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Leading remotely

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With flexible working, virtual connections and international offices come new management challenges, says Nic Paton. So how do you lead your team from hundreds or thousands of miles away?

You'd have thought, in this age of 24/7 connectivity, that leading, motivating and inspiring remote teams – whether working from home, on the other side of the country, in another country completely or a combination of all three – would by now have become second nature to most executives and leaders.

Keeping your team engaged in your strategy and vision is more difficult when you're removed from staff

Yet, according to Ghislaine Caulat, associate business director with Ashridge Consulting at Ashridge Business School, even now leaders can too often find themselves becoming bogged down in the mechanics of

remote management – organising teleconferences, firing off emails, the detail of ensuring people are meeting their targets – rather than actually thinking about how they are or should be leading these disparate teams.

"For a lot of managers, 80% of their time is still spent task-checking. But that's just not going to work virtually. Instead, perhaps 60-70% of your time needs to be spent on building and managing relationships. So that is a big shift," she says.

Remote leadership is, in many respects, a very different kind of leadership, and can create challenges that are often under-estimated, she contends.

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A common failing is not recognising that what you are leading is a whole virtual working space, not just a bunch of people scattered across the globe. Another key failing can be what Caulat terms "HQ centricity".

For example, if you have a team of, say, 15 people and five of them are based in HQ in London and the rest are in Shanghai, Singapore and New York, how often are conference calls set at a time convenient to one of those offices rather than London?

"People do accept they may sometimes have to get up early or stay late for these calls, but the point is they shouldn't always be having to do so. There needs to be an open conversation about that," she says.

Everyone recognises there will be going to be issues around time zones, languages, working cultures and expectations when you are dealing with remote teams, concedes Simon Foster, senior client partner at HR consultancy Kenexa.

But leadership in this context has to go that much deeper. "It comes down to three elements: mindset, skills-set and behaviour," he says.

"Skills, to an extent, come under management nuts and bolts, so it's about organising meetings and being able to diagnose and resolve problems quickly. But mindset and behaviour are also very important. For example, if you are working with an Asian team you need to be aware of whether people are going to be as open about things if they are unhappy.

"It is about not making assumptions and really working hard to understand what makes people tick and then flexing your management style accordingly," he advises.

End of the line

Management consultancy firm Accenture employs some 24,000 employees spread across 54 countries, meaning it is impossible for managers physically to have oversight of everyone, and it is very common for team members to be at the end of a phone line or internet connection, says David Gartside, leader of its HR and talent management practice.

"So leaders have to develop a portfolio approach as well as strive for simplicity. It is about getting messages across in as concise a way as possible, distilling messages down to two or three critical things and conveying the passion of what you saying in a three- to five-minute slot.

"In an ideal world the technology should be invisible. There needs to be an infrastructure to allow you to lead, but it is about not getting tied up within it.

"We always try to ensure we are using the richest medium – so if you're setting up a conference call, can it be done via a video call? We try to treat the technology as an enabler and a video conference can help you to read the nuances in a conversation that you won't get in a straight phone call," he adds.

In some respects, leading a remote workforce can force you to become a better leader because you don't have – or shouldn't have – the option of falling into bad habits of micro-management, contends Peter Thomson, visiting executive fellow at Henley Business School and director of remote working practices consultancy Wisework.

"You are forced to describe what it is you are wanting to achieve and then to help people to achieve that. So you need to think about strategic goals rather than implementation. It is about focusing on the outcomes rather than the process, which is of course what all senior leaders should be doing anyway," he says.

It can also be a good idea very consciously to transpose some of the good leadership behaviours that will occur automatically in a physical setting into the virtual space, argues Dr Suzanne Edinger, lecturer in organisational behaviour at Nottingham University Business School.

Often, for example, because we know someone is sitting on the call late at night or because the line's not brilliant, we focus on simply "getting through it", crunching through the agenda and then wrapping up.

But if you had been sat around a table you would all probably have spent a moment discussing the weather, the traffic getting there, something in the news, sport, families, whatever it might be, before jumping in.

"Communication needs to go beyond the specifics of the task. If you want to instil a sense of group identity towards the organisation or even just the project that is being worked on, then people have to feel a sense of personal connection to each other," she explains.

"So make sure you have conversational exchanges that are about the broader business, things people are doing or working on; get beyond the specifics of the task. Think about the sorts of conversations you would have with someone if you were engaging with them face to face – you'd perhaps ask what they did over the weekend or, if you know they're interested in football, say, something about that.

"The intention often is to be courteous and just get on with things, but the outcome is sometimes that there is a lack of connection. This can be learned but it can be really beneficial to have a mentor who has done this before," she adds.



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Ghislaine Caulat, associate business director with Ashridge Consulting, Ashridge Business School



Time to bond

Finally, of course, investing the time and effort physically to get remote teams together to “regroup” and bond can be a good idea.

Serviced office provider Regus says it has seen growing demand from businesses for temporary office space where remote teams can meet. In June, for example, it agreed a deal with motorway services firm Extra to open three business centres on the M40, M11 and M25.

It is piloting a similar arrangement with Shell on some of its forecourts across Europe and has in place arrangements with railway operators SNCF and NS in French and Dutch railway stations.

“I’m for example based in Staines but my team is spread between Norwich, Manchester, Dublin, Paris, Frankfurt and Amsterdam, so if we’re going to meet it’ll almost inevitably be somewhere on the road,” explains Regus communications manager Henry Collinge.

“We have a monthly video conference which is really important in terms of social interaction. But then we also bring people together regularly, probably more so than if they were in the same office. You need to work to build that social bond,” he adds.

BT: Leading across distances

With 100,000 people working in 170 countries, telecoms giant BT has long been a global organisation but, as Caroline Waters, director of people and policy, points out, even if your team is just dotted around the UK it can create a whole new dimension of challenge when it comes to leadership.

“We have a lot of teams being drawn together or groups spread around the world. Even in the UK you can have teams from Truro to Thurso. So this is a huge issue for us,” she explains.

“The real point is that good leadership is good leadership, whether that person is in front of you, in the next room or miles away,” she adds.

To this end the company makes a point of offering managers extensive training around optimising remote workforces.

“We have courses covering all sorts of different things, especially how to use technology to support you. Super-fast broadband has transformed what managers can do and how they can interact with one another,” Waters explains.

“People can now use collaborative tools to communicate in a much more natural, spontaneous way, so it is important to have proper training in how to get the most from them,” she adds.

“It is possible, too, to develop skills around interpreting the tone of someone’s voice, which is very important when you don’t have body language to go on. I can tell instantly, for example, whether someone on my team is excited, concerned or under the weather.

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"On top of this you need to develop active listening skills, and we have courses around that," Waters adds.

Some regular physical, face-to-face contact can also be important, especially during the early stage of leading a remote team.

"Most of our teams, for example, physically get together once a month for a team meeting and then do more frequent team calls. My own team meets virtually, twice a week, at the beginning and the end of the week – normally just a voice conference," says Waters.

Ultimately, she emphasises, good leadership in this context comes down to communication, openness and building trust – so little different, really, to the priorities of any good leader; just more pronounced because you are leading a remote team.

"It is about ensuring people, wherever they are, feel part of the team and feel involved in decision making; that they feel there is someone they can talk to."