

It is almost impossible to understand the devastation that COVID-19 has caused in such a short time and the extent to which we are all impacted, as well as the the people who are very significantly affected. This past week as leaders grapple with changed business and personal circumstances, we have focussed our help on leading remote teams effectively. Here are the key things that leaders are finding helpful to keep business in play, and to help people stay positive, right now.



### Find your space

One client this week told me about her daughter who lives in a tiny apartment in New York without a table. She has set up the ironing board as her desk and asked her partner to delay his ironing until the evenings! Hopefully your home has more space than this, but even so it is helpful to designate a spot and use that as your nominated work place. This helps others to respect your area (as much as is possible if you have young children) and enables you to have calls, video calls and quiet work time when you need to.

- Make sure your remote working space will support your tech needs
- Some people find a Please Do Not Disturb sign helpful to give a clear signal when you're on a call
- Get a good chair if you don't already have one!
- Talk with your organisation if remote working isn't ideal; some organisations are offering a staggered approach to working onsite and remotely



### Set a schedule

Setting a schedule will help you stay focussed and on track. It is super-easy to forget which role you're in, start doing something else, and end up feeling off-track or behind. Many people find dressing for working at home helps distinguish which role they're in – I know that at first, I loved not having to change out of my pjs or gym gear, but after a while I found it hard to be in deep work mode when I was dressed for something completely different.

- Structure your day as normally as you can with the same getting-up time, and pre-work routine
- Get a coffee first if that's what you have done before – it's also a good way to check-in with your neighbourhood
- If you normally chat with others first-thing, call or video them – it's referred to as an e-chat or e-coffee!
- Take breaks, go for a walk, get some air, or a change of scenery. This is especially important if your work normally involves being in multiple places or with multiple people throughout the day
- To the extent that social distancing allows it, interact with people as you go about your new routine – where you can't speak to others in person, it could be a time for phone calls to return as the first communication option!



### Lead your meetings

It's tempting to cancel your meetings because they're harder to organise and participate in at the moment, but now is the time you and your team members will benefit from them more than ever. If remote working continues for a longer period, social isolation, loneliness and the difficulties of juggling work and family will become significant issues for some people. I've seen some highly creative responses – Skype, Zoom, FaceTime, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, and the good old conference call where video isn't available. To create effective meetings, you will need to think differently about inclusive participation. Here are the key differences to ensure good outcomes:

- Prepare for and structure your meetings – this will keep you on-track, and outcome focussed
- Video-based meetings are best as you can gauge how people are reacting and responding through the meeting. If video isn't available, then phone calls are better than no calls
- Start on time, but allow 10-15 minutes for people to join before you start as people who are less experienced with remote technology can get delayed
- People who are less experienced with home video calls may also need some guidance with the room they use, what's in the background, etc.
- At the start of the meeting write down everyone's name, even if you know all participants. It is easy to forget someone is on the call if they are quiet. Having the names in front of you means you can check in with people who haven't spoken – silence sometimes means people are feeling uncomfortable or anxious



### Communicate with clarity

When teams become a group of remote workers, one of the downsides is that the mutual information sharing that happens naturally in an office is lost. Leaders who are aware of and actively help team members maintain their knowledge about what is going on in the remote team will experience better results.

- In usual circumstances organisations will have policies to support working from home but this may not be the case for you right now. Acknowledge that with your team and ask them to raise any concerns with you directly. Open and direct discussion now will prevent issues later on
- Be clear about your expectations and deadlines using a three-point approach – 1. This is the work you need to do 2. This is the standard we need and 3. This is our deadline. The more detail the better, in particular explaining the "why".
- If you need to discuss something with a team member, pick up the phone – email is easily misinterpreted, particularly in times of other distress
- If your team members have children, or elderly parents, talk with them about how they're thinking of managing this juggle, and the help or flexibility that you can provide



### Lead others well

Effective leadership will be intentional and individualised in the way that it is carried out. Leaders have to think carefully about how they will connect with and keep each team member reassured and productive. I'm hearing about teams who get virtual lunch together, or who have come up with other creative ways to carry out work that is normally completed in-person. Leaders play a critical role in encouraging and supporting this creativity to keep people working and engaging together.

- Set up a 15-minute check-in time each day and make it a routine item to hear what's gone well this week, any unexpected highlights, who needs help
- Decide as a group whether you want to an informal method for group chat – WhatsApp or IM for example. This enables the usual incidental office chat to take place and another avenue for you to gauge your team's emotional state
- Individualise your leadership approach for each of your team members, you're a leader and a coach right now and each person will have different needs
- People gravitate to calm leaders to guide the course through a crisis – be that leader
- Start every individual conversation getting an understanding of how that team member is right now. This will help you respond quickly if an issue escalates



### Use your empathy

Great leaders have empathy. Empathy is not sympathy and doesn't mean the leader solves the problems. What it does mean is that the leader understands the situation from the other person's perspective. When a leader tunes into what the other person is thinking and feeling; it will help both people get further in resolving the issue. Something I've taken to doing in this last fortnight is contacting at least one person each day who I haven't heard from recently or who I know is in a difficult situation – a friend, someone in my broader work network, a neighbour. These check-ins let me know what's going on for them and empathise with their situation.

- The idea is to say less "I" and more "You"
- If a team member is struggling, rather than say "This is what I would do..." say "You must be finding this difficult, what do you feel you need help with?"
- Rather than consider how you would feel in their shoes, think about how they feel in their shoes

What I've observed and experienced in this past fortnight across a range of clients, businesses and leaders is that people have adapted to this daily-changing new normal very quickly. This resilience and leadership is amazing to see in action. I'm hearing leaders talk about this period as a shift, meaning they look to create a positive mindset in others despite enormous uncertainty. It is without doubt an unprecedented time, but I can see that great leaders have got this.

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