Hybrid management

An article featuring practical tools for functional, structured management in a hybrid reality

Our expectations for our working lives have changed, and it is important that we as managers construct a logical framework for how we organise ourselves in the future. The question is, what is the right model for your particular team? We hope this article can inspire you to see new possibilities.

Hybrid herd animals

There are many indications that the hybrid working life is here to stay, placing new demands on our ability to collaborate across both virtual and physical settings, as well as different time zones.

We humans are herd animals, and new research shows that we lose a sense of cohesion as a team when we work separately. Many of us notice that we have far less awareness of what everyone else is working on or struggling with. This applies not only to new colleagues, but also to those who have been in the workplace for a long time. This feeling intensifies over time. We may get used to the lack of regular informal interaction with each another, such as when we spot a colleague in the car park, wave and say good morning. Yet in order to thrive we need in-person relationships, which require more than recognising an image on a screen or a voice through a phone — they require a physical subject in the spatial world [1].

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[1] *See Totem's survey https://hi.totem.team/the-hidden-impact-of-remote-work-infographic/*

A report by Microsoft (based on a study of 30,000 people across 31 countries) shows that more than **70%** of respondents still want to have the option of tele-working, while **67%** simultaneously want to spend more time in-person with their team [2]. This leaves companies with a paradox that is difficult to navigate. Yet more companies want to incorporate the hybrid working life. A new McKinsey study shows that **90%** of companies surveyed will continue to offer their employees the possibility to work both from home and at the workplace [3]. So the reality for many companies is that they now need to define the conditions required for a successful hybrid work culture in order to be an attractive workplace in the future. This is where management plays a key role.

· **30,000 people** ·
spread over 31 countries

70%
want teleworking

67%
want time in-person
with their team

90%
of the firms surveyed
want to offer both office
and home working

· ·

Hybrid formats

The hybrid format affects all dimensions of working life in an organisation — from the individual meeting to overall working life. We have split the hybrid formats into three categories and will address each category in our series of articles on hybrid formats. The categories increase in complexity: running the gamut from specific interactions in meetings and workshops, to hybrid management and, finally, hybrid working life as a whole.

2   *https://ms-worklab.azureedge.net/files/reports/hybridWork/pdf/2021_Microsoft_WTI_Report_ March.pdf (The 2021 World Trend Index)*
3   *https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/what-executives- are-saying-about-the-future-of-hybrid-work#*

The three categories are:
1) Hybrid meetings and workshops 2) Hybrid management and 3) The hybrid working life.

This article focuses on the hybrid management.
The other two articles can be downloaded *here.*

The hybrid working life

The hybrid working life describes different ways in which employees organise their working life, where relationships between the company and the employees are more fluid (some are at work, others work from home or from somewhere else entirely at different times of the day).
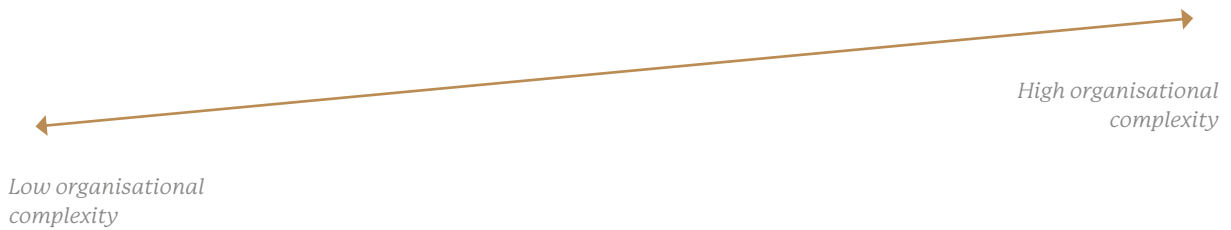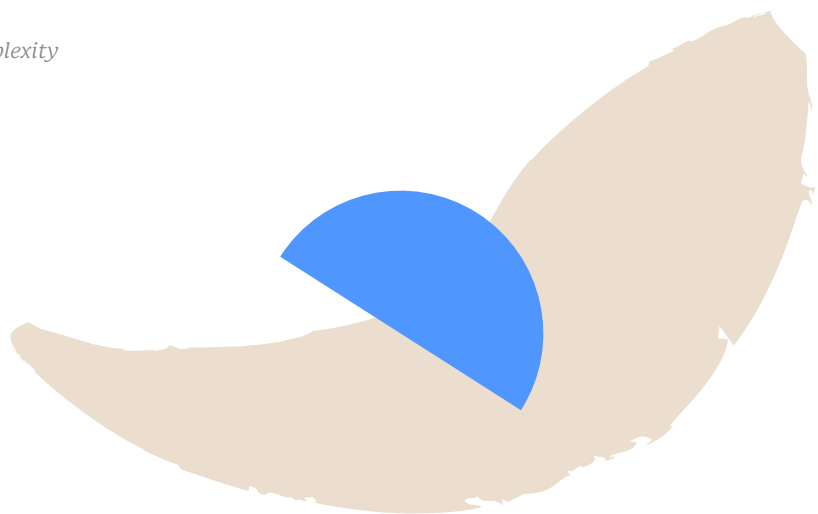
Hybrid management

Management where geographical spread is inherent and where that geographical spread can also include different time zones, cultures, countries and organisations.

Hybrid meetings and workshops

Sessions where some of the participants are physically together in a room, while others participate in the meeting online. Participants often attend from unequal conditions.

High organisational complexity
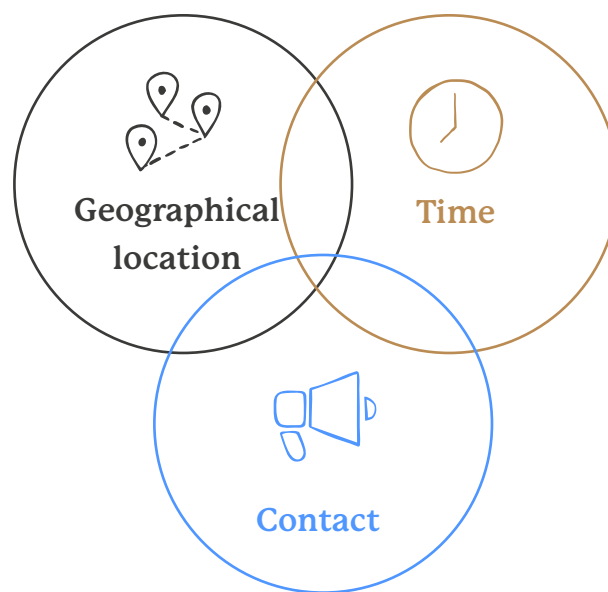
Low organisational complexity

Figure 1
Hybrid formats and organisational complexity

Hybrid management

Hybrid management describes a continuum between traditional presence mana-
gement and distance management, where the manager must relate to a team
of employees spread geographically across time zones, and has a more sporadic
interface with each other. This format differs from previous modes of working,
where traditional teams sat together from 9-5, sharing not only a time zone, but
also physical space. Hybrid management includes:

Employees that are geographically located somewhere different from their manager and others in the team.

The geographical spread can also include different times zones, cul-tures, countries and organisations.

Geographical location

Time

Contact

There is limited in-person contact with the manager
and other colleagues/team members.

Figure 2
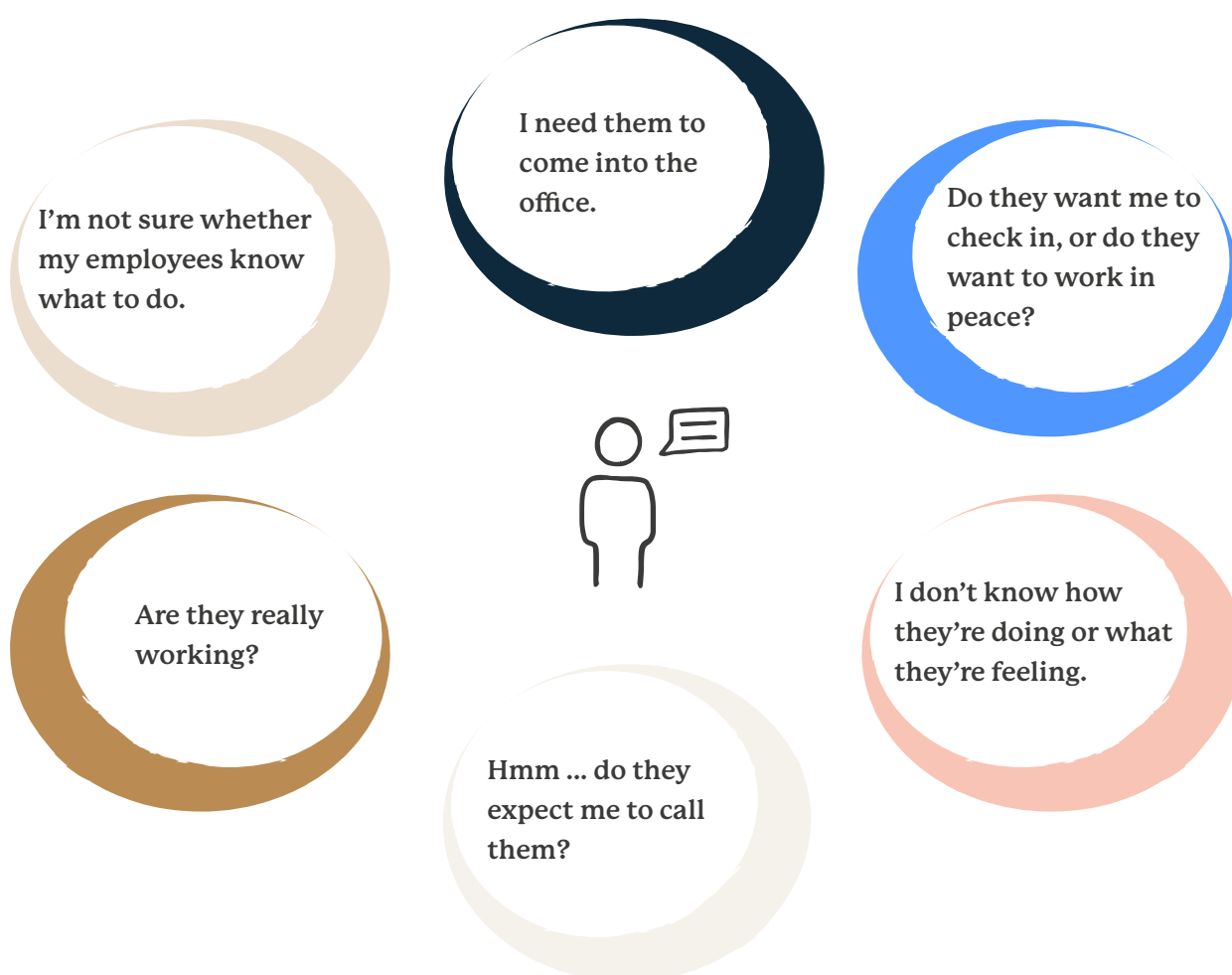*Examples of hybrid management*

The role of the hybrid manager

As a leader, one of your tasks is to help your team get a better result from their
work than if they were left to themselves. You must also support psychological
safety and cohesion in the team. Below we offer some of our tips on how to
succeed in a hybrid reality where some of your employees are physically at work
while others work from home or in other locations.

In a hybrid work format, you as a manager may find that you end up adapting your
management to suit your own situation. If most of your work is done remotely,
you are more likely to create structure, have scheduled meetings and communi-

cate in writing. If, on the other hand, you work mainly at the office, it is easier set your schedule spontaneously and to make more room for informal communication.

If employees work remotely part of the time, however, it is important to maintain the structure no matter where you are, so that all employees are included equally. Also, make sure you dedicate an equal amount of time to the employees who work at the office and to those who work from home.

For many managers, the flexible, hybrid everyday life is fraught with a number of dilemmas:

I'm not sure whether my employees know what to do.

I need them to come into the office.

Do they want me to check in, or do they want to work in peace?

Are they really working?

Hmm ... do they expect me to call them?

I don't know how they're doing or what they're feeling.

Figure 3
Examples of the hybrid manager's thoughts

Some managers feel that they have a hard time keeping up with whether their employees have enough to do, and managers who like to be close to the job itself may feel a big loss of control when employees are not close by. This applies especially to managers who have traditionally stepped in and out of work tasks

because they have a special level of expertise, or because that's how they have always managed.

A manager in our network explains that her employees no longer call her as much as they used to. She now experiences having to be much more proactive in terms of getting a sense of how her employees are doing. They no longer bring their work issues to her to discuss.

However, employees must also adjust to the new norm, where they too don't have the same degree of daily contact with their manager or colleagues.

"So when I don't hear anything from you" ...

I think you don't trust me

I feel that you're not interested in me

I become unsure whether I am doing my job well

I start doubting whether or not I can trust you

I worry that I'm being left out

I don't think that you're thinking of me

Figure 4
Employee thought patterns at a distance

Distance clearly has a strong influence on our well-being. We may therefore need to restore the level of trust and cohesion in the team in order to create a positive work atmosphere.

Here are 4 good tips for the hybrid manager to support cohesion and psychological safety in the team:

Focus on collabora-tion and interfaces	Take care of the teamwork	The social cohesion	Support delivery
Strengthen cohesion through conscious use of in-person encounters. New relationships are best nurtured by meeting in person and sensing the mood and cultural rules of the game. Focus on teamwork when working on a task, and focus on developing competencies. There is less informal sparring.	Help employees with the borderless way of working by continuously aligning expectations, e.g. for when a job needs to be completed. Set aside more time for regular 1-on-1 meetings with employees. Emphasise the importance of focusing on your own and others' well-being, and provide a framework for discussing well-being.	Support social gatherings by, for example, arranging informal coffee meetings and joint meetings. Focus on teamwork to avoid the formation of an A team and B teams, simply because some work more from home than others. Take the lead in putting feedback and community on the agenda.	Focus on the volume and content of work tasks. Help the employee to organise work that needs to be done with others. Focus on whether the employee has the skills to plan and solve the work tasks in a hybrid setup.

Figure 5
https://www.medst.dk/arbejdsomraader/ledelse/ledelse-paa-den-hybride-arbejdsplads/skab-en-god-hybrid-arbejds-kultur/

Managers are therefore responsible for monitoring whether their employees have too much or too little work to do, and whether the employees develop, thrive, have a good network in the organisation, etc. As a manager it is important to speak up and perhaps also say out loud: "I feel a loss of control, I feel it's hard to keep up with what you're doing." Some employees may express that they can easily work independently and don't need managing. But there may also be employees who almost feel let down if their manager is not visible. That's why it's essential to align expectations around the individual employee's and the team's need for management.

A good alignment of expectations with your team

The hybrid manager's task is to set the corner flags for how the team should work and organise itself in the future. It could, for example, be that in your team you must have a maximum of two home-working days, and these have to be on the same weekdays for everyone. Discuss as a team which two days these should be. You can also involve the employees when deciding whether this format works and when to next review it.

One model that can help the individual manager with aligning expectations, as well as defining the corner flags for hybrid management, is the hybrid manager's dialogue model, which we call the SEAS model: 1) Set corner flags 2) Establish the rules of the game 3) Assign clear roles 4) Strengthen the relationships.
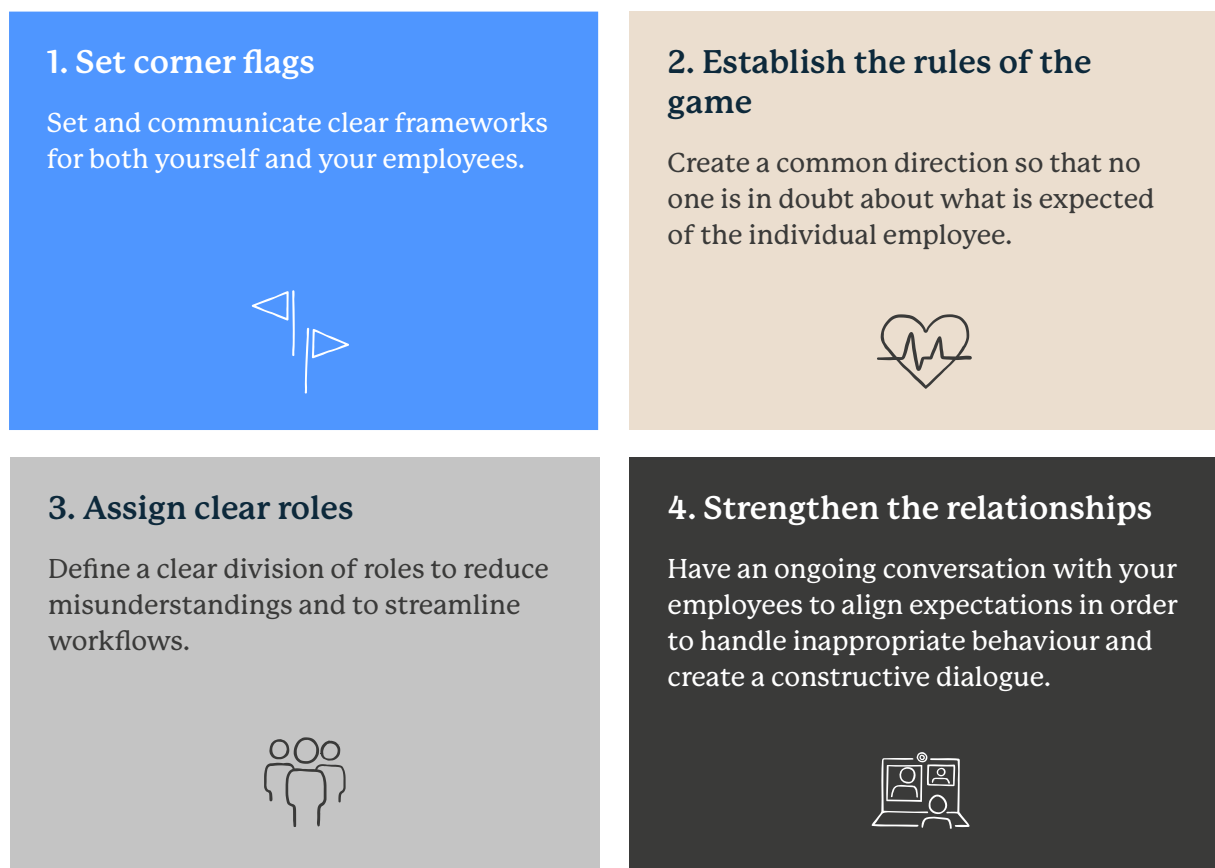
1. Set corner flags

Set and communicate clear frameworks for both yourself and your employees.

2. Establish the rules of the game

Create a common direction so that no one is in doubt about what is expected of the individual employee.

3. Assign clear roles

Define a clear division of roles to reduce misunderstandings and to streamline workflows.

4. Strengthen the relationships

Have an ongoing conversation with your employees to align expectations in order to handle inappropriate behaviour and create a constructive dialogue.

Figure 6
SEAS model

Set corner flags:

Setting corner flags means that you as a manager define a clear playing field in which your employees can work and thrive. These corner flags must be completely clear, so clear that the employees are in no doubt about what behaviour is off the pitch and what behaviour is expected on the pitch. If you have an ongoing dialogue with your employees in which you align each other's expectations, you can deal with any inadequacies and manage any conflicts as you go along.

This could be anything from carrying out specific work tasks to how, when and where you are available, and which meetings are taken remotely or at the office.

Here are some sample questions to ask:

Dialogue questions

- What are our common goals?

- What do others on the team need and how can I help?

- When do we work in the office/from home?

- How do we create a good level of flexibility among us?

- When are we all present, in time and place? (Online and in-person)

1. Establish the rules of the game

As a manager, you must continuously align your expectations with the employees and set clear guidelines and expectations for how the work should be completed. Employees will typically have very different experiences, which also means that they have different needs for management when working in a hybrid format.

It can be particularly important to focus on supporting younger and less experienced employees with training and knowledge-sharing, especially when working from home. Employees who want to work away from the office often work independently, have control over their own expertise and prefer to work in peace. This may mean that the new and less experienced employees, or those who like socialising, are in the office. This can lead to a certain polarisation among the employees and, over time, the office culture may become diluted such that com-

ing into the office grows less and less appealing for everyone. As employees, we tend to forget that, in addition to being responsible for our own work, we are in fact also obligated to our colleagues and to the organisation in general, e.g. by supporting new colleagues or contributing to the social side of working life. Here, flex-day-agreements or fixed agreements on remote working can be a good way to go, so that employees know when they can be together in person. Such agreements can also create a better common understanding of the importance of spending time together in person because it e.g. strengthens cohesion.

Here are some sample questions to ask:

Dialogue questions

- What is good behaviour for us?

- How do we talk to each other?

- When do others need my knowledge?

- When do I need the knowledge of others?

- How do we ensure knowledge-sharing?

- How do we give each other feedback?

- What types of meetings do we use? (hybrid, virtual or physical?)

- How do we hold good meetings?

2. Assign clear roles

A clear division of roles helps to reduce misunderstandings and streamline the workflow – especially if the team doesn't come in every day and get that informal alignment of expectations.

It is important that you think about the division of roles within the team, management team and cross-disciplinary projects, and get a clear alignment of expectations in relation to who is expected to do what and what responsibilities belong to the different roles. How do we collaborate, what does the final product or

reporting look like, how often should we check in with each other? An overview of competencies can help build knowledge about whom to reach out to and with what. If you create an overview within the team of what competencies and experiences are available based on educational qualifications, previous employment and areas of responsibility, it will also be easier to work across silos, offering help and reaching out about work tasks that are not necessarily related to current projects or work.

For example, ask the following questions:

Dialogue questions

- What are we collaborating on?

- What are the roles of the collaboration? Who takes responsibility for what, and who follows up?

- Do we know each other's (colleagues') experiences, competencies and strengths?

- Are we in agreement about how we make decisions?

3. Strengthen relationships

Psychological safety and the need to reduce the experience of distance are important. If there's room for interpretation, we tend to interpret things negatively when we are at a distance from one another. We say that 'distance creates distance'. One such example is if you read a negative emotion into a message from a leader or colleague. From a distance, the negative thought is magnified. This can also happen when you send an email that says "urgent" in the subject field and don't get an answer right away, but don't know why. These negative interpretations of communication can have a major impact on the individual's job satisfaction and the work environment in general.

If we are not all self-reflective and aware that negative thoughts come to us easily, the negative interpretations will affect the confidence and cohesiveness of the team. The first step is awareness that distance can create negative interpretations of others' communication.

Here are some sample questions to ask:

Dialogue questions

- How is our well-being?

- What does it mean to have "good working relationships" here?

- To what extent do we believe that day-to-day, everyone has each other's best interests at heart?

- How can we increase trust — with each other and across the organisation?

- How do we accept differences?

We recommend that you, as a hybrid manager, take the first step and set the corner flags to create the flexible working life you want for your team. Next, involve your employees in the decisions that they can have a say in. Setting up the new framework together not only increases commitment from all parties, it also ensures a real joint ownership and obligation to live up to the new agreements.

How to start on the small things.

While the above SEAS model for hybrid managers encourages you to perform a major service check of your team and create some forward-looking frameworks and roles, there are also things you can do right away to strengthen your hybrid management. For example, you might consider starting the following as early as tomorrow.

Make sure to 'check in' with your employees more systematically, and make it easy for them to reach out to you. Make sure you say good morning to everyone, e.g. on the chat every day. Hang a picture of all the employees you would normally greet, so you can remember them more easily. Set aside time for a 'call and walk' with your employees at least once a month.

During periods when you can't meet in the office due to 'lock down', make sure you meet outdoors in small groups, where you can see each other and sort out any minor or major issues. You could even make goodie bags with reflection questions, drinks and snacks for people who walk in pairs.

When holding virtual or hybrid meetings with your employees, schedule them so that everyone can get involved. Prepare the questions you want to ask and, for example, ask everyone to answer in the chat. Welcome each attendee by name when they enter the meeting so that they feel seen.

Conduct weekly 'temperature' checks with your team to detect any low mood and discuss the results.

If you have new employees, consider assigning a mentor/contact person who can help involve them both professionally and socially. Consider extending this scheme to apply to everyone on the team, so that you formalise what was previously informal. For example, set up a mutual mentoring scheme between employees, which rotates from week to week. This can also increase knowledge-sharing across the team.

We hope this article has inspired you to think more specifically about how you as a manager can support well-being and professional focus in a hybrid workplace. At Good Company, we work with many different types of organisations and are available for sparring and discussing our different experiences, so please do not hesitate to contact us.

Literature:

If you'd like to learn more, start here:

- *Gitte Haslebo 'Relationer i organisationer' 2nd edition, 2019*

- *Peter Hansen- Skovmoes and Gert Rosenkvist: 'Samtaler i organisationer', 2017*

- *Gitte Haslebo et al. Anerkendende og relationel ledelsesudvikling, 2008*

- *Dion Rüsselbæk Hansen, Associate Professor and Karsten Mellon, PhD, Management Researcher: https://www.nb-kommune.dk/2020/05/07/coronakrisen-kraever-modige-ledere/*

- *Rüsselbæk Hansen, D. & Mellon, K. (2020). Ledelsesmod i en krisesituation. Om selvindsigt og selvforhold. in: Karsten Mellon (red.). Mod i kriseledelse. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.*

- *Totems Survey: https://hi.totem.team/the-hidden-impact-of-remote-work-infographic/*

- *Zetland, Hvordan har du det?: https://www.zetland.dk/historie/sOKVqzvR-m8qE Zl31-86249*

- *A study of Danish media managers' handling of the Corona crisis: https: //www.sdu.dk/-/media/images/om_sdu/centre/journalistik/mfi/handout_ledelse_corona_18sep.pdf*

- *Microsoft`s annual Work Trend Index, Marts 2021: https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab / work-trend-index*

- *Employee and competence agency: https://www.medst.dk/arbejdsomraader/ledelse/ledelse-paa-den-hybride-arbejdsplads/gode-raad-til-hybrid-ledelse/*

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