

A guide to leading remote workers *digitally*

Introduction

In recent times many of us have quickly had to learn how to work from home effectively and there is a vast amount of information available to help support us with the transition.

However, once we've settled into our own routines, those of us that are involved in leading or managing teams need to give some thought as to how we can become better leaders remotely. Now more than ever, our teams will be looking for support and guidance.

At PDMS, we have recently welcomed Dean Fathers to our team. In addition to his many years of experience in the healthcare sector, Dean has also had significant involvement in Executive Education and was a lead tutor for the Institute of Directors. In this article, Dean kindly shares his insights and advice for leading remote workers.

Technology has a role to play but, as leaders, we need to ensure that we are using it to build strong and positive emotional connections that will help support our teams and help ensure the ongoing resilience of our organisations through these challenging times.



Joanne Pontee

Marketing Director PDMS



The challenges of leading from a distance

A new world order has emerged as a consequence of restrictions placed on society due to the Covid-19 pandemic and yet it isn't *all* bad news. Digital technology has been a powerful aid to enable many organisations to continue to function with employees working remotely, but are they all working productively and in a resilient way? We thought we would share some lessons on how to be successful at leading remote workers digitally.

Running any organisation is challenging enough. When you have to lead it from a position of self-isolation or quarantine and you are no longer able to rely upon those familiar face-to-face human interactions, the normal structures, policies and working practices and routines you have developed and become accustomed to over your career, it starts to feel very challenging indeed.

In these circumstances instead of normality, leaders are faced with an increasing array of bewildering and taxing demands. Where ambiguity, complexity, uncertainty and volatility increases, our feeling of psychological safety decreases.

An old adage is, "When you are up to your neck in alligators it is difficult to remember that the purpose of the exercise is to drain the swamp."

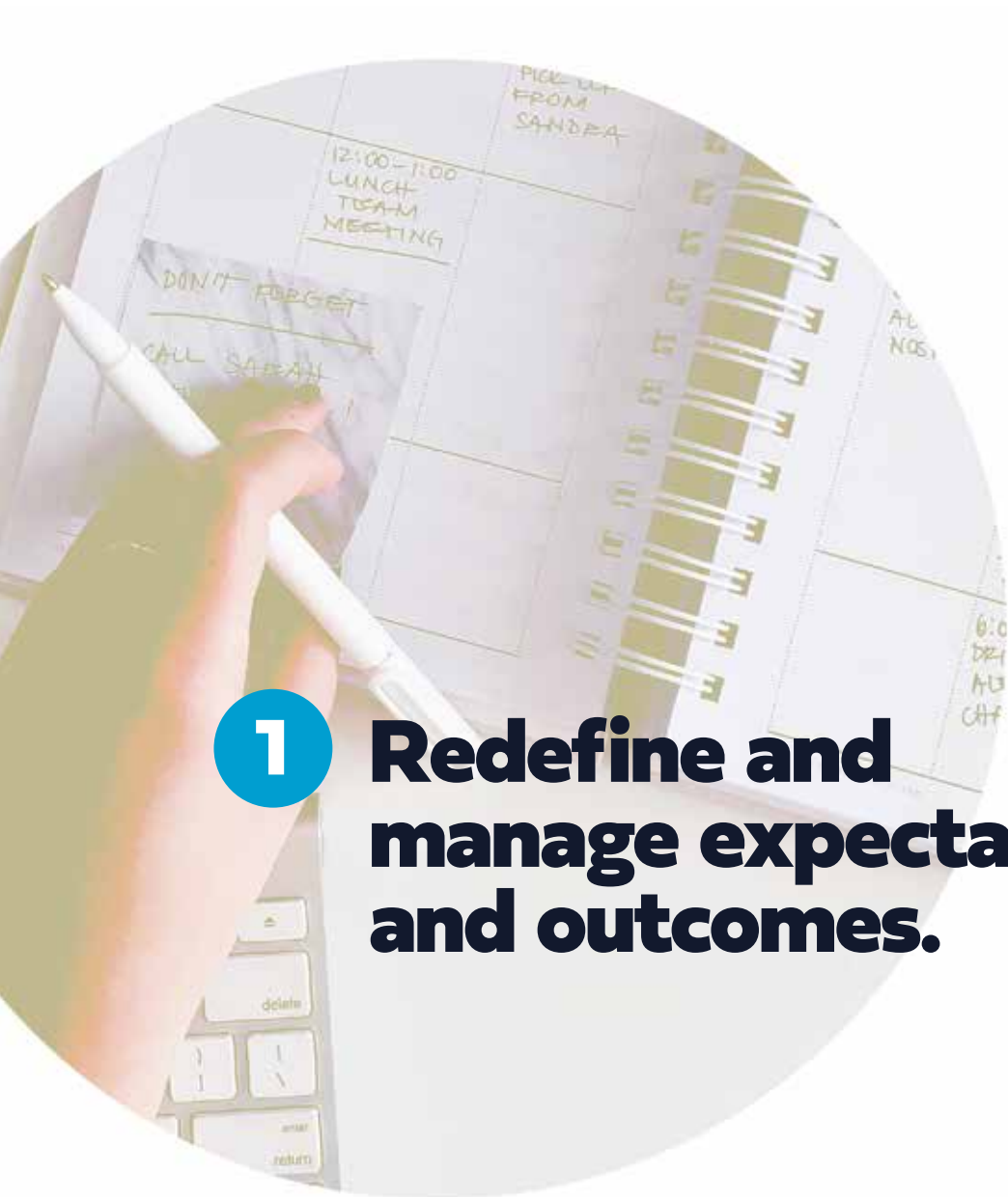
In a crisis it becomes increasingly vital that leaders remain purposeful. Purposeful leadership ensures the organisation's key strategic differentiators aren't lost and that the organisation remains focussed on building strong, competitive and sustainable levels of capability that are resilient for the future.

Pressurised conditions - like a swamp full of alligators - exacerbate anxiety and, when you are leading remotely, can create a heightened sense of dislocation, isolation, perhaps even a sense of paranoia and in many, an increased sense of a need for control. The emotional and rational responses of leaders need to be reflected in the light of the need for continued performance, financial return, the delivery of key outcomes and also of the health and well-being of both the leaders and employees alike.



Dean Fathers
Independent Healthcare Advisor





1 **Redefine and manage expectations and outcomes.**

Traditionally organisations have structures, norms and working practices that are based on rational hierarchical models where direct supervision has been of employees in the workplace. Tradition, how we do things around here, or culture is often codified in standards so as to restrict behaviours and create compliance to defined expectations and working practices.

Remote working means however that direct lines of sight are lost so that leaders become increasingly reliant upon the work ethic and values of those they serve. Trust becomes an essential value and without the direct supervision capability that comes from working together in the same space, under the same working conditions, with the same work schedule it is a value that is easily lost. In a remote environment, leaders must help their teams shift to flexible work patterns that allow for a diversity of needs and to redefine and reset expectations for how work gets done.

Letting go of when and how tasks are accomplished, allowing each individual to achieve their responsibilities on their own terms will be a challenge for many leaders. This means focusing on the virtues of the organisation to win through, defining the nature of the results delivered and challenging the reasoning behind why greater flexibility was historically not allowed.

With flexibility comes risk, which in this case can be contrary to what many leaders might be most concerned about. The concern of many leaders is that with too great a latitude offered workers don't perform and don't work hard enough. Much research however points out that the opposite is often true, worker are more likely to blur the lines of work and home life, lose the balance between them, work too hard and burn out.

NEXT: Communicate, communicate, communicate →

2 **Communicate, communicate, communicate.**

Evidence suggests that shorter communication cycle times are more effective in building and sustaining individual and team morale so consider how effective two directional engagement can be developed.

Corporate social media is a simple system to form the basis for regular contact and current best practice suggests that employees shouldn't go for more than a half day without being checked in on.

Digital huddles are another technique to enhance engagement, ideally using video links like Zoom and Microsoft Teams (other technologies are available), and consider using these events as an opportunity for a team member to demonstrate their leadership of a particular field or topic so as to grow their capability.

Prioritise the importance of these meetings over other tasks ensuring everyone is both present and mindful ensuring that individuals receive the message that the team, even though it is virtual, is of vital importance. Remember also that employees who might be furloughed in these difficult times are still employees and will be wanting reassurance still and a feeling of being engaged with their leader.

Remember uncertainty creates anxiety and in the absence of communication the natter and gossip of others will fill the void. Ensure you avoid an information vacuum within your team. Communicate regularly even if there is no new information to share. It is vital to maintain transparency when faced with a crisis with frequent updates being the ultimate expression of good faith, empathy, and a genuine concern for your team member's well-being. Remember also that in times of heightened anxiety, employees, especially those furloughed, will be receiving communication from other sources concerned for their well-being or future career prospects.

Many organisation's policies prevent staff from using equipment for personal use which may in these circumstances prove counter-productive. Staff residing in the surroundings of their own home will resort to the use of other technologies, thus increasing the chaff interfering with their focus and so decrease productivity. Lessons in good time management techniques may need to be re-learned.



3

Learn quick, learn fast.

The virtual world is a haven for learning and the new digital technologies are a perfect place for learning school playtime lessons.

As above, encourage individuals to share their daily learning maybe for just five minutes at the end of each virtual meeting. Micro learning every day over a long period becomes macro learning that can significantly differentiate an organisation and deliver a real competitive advantage. Turn mistakes into learning opportunities by building a trusted environment where criticism is seen as constructive and always thank people for their trust in sharing their mistakes and for learning lessons.

Consider capturing these lessons among team members in writing so as to allow the team to identify key themes and topics for training to other teams in the organisation. If interested allow team members to lead on the training, making them ambassadors for your team demonstrating your trust in them as a valued member of it.

Remember also, whilst furloughed employees are not allowed to work there is nothing preventing them from learning. The successful organisations that come out of this crisis will be those that have developed and learned to adapt. As Darwin teaches, adaptation is a key ingredient to enable survival.

4

Parallel mentoring and learning buddies

We live in a diverse world where skills, capabilities and valuable experience lies in every individual.

Traditional mentoring models rely on the hierarchical structures being in place as identified above. Remote leadership prevents such structures from working effectively and if enforced can become both exhausting and time consuming for the leader.

Consider therefore distributing responsibility so that individuals are allocated learning buddies with unique learning objectives. Parallel (often also known as reverse mentoring) should also be considered.

All leaders should mentor and be mentored so as to increase the breadth of their world view and not just in regard to a specific task or performance objective.

This creates strong bonds of mutual respect and trust as support is developed in all directions. It also protects leaders from emotional isolation, builds their personal resilience and helps their well-being.



5 Use narrative and storytelling

Leaders working remotely will lack the benefit of visual cues in regard to how people are feeling and consequently will have to develop new emotional intelligence techniques.

Digital tools can also be used to monitor well-being directly or indirectly. Written and verbal narrative can provide context and tone as well as patterns of communication as proxy indicators.

Leaders should pay particular close attention to the rate, volume, pitch, and inflexion of voice and written communication; and any physical gestures in video communication. Changes in these patterns help identify early health related matters like stress, anxiety and depression and indicate that a team member may need some space for a supportive conversation.

Whilst leaders are not clinicians and so not capable of making professional or clinical support judgements be aware that in stressed situations an employee may reveal their need for professional clinical support. In this case make sure leaders are aware of your organisation's policy for accessing professional support services. Listen also to the stories people are telling.

Stories are rich in values based information and an indicator of the cultural health of the team.



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6 Provide hope, practice realism and tackle fear

“Without hope they shall wither on the vine”. Leaders who demonstrate hopefulness and confidence about the future also provide meaning and purpose (remember the swamp) especially under stressful conditions like being furloughed or confined.

Hope without a sense of reality however can soon lose a leader their credibility. You have to practice both and consequently leaders need to either enable their team to break down the hope into meaningful and acceptable bite sized chunks or show their team members where the vision has been practiced before with evidence of a successful conclusion.

The former drives innovation when in the face of adversity. The latter drives adaptation. Fear can be the downfall of both so leaders must spend time making fear a legitimate emotion to feel so that it can be discussed openly, mitigated for and turned into positive energy.



7 Turn stress into a positive force for good.

We all need pressure but none of us need stress.

Pressure is when capacity and capability are in equilibrium with demand. Stress is when demand exceeds capacity and capability and eustress is when capacity and capability exceed demand. The symptoms of stress and eustress are the same. The cure completely the opposite.

To turn the stress of situations into positive energy leaders must first make it clear that the health and well-being of their team is their chief concern.

Take time therefore to monitor your engagement periodically and assess how stressed your team members are in regards to this important balancing act and identify what might be impacting on their individual psychological safety: their levels of connectedness to each other and the organisation's purpose; their levels of hope and optimism; their sense of identity and meaning; and their perceived levels of empowerment are all important elements to consider.

Again digital tools like T-Cup can be used to help identify not only the levels of stress but also the causes of stress, so that appropriate solutions can be developed between leaders and employees.

Where individuals and teams feel engaged, safe to learn, contribute and challenge without fear of being bullied embarrassed, marginalised, or punished in some way, they continue to perform, contribute, and perhaps, most importantly compete even when faced with the adversity of a complex and uncertain world. When organisations have individuals and teams led in this way, even at a time like this with Covid-19 still at pandemic levels, then they must most likely be more resilient.

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We collaborate with you to build software to support your digital transformation journey. Whatever your business challenge, we have the technology and know-how to help you meet it - with well-engineered solutions that add value and deliver tangible results.

Our team is with you every step of the way from - ideas and discovery through to design and development, deployment and beyond.

We can help by providing clear insights and practical solutions to guide your organisation through the digital chaos to digital productivity.



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