A picture containing drawing

Description automatically generated**The remote leadership job**

**By Simon Bird, Director, Thorpebird consulting**

Since the Coronavirus pandemic transformed the way many of us are working, there has been a wealth of high quality and helpful guidance, articles and briefings about working and leading teams working remotely. Simon Bird has identified some of the most relevant and extracted the key ideas for you.

Simon has presented his findings in an engaging 18-minute video, but if you don’t have time to watch, the audio is still well worth listening to. The video is available to watch or listen at:

<https://healtheducationengland.sharepoint.com/:v:/s/LeadershipAcademy-South/ES9d_tDlRWZAtnLhDTHJ8tMBwHP5x5wtqFj_PdiFO3We1Q?e=0BDhIg>

The findings are also available in the document in three versions, to suit your time and energy:

* A one-page summary – page 2
* A more detailed expert read – page 3
* And a full in-depth read – starting on page 6

References are listed at the end of this document on page 10.

**One-page summary**

**What is the leadership challenge when the team you lead are all at home?**

The Covid-19 climate is one in which leaders in different contexts face diverse demands. Many clinical leaders are working in front-line roles – and drawing on every ounce of their experience, skills and education to deliver the best they can to each patient they treat.

Yet other leaders find themselves overnight required to lead a team that is entirely home-based. On the surface, this might seem like it can’t be that difficult or different. But that would be a mistake.

As an article in the *Harvard Business Review* (March 2020) points out, “There are more than 10,000 books in the English language on Amazon on virtuality and how to lead remotely or at a distance. Why is that?” The reason of course is that it’s very difficult – so what are the most important things to pay attention to from a leadership perspective?

***Clarity*** – when people are at home, or away from a conventional work environment, they need clarity from you as the leader more than ever. Specifically, they want clarity around their roles and goals. Has anything changed? What do you need from them, by when? They also need clarity around boundaries and controls – so how far can they go? Who signs off on things?

*Think through each person in your team – have you had a conversation to confirm or reconfirm these things with them?*

***Communication*** – people can quickly feel cut off from the resources, information or relationships they need to do their jobs well. You’ll probably need to communicate (even) more than you think – especially if the team in question is new – or been put together for a very specific and short/medium term purpose e.g. supporting a Covid-19 activity stream.

*Yo*ur*team also needs to hear from you to maintain their trust in leadership. Keep the lines of communication open, honest and broad. Send emails or post videos about your reasoning, intentions and expectations. Make it easy for your team to know your thoughts and contribute their own.*

***Individualisation*** – it’s a given that good leaders know their individual team members separately. They know how to get the best out of them as individuals, how much clarity they need, how confident they feel and their strengths. When the team is remote, and operating via Zoom and email, leaders will need to consciously think even more about the individual needs of their people. Leaders have to work even harder here – as they have generally lost all the body language cues they normally have – and are restricted to a head shot if they’re lucky.

*Make sure you ask each team member to describe the conditions under which they perform best, any concerns about their workflow and their emotional/practical response to the new way of working – and the bigger Covid-19 picture.*

**More detailed expert read**

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David Rock’s work on neuroleadership talks about how our brains are generally wired to perceive threat – and uncertainty or lack of clarity certainly causes our brains to prepare a ‘threat response’. And a threat response means our primitive brain becomes more dominant – fight or flight anyone?

In a work context, this can manifest itself as withdrawal, defensive behaviour, seeing threat where there is none, and a deterioration in our ability to assess situations accurately. So, the leader’s job here is to try and answer as many questions as possible and reduce uncertainty – wherever they can.

*Think through each person in your team – have you had a conversation to just confirm or reconfirm these things with them?*

*Are you doing everything you can to help reduce uncertainty? People are hungry for information – almost anything you can tell them, even if you think it’s small.*

***Communication*** – people can quickly feel cut off from the resources, information or relationships they need to do their jobs well. You’ll probably need to communicate (even) more than you think – especially if the team in question is new – or been put together for a very specific and short/medium term purpose e.g. supporting a Covid-19 activity stream.

When thinking about communication, leaders need to think about it in terms of frequency – and also be prepared for challenging content. So what might this look like?

Leaders should help their teams establish a rhythm in their day. To do this, they can learn from the way Agile teams work – and have the equivalent of ‘stand-up meetings’. In Agile methodology, teams check in with each other briefly at the beginning of each day. This simple act helps create structure in a working day. Team members also say what they’re aiming to do that day – and this helps create some accountability within the team – and for the team member in question. Yet leaders should also remember this is not 9-5 territory – so agreeing when this would work for a team is an important conversation to have.

And on that note, leaders might want to think in advance about how they discuss issues like children and childcare. As the *Harvard Business Review* writes;

*“…the blurring of boundaries between work and home has suddenly come upon us, so managers have got to develop the skills and policies to support their teams. This might involve being more flexible about the hours in which employees work. You don’t have to eat lunch at 12pm. You might walk your dog at 2pm. Things are much more fluid, and managers just have to trust that employees will do their best to get their work done.”*

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*Prepare to talk about issues beyond the obvious ‘work progress’ subjects – and think about how flexible you’re prepared to be*

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Whether it’s Zoom, WebEx, Teams or Google Hangouts – video conferencing and our take-up of it, means it’s unlikely we’ll ever go back to how things were before.

And there are lots of upsides to the use of this technology.

One of these is the democratisation of meetings. There’s a certain equity achieved by everyone having a headshot – and the same ‘space’ in the meeting. And if you’re leading the meeting, you have an enormous amount of power – with the ability to mute participants and steer the direction of the meeting in a way that’s very different to a physical meeting.

However, don’t confuse this with the idea that each of those people might not need something else from you. The virtual meeting is only the start – leaders should expect to check in with individuals as well – to understand individual needs – as well as building a discrete relationship so team members still feel valued and heard.

*Make sure you ask each team member to describe the conditions under which they perform best, any concerns about their workflow and their emotional/practical response to the new way of working – and the bigger Covid-19 picture.*

**And what else?**

Beyond the essential ‘hooks’ of clarity, communication and individualisation – the areas that need rapid attention, leaders as always face the challenge of ‘being’. The challenge of ‘being’ a leader.

Each leader will have their own anxieties and concerns - about their families, their jobs, their health, their colleagues - and maybe society more broadly. And all of this will be a mirror of how their teams will be feeling. As *Fast Company* writes;

*“Outside of your role as a leader, you can, and should, feel whatever you need to feel. But in your role as a leader, you will best serve your team by being a voice of reason and calm. The more you can show up from a place of empathy, respect, understanding, and peace, the more those under your leadership will have the ability to calm themselves and to do their work.”*

**In-depth read**

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**Is this virtual working simply another step in the evolution of work?**

Lynda Gratton, Professor of Management Practice at London Business School, talks about this development in the way we are working, as part of a series of webinars, *‘Leading in a Pandemic’ (2020)*, by London Business School.

She frames the current home working as a ‘mass experiment’ – which in effect makes up the ‘third wave’ of virtual working – with the first taking root in the 1980s when (very large) home computers began to appear in our lives.

Lynda Gratton offers a framework to look at each wave – technology, social and the work itself.

She notes that even during Wave 1, when independent consultants were pioneers in terms of technology, they quite soon began to worry about not being part of a community – which is the social element of the framework. How do people working remotely pick up the ‘tacit’ knowledge – the things that you pick up by osmosis – just by being around others in the workplace? This became a recurring theme as remote working developed to the present day.

This social element presents a real challenge to any leader. On the one hand, there is the individual social needs of an individual team member needs, and this might be picked up by a good leader in their differentiated approach to leading their team. However tacit knowledge is also all the ‘soft’ data that doesn’t get written down by a team or organisation. For example, the stories, legends and myths – and how to get things done – are all examples of tacit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge is like the cement between the building bricks of policy, projects and workstreams. When organisations and teams talk about knowledge management, they’re not only talking about the ‘official’ explicit knowledge – if anything, tacit knowledge is even more valuable – because it’s not written down.

So how can a leader hope to replicate any of this? The *Harvard Business Review* pandemic resources, also note this point,

*“People lose the unplanned watercooler or cappuccino conversations with colleagues in remote work. These are actually big and important parts of the workday that have a direct impact on performance. How do we create those virtually? For some groups and individuals, it will be constant instant messaging. For others, it will be live phone conversations or video conferences. Some people might want to use WhatsApp, WeChat, or Viber. A manager can encourage those types of contact points for psychological health. People are not going to be able to figure these things out organically. You’ve got to coach them”*

**A change in mindset?**

Leadership is always about people. Yet the leadership role may be changing shape to focus even more forensically on how the leader not only operates with individual members of their team – but is also required to create a space in which the team can operate – and actively manage it.

Leaders may need to be more mindful or intentional about how they’re going to communicate with their team. They can’t rely any more on bumping into people in corridors, sticking their head in a nearby office or asking someone to drop in. They will need to be more planful about what they want to say – and also consider the impact they want it to have – as they deliver it on the phone or on Zoom.

This kind of leadership remains people-centric – yet is also measured, thoughtful and empathetic. This will be a challenge for those who thrive on organisational drama. That drama will still be there, but they might have to work harder to find it!

**Helping people find hope and opportunity**

Finally, *MIT Sloan Management Review* (March 2020) takes a step away from Covid-19 specifically in favour of broader crisis leadership - and looks at 3 areas where leaders and organisations can act to drive even higher performance from teams.

1. Adaptive Capacity - leaders need to be able to respond and move as the situation changes rapidly – yet also maintain stability, or anchoring where it is possible. This anchoring can take the shape of consistency;

*“If, for example, your organization proclaims that people come first, ensure that all of your decisions in this time reflect that. Support people…. who make decisions using those tenets, even if there are short-term financial consequences. Value contributions no matter who offers them — this is no time for politics”*

1. Resilience – is this an opportunity to rally your team in adversity? To talk about how you may all emerge stronger, more engaged and more capable than before? This would require leaders to reassure and encourage people – and then supporting them both at work and at home;

*“Lucy English, PhD, vice president of research and science at [meQuilibrium](https://www.mequilibrium.com/), a company specializing in workforce resilience….shared research that shows approximately 50% of people are “worst-case thinkers.” In a crisis, they will be operating from fear — contributing negative energy and sharing doomsday scenarios. English said that the antidote to this is for leaders to operate from a realistic assessment of what is most likely to happen. This, she said, “reframes the situation to one that is inherently less scary.” With that most-likely-outcome assessment, leaders can then challenge the team to move the needle into more positive territory*

1. Trust - the research quoted by Sloan Management Review suggests that trust is the foundation of cooperative and collaborative leadership.

The idea of trust takes us back to where we started in our discussions around virtual working – and how to lead effectively and give your teams what they need. Lynda Gratton addresses this issue by recalling how the main blockers to virtual and home working taking off were the leaders and bosses themselves. Fundamentally, they didn’t believe that people at home were working – deep down they thought they were skiving.

However, the ‘mass experiment’ in home working she also referred to has been a leveller – now those same leaders and bosses are finding themselves also doing it – and presumably not skiving all the time (?)

For leaders to truly trust their people at a deep level may be a challenge to some – and so to conclude this piece, Gratton offers a mantra from one of her clients:

**“Trust someone until they become untrustworthy”.**

This may feel aspirational – and yet during Covid-19, convention and tradition is being broken everywhere. What was impossible is now possible. And so the questions for leaders, as new habits form, must include;

“How can I help my team be even better than they were before? What do I need to do? How might I need to think and be?”

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