Book Review – *Ken Dickson*

For such a time as this

In this article, Ken Dickson considers two books on leadership that have come into prominence during the pandemic.

Virtual Leadership:
Practical strategies for getting the best out of virtual work and virtual teams

By Penny Pullan

Kogan Page, 2016, paperback, xiv + 233 pages, £19.99, ISBN 978-0-7494-7596-3

Called to Influence:
How to become a kingdom-style leader in your workplace

By Karen Kircher

Malcolm Down Publishing, 2017, 207 pages, £12.99, ISBN 978-1-910786-66-6

It may seem strange to be reviewing books published a few years ago, but the current pandemic has brought their subject matter and the authors back into focus.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times", so said Charles Dickens.[1] To some extent that is where we are at present. With Covid-19 wreaking unprecedented havoc on the world, people and economies, it is indeed the worst time many can remember. And yet there is hope. The enforced changes resulting from lockdown, restrictions on travelling and changes to business activity have engendered new ways of working – some of which are facilitating international collaboration on vaccine developments. One phenomenon impacting many is the rise in virtual meetings for engaging with families, or business colleagues, or conferencing

The authors

Penny Pullan is an acknowledged expert in international project management and running virtual meetings. Her book *Virtual Leadership (VL)* had its genesis in the impact of the 9/11 atrocities and it reflects and builds on her experience

of establishing a virtual conference to overcome travelling restrictions.

I met Pullan on a virtual writing retreat this year run by Alison Jones, whose own book I reviewed in *FiBQ*.[2] Pullan appears frequently on social media and participated in one of a series of interviews that Jones conducted to help people cope with working from home.[3] I was taken with the format and the way in which Pullan provided many tips on managing virtual meetings.

When Faith in Business began its series of webinars,[4] I recommended inviting Pullan to speak. I also suggested that Karen Kircher, whom I'd heard speak at a conference, be invited too.

Called to Influence (CTI) is getting known again through an online course of the same name that Kircher – an HR practitioner and coach – launched during lockdown. Whereas *Virtual Leadership* is about connecting into the world beyond your place of work, *Called to Influence* is about learning to partner with God to influence workplaces where you are, for the advance of his glory and kingdom.

Christians in business would do well to follow Paul's exhortation: "Whatever you do, work at it wholeheartedly as though you were doing it for the Lord and not merely for people"[5]. *Virtual Leadership* and *Called to Influence* each facilitate this, but in distinctive ways.

Structure

These clear and engagingly written books are very practical. They interweave advice and suggestions with real-life case studies or stories. Chapters conclude with questions to stimulate further thought. Helpfully, Pullan commences each chapter with a mind-map to provide a quick overview of its contents. Whilst Pullan's book is inevitably more process-oriented, Kircher's is more anecdotal and explicitly Christian, approaching the subject from a charismatic perspective.

Leadership

Definitions of 'leadership' abound, but both authors agree that you can be a leader and influence those around you whatever your role.

Virtual leadership "…is about being able to engage people from afar to produce results together. It builds on a shared vision of the future to help people to get things done together." (*VL* p3)
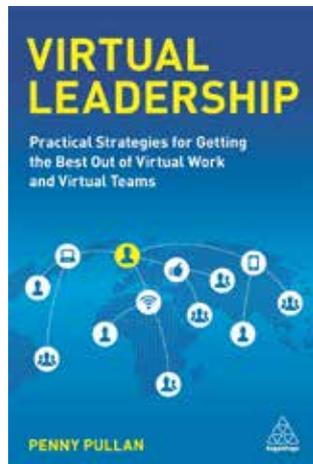
To this extent it mirrors what non-virtual leadership should be about (*VL* p18). Called to Influence echoes this: "Leadership is a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead, and those who decide to follow." (*CTI* p29).

With only one of its nine chapters devoted to technology, *Virtual Leadership* is clear: virtual leadership is not just about using technology to communicate internationally but occurs when "at least one person is not in the same location as the others." (*VL* p3)

Mindsets and trust

If leaders are to bring about change – whether in projects, products or culture – "mindsets need to shift from survive to revive" (*CTI* p30) so that the team and organisation can then transform the status quo and thrive.

This requires trust and support from all team members. Pullan notes that "Honesty forms the basis of trust and means your virtual team will accept what you have to say." (*VL* p32.) She acknowledges the challenge of developing trust in a virtual team where it is not always possible to assess body language or where different culture and language skills might prevent it. Yet it is important to do so as "Equal treatment of each person in your team is a key element of virtual trust." (*VL* p40)

Pullan also mentions changes in mindset: "the courage required for virtual leadership does not need nerves of steel. It is more about a mindset and a choice to do what is needed and what is right. It is about caring about the outcomes enough to step out and do something different." (*VL* p43)

Pullan makes the important – but rarely articulated - point that changing the composition of the team, even by just one person, means that there is a new team and the process of building relationships, trust etc amongst all team members must start again. (VL p76)

Teams and culture

Kircher stresses the importance of being servant leaders who "value the development of their followers, build their communities, act authentically and share power." (CTI p 141). This is about changing culture, something to which Virtual Leadership devotes a chapter.

Many of the guidelines in Virtual Leadership are reminders of good face-to-face meeting practices: generating positive team culture, paying attention to individuals' needs and contributions, remembering team members are humans!

Christian influence

Kircher is passionate that: "What we believe impacts what we think, which then impacts how we behave and respond to situations and people around us." (*CTI* p65). As Christians, we should be seeking to bring about cultural transformation and help bring God's kingdom into our workplaces. Kircher points out that we can begin to change the atmosphere by being intentional about praying for God's blessing on meetings, asking God for a word for somebody or using supernatural gifts to gain and give insights into seemingly intractable situations.

Each book is applicable to church as well as business settings.

Good practices

The need to provide appropriate training is taken up by Pullan: "Don't fall into the trap, as many organizations do, of providing training for new virtual technologies, but not providing any support on how to work together effectively virtually." (*VL* p91)

There are many similarities between good virtual leadership and beneficial face-to-face leadership. The main difference is in the use of technology to communicate. Pullan provides plenty of advice on how to get the best from the technology and how to manage meetings so that the team get the most benefit too.

Many of the insights and suggestions that Kircher provides can be deployed in a virtual setting. Praying for colleagues, for insights and help in managing complex, often ambiguous situations is something that we can all do. God is concerned with all elements of our lives and work is no exception.

The books reviewed offer different but complementary insights into good management and leadership practices – whether virtual or face-to-face. The authors focus on different elements and have developed websites[6] to supplement their books.

There is much in both books to benefit anyone interested in leadership. I learned a lot and was encouraged in equal measure by the books, both of which I recommend. 🔲
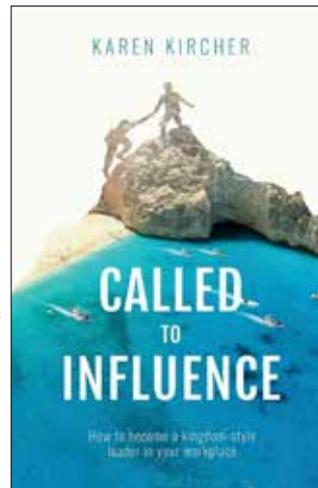
1. Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* opens with this memorable phrase.
2. Ken Dickson, Review of *This Book Means Business: Clever ways to plan and write a book that works harder for your business* by Alison Jones, FiBQ 19.2, 2018 pp20-21.
3. Listen to episodes of PI-Q: Intelligence for the Future at https://practicalinspiration.com/pi-q.
4. To register for future Faith In Business Monthly webinars, please go to www.faith-in-business.org.
5. Colossians 3: 23 (ISV).
6. See Penny Pullan's www.virtualleadershipbook.com and Karen Kircher's www.calledtoinfluence.com.

Ken Dickson founded Axiom-e Limited (www.axiom-e.co.uk) through which he works as 'The Financial Doctor'. Via international talks and courses, which emphasise Bible-based principles for business, Ken equips the next generation of entrepreneurs in the UK and Africa to benefit their communities. Contact Ken via Twitter (https://twitter.com/Axiom_e) or email pobs@axiom-e.co.uk.