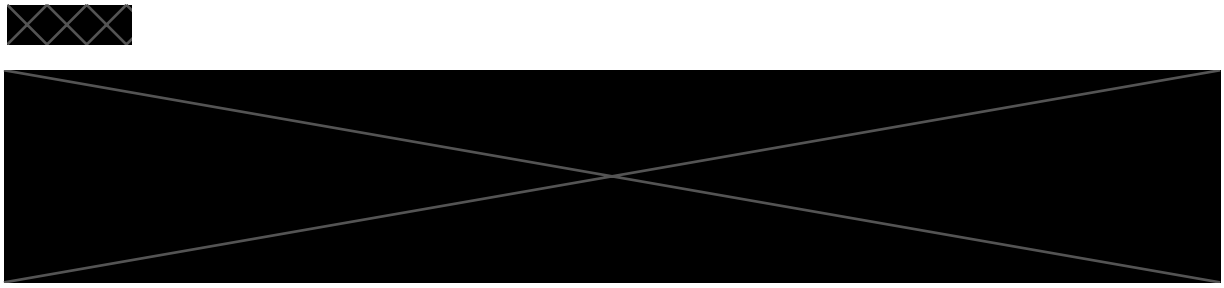

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