

# The Future of Teamwork

Lessons from an Immersive  
Cyber-Attack Simulation



An innovative game created  
by Dr Nora Grasselli at ESMT  
Berlin pits business leaders  
against fictional hackers—  
and reveals lessons for the  
future of teamwork

Business News

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# Cyber Attack!

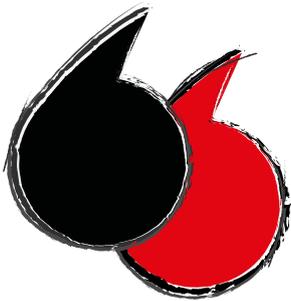
**B**erlin, January 2020. A group of executives is ushered silently into a conference room. With little in the way of preamble, a grim announcement is made: their company is under cyber-attack. Anonymous hackers have sent a series of cryptic demands which must be carried out within the next 30 minutes—or else the company's entire client data will be sent public.

And that's not all. Like many in its field, the firm has recently looked to expand its international client base and is now operating across three different locations. The hackers have sent fragments of their demands to each office, meaning each local team has only part of the information required to untangle and crack the series of coded messages.

A deathly hush falls upon the room as this news sinks in, and then—a flurry of action. But exactly what kind of action may come as a surprise. iPads, paper, scissors and felt-tip pens are quickly distributed. A countdown clock is projected onto the conference room wall.

**This was not a real cyber-attack (this time!) but a game—a learning simulation that replicates the type of unexpected crisis that business leaders dread. ‘The Virus’ is a digital tool created by Dr Nora Grasselli at ESMT Berlin, a leading expert in organizational psychodynamics. Based on an escape-roomesque scenario, it has been carefully designed to facilitate breakthrough learning around the particular challenges of leadership and teamwork in the modern age.**

From invisible hackers threatening to release confidential data, to an invisible biological enemy, such as the coronavirus—today’s business leaders are faced with a new and sometimes frightening set of existential crisis situations, each demanding impeccable teamwork if the company wants to survive intact.



## **How do we achieve impeccable teamwork when the nature of working in teams has undergone such seismic change over the past decade?**

But what does impeccable teamwork look like now, when the very nature of working in teams has undergone such seismic change over the past decade? Modern teams tend to be spread out globally, interrelationships between team members are more complex, and communication is typically virtual. All realities which make fast decisions and effective action much harder, and leading teams a tougher challenge than ever. These realities are carefully reproduced in the design of Dr Grasselli’s game, and then explored in a guided debrief session with participants after the game has ended.

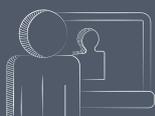
As teams search for solutions during the 30-minute gameplay, each player can learn a huge amount about themselves in the context of the modern team setting—while faculty observers gain new insights into how teams like these can be successful.

## Three major shifts in modern team dynamics



### MORE GLOBAL

In today's globalized economy projects are regularly planned, debated and carried out in offices right across the world



### MORE VIRTUAL

We are spending more time collaborating with each other online, regardless of our physical distance from fellow team members.



### MORE LIQUID

We are seeing much more liquidity in all teams, and especially virtual ones—with individuals frequently swapping in and out—due to lower group boundaries fostered by digital communication technologies.

## How virtual is your team?



**% OF TEAM MEMBERS  
WORKING VIRTUALLY**



**% OF TIME WORKING  
VIRTUALLY**



**DEGREE OF VIRTUAL  
DISTANCE**

# Replicating the modern team environment

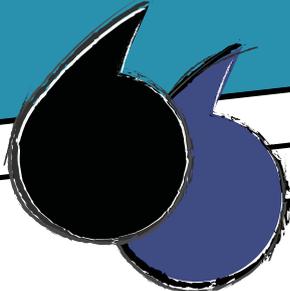
For the Executive Education department at ESMT Berlin the vision was to create a digital learning tool similar to a physical escape room, allowing exploration of managerial response to the challenges faced by modern-day teams. 'The Virus' is an immersive app-based experience—rather than literally putting their heads together to solve problems, players download the app, and are then separated into smaller groups to be placed in different rooms, or connected virtually via conferencing software. The 'escape' in this case is not from a room, but from invisible hackers threatening to release confidential client data.

## The role of leadership

There is a 'golden rule' that is reflected in much of what the ESMT faculty teach: different types of project require different leadership approaches. In a crisis situation such as the one simulated in 'The Virus', a flexible leadership mindset is absolutely essential.

With the sound of a countdown clock ticking away in the background, it is vital that the team—now split into three separate groups, or 'global offices'—rallies together to quickly identify and implement the most efficient approach for each task.

Without the formal protocols, hierarchies and personal alliances that exist in a real-world organization, the players are free to establish their own framework for communication and task distribution. Stronger voices often take control, others tend to fall into line, and the organizational structure that emerges at the outset will often persist throughout the game. Typically, participants don't take time to discuss the organizational structures they will use to process and share information. The minority of teams that do define their roles and adjust them according to the task tend to complete the game in the fastest time.

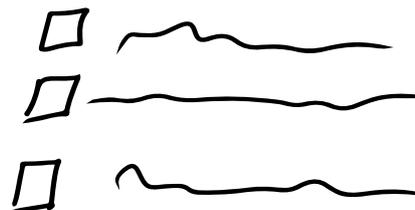


**Different circumstances require different leadership approaches—and the ability to be flexible and adaptive is invaluable.**

## Centralized vs. decentralized

In certain tasks it is more efficient for the unique information the teams have in front of them to be collected in one place. Without one of the locations collating this data and analyzing it holistically, it is far more difficult to solve the riddle. In this way it represents a typical ‘HQ task’—one which requires a bird’s eye view to tackle effectively.

However, to complete another one of the tasks the players must make use of local context—information from the physical environment nearby each group. This task is much quicker to solve when the three physically-distanced groups focus on their own data-set and work in parallel in their “local offices”. The golden rule applies again: different circumstances require different leadership approaches—and the ability to be flexible and adaptive is invaluable.

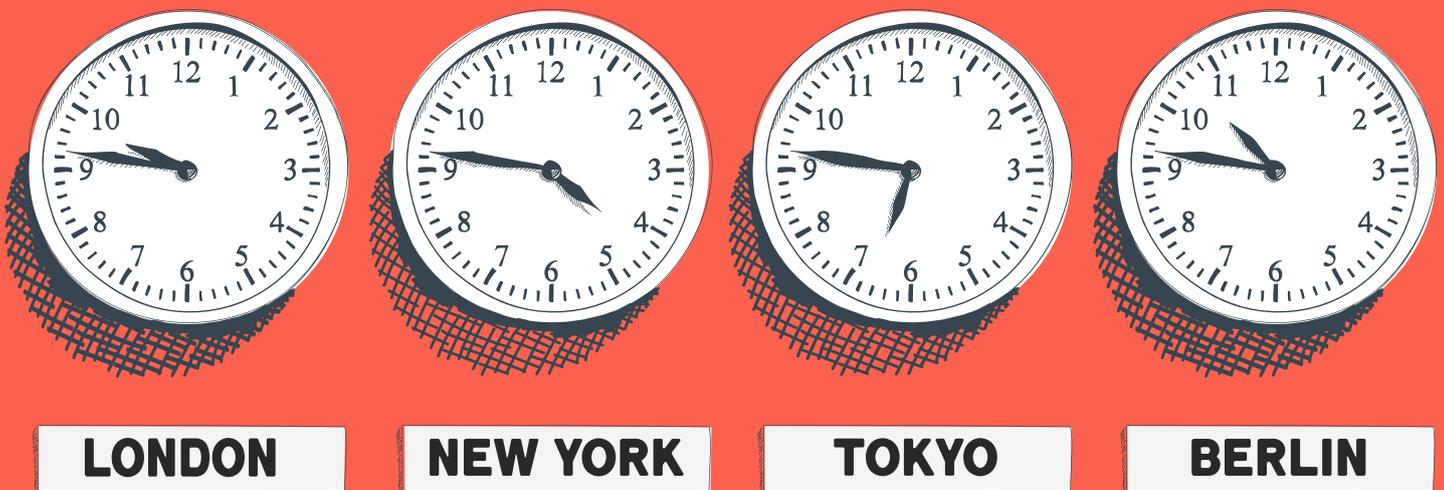


# The need to desynchronize

Teams working across time zones with different national holidays cannot (and should not) follow a project plan in a strictly synchronized and linear fashion. To do so is to waste time, and deadlines are likely to be missed. Periods of desynchronization are vital, in which some parts of the team are trusted to take a step back from the collaborative space to work independently on their own contribution, whilst other team members look ahead to prepare for upcoming tasks.

Even within the half hour that players are “under cyber-attack” in this game, they can experience the benefits of desynchronizing sometimes for the sake of efficiency. One of the tasks involves deciphering the meaning of an enigmatic sentence—which turns out to be different for each player. If the physically-distanced groups default to analyzing each one as a group, or realize too late that they are all looking at different sentences, they are likely to waste valuable time.

“We are one team, we have to stick together” is a long-standing myth that causes teams in both physical and virtual settings to create distraction. The most successful teams in the game are those who manage to agree together on a process that allows all three “local offices” to work simultaneously within their own context at least some of the time.



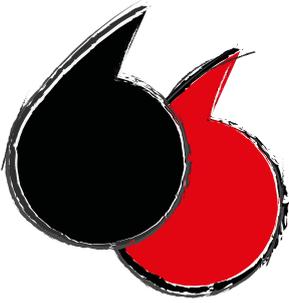


## Processes rule

It is especially critical in virtual project teams to create crystal clear structures and processes. With outward pressures on time and resources, as is often the case in fast-paced teams, this often falls by the wayside.

In an office environment you can pop over to someone's desk to share knowledge, check capacities and monitor project progress in a non-intrusive way. This grants team members a view of potential upcoming delays in the project pipeline.

In a virtual scenario, we too often lose these insights and find ourselves unaware of what others are currently working on. Regular task-related discussions can help here. What? Why? How? and Who?—these simple questions can be key for virtual team success.



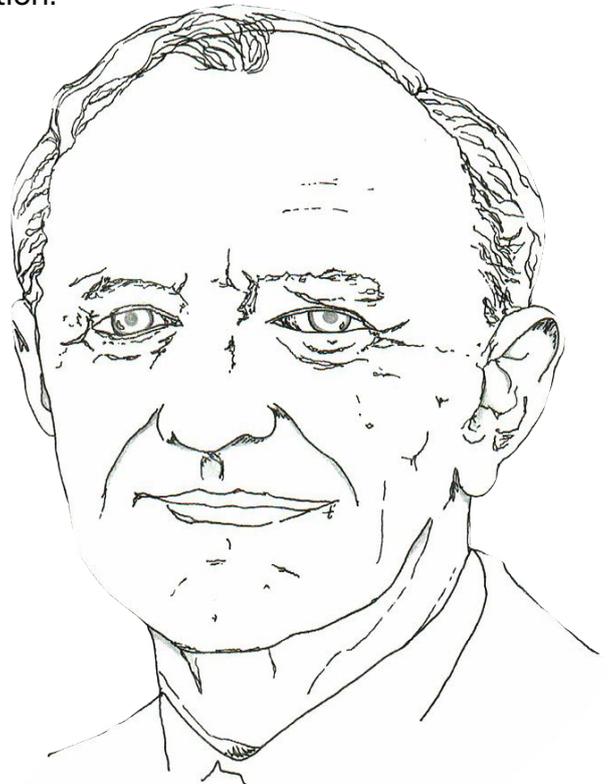
**These happen to be tendencies that are vital ingredients for innovation.**

## Play in the executive classroom

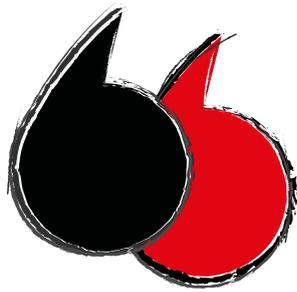
Moving away from the old-school case study approach to executive education, Dr Grasselli puts a lot of the success of her teaching sessions down to 'gamification'. Rather than passively reading about another company's dilemmas, participants get the chance to experiment and play within the safe space of a fictionalized scenario. Instead of reflecting on abstract theories, they are thrown into an unpredictable and active situation, working in a team made up of real human beings.

The licence to play is rare enough in normal adult life, let alone in our professional lives. Here it allows participants to be less serious, have fewer preconceptions, be more open to experimentation, and more relaxed about potential failure. These happen to be tendencies that are vital ingredients for innovation.

Dr Grasselli was influenced in her attitude to teaching by the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who studied the role of play in early childhood developmental processes. Winnicott put forward the concept of "potential space", within which everything that exists in the real world can be reinvented to create something new. Building on Winnicott's ideas, Grasselli's game allows its executive players to become more open to experimenting with the unknown, to breaking down or bending rules, and making space for potential failure.



*Donald Winnicott, British psychoanalyst, 1896-1971*



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For ESMT clients who have already taken part in Grasselli's session, the sense of fun and adrenaline they experienced during gameplay also heightens their memory of what they learned. The story-led interface of the app builds a sinister characterization of the unseen hackers, quickly uniting the group of executives against a common enemy. Indeed, it would be clear to an outside observer that the executives really do want to 'beat the hackers.' The stakes feel high, even if on a rational level everyone is aware that it really is 'just a game'.



**Dr Nora Grasselli**

Program Director in Executive Education  
ESMT Berlin



**Bethan Williams**

Program Manager in Executive Education  
ESMT Berlin

Executive Education at ESMT Berlin  
Schlossplatz 1  
10178 Berlin  
Germany

 [www.execed.esmt.berlin](http://www.execed.esmt.berlin)

 [programs@esmt.org](mailto:programs@esmt.org)

 +49 30 21231-3130

ESMT  
BERLIN