

In The Wake Of COVID-19 Here's How To Lead Remote Employees

By Dan Pontefract

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared SARS-CoV-2 (aka: coronavirus) a pandemic. The resulting disease, COVID-19, has inflicted pain on thousands of people.

Organizations are now grappling with the inevitability that the way work is performed is drastically changing. Social distancing is now the norm. Supply chains are disrupted, and operational delays have become a reality. We've seen major conferences and events cancelled as well as training sessions postponed. Workers may be (rightfully) psychologically freaked out to be at work should the virus break out in your city. If it does, the very nature of day-to-day operations will change, at least until health officials and government leaders sort out containment measures, treatment plans and a vaccine.

When the unknown lies lurking in the background, it can present a real opportunity. In this case, how might you lead your team and employees differently—indeed even the entire organization—should SARS-CoV-2 necessitate a change.

Here are a few leadership strategies to consider assuming you and your team are not all that familiar with a work strategy where people work from home or other remote locations. It assumes you lead a team that is not in the business of manufacturing goods or scenarios where services are accessed by the public, such as restaurants, community centers, hair salons, and so on.

Keep Calm and Empathize

Like with any abnormal or crisis scenario, employees need their leader not only to remain calm but to empathize with both their thoughts and feelings. While they may be feeling nervous or anxious, they could also be thinking about the virus incorrectly. For example, the recent [YouGov](#) Brand Index buzz score for Corona beer shows a decrease from 75 at the beginning of January to 51 as of late February. Clearly there is no association of Corona beer to the coronavirus but that doesn't stop people thinking there might be. A leader must empathize with not only an employee's feelings about the situation but how they may be interpreting the outbreak. (And providing factual guidance as appropriate.) I'd stick with [WHO](#), [Popular Science](#) or [Elsevier](#).

Establish Team Norms

With employees no longer in the office, the daily cadence immediately gets thrown off. If you and your team are now working remotely, the first step is to establish team norms. These norms are a set of practices that you agree to carry out while everyone is offsite. Consider the following questions:

- Do we meet more frequently as a team? When? How long?
- Do we use a conference call or an online meeting platform like Zoom?
- If we use an online meeting platform, does everyone turn on their video camera?
- How do we ensure people are present and not multitasking?
- What is the recommended response time to a text or email?
- Should we use the phone more?
- How will we share sensitive information? Email? Online sharing platforms like Slack or Basecamp?
- There are many more questions to ask, but it's best to set up a conversation with the team to establish all team norm questions that need to be surfaced and answered.

Hold Virtual Open Office Hours

As a leader, employees need access to you. They need you to lead, not disappear. (See “keep calm and empathize” from above.) On top of your regular staff meeting and one-on-one meetings, consider holding open office hours on a conference call line or video-sharing platform. No agenda. No formalities. No hierarchy. It's merely an open forum for questions to be asked, ideas to be shared, and if needed, fears quelled. Make it accessible not just to your team, but however many are under your direction. (Sometimes called skip-level reports.) Fridays after lunch seem like a great spot to park it in your calendar.

Conduct Morning Huddles

Imagine an employee who has commuted to work for several years. The routine has been consistent. Every morning started the same way. Their morning conversations with the security guard, the front desk assistant, even the coffee barista are now gone. The new normal is isolation. To ameliorate any feelings of loneliness, I recommend a daily virtual huddle of 10 minutes. Now that employees are no longer commuting into work start the day 10 minutes early with a 10-minute pep talk. Be open. Discuss what you're up to for the day with meetings, tasks, projects, and so on. Publicly recognize someone. Provide updates on other organizational projects or changes. It's a perfect opportunity to be human in the face of uncertainty.

Frequent Check-ins

More than ever, your team members need to feel that you care. The easiest gift you can give is actually to care. You are equipped with a mobile phone, tablet and/or laptop. Use it. Send out-of-the-blue texts, emails and DMs to team members asking how they are doing. Maybe use it as an opportunity to thank them or recognize something you've noticed that day or week. You could send them an article, a hilarious meme, or a TED Talk. (Maybe one of [mine](#)!) Receiving unexpected messages from “the boss” ends up becoming an excellent shot of adrenalin for employees. Please don't overdo it, but don't ignore this tactic either.

Discussion Forum

If you've never led a team of remote employees before, you're likely used to office collisions. They are the moments when team members—including yourself—bump into one another and magic occurs. Maybe it springs an idea. It could remind someone that a task is due. It could unlock a problem. The “water cooler” chat may even create a new network connection. Whatever the case, they are no longer if everyone is working remotely. How to mitigate? In part, set up an online discussion forum where employees can rant, rave and discuss anything that pops into their mind. It's intended to be asynchronous—that means it's not a live conversation—such that people use it as a means to create some virtual collisions.

In Summary

Rather than sticking your head in the sand, I recommend that you become a proactive “remote” leader, one that is ready to change the very nature of how leadership is conducted should COVID-19 cause your organization to alter course.

Who knows? Maybe some of the changes will become standard practice as you evolve your leadership to become one that endorses a flexible working strategy.

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He is the best-selling author of three books: *OPEN TO THINK*, *THE PURPOSE EFFECT* and *FLAT ARMY*. A renowned speaker, Dan has presented at four different TED events and also writes for *Forbes* and *Harvard Business Review*. Dan is an adjunct professor at the University of Victoria, Gustavson School of Business and has garnered more than 20 industry awards over his career.



His third book, *OPEN TO THINK* won the 2019 getAbstract International Book of the Year winner and the 2019 Axiom Business Book Award in the Leadership category. He is set to release his 4th book on September 29 titled, *LEAD. CARE. WIN. How to Become a Leader Who Matters*.

Previously as Chief Envisioner and Chief Learning Officer at TELUS—a Canadian telecommunications company with revenues of over \$14 billion and 50,000 global employees—he launched the Transformation Office, the TELUS MBA, and the TELUS Leadership Philosophy, all award winning initiatives that dramatically helped to increase the company's employee engagement to record levels of nearly 90%. Throughout his tenure he was a mobile worker and helped the organization rollout its award-winning Flexible Work Styles model. Prior to TELUS he held senior roles at SAP, Business Objects and BCIT.

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