WHERE AN OCEAN OF LEADERSHIP
RESEARCH MEETS THE REAL-WORLD
OF ORGANIZATIONAL APPLICATION

Are You Lost at Sea in 2020?

Do you feel like you are caught in the undertow with waves crashing into you as try to lead a remote team? You are not alone. Leading remote teams is obviously a big problem in 2020 and beyond. A Google search of "leading remote teams" returned 126,000,000 results. There are countless articles with tips and guides for leading remote teams. Yet, even with all the tips and advice offered to leaders, the struggle continues.

A recent Harvard Business Review article highlighted a survey of remote workers that included more than 1,200 people from around the world. Managers and workers responded to a survey that explored how Covid-19 is impacting their work, well-being, and productivity. The results suggested that managers are struggling in their role, they need more support, and higher quality leadership would improve remote workers' well-being and performance.

Approximately 40% of the 215 supervisors and managers surveyed indicated they had low self-confidence in their ability to lead remote workers and doubt their ability to influence and coordinate workers to perform well. Thirty-eight percent believe remote workers have poorer performance and

22% were unsure, 41% were skeptical that remote workers can stay motivated for an extended time, and 17% were unsure. Some managers reported they didn't trust the competence of their employees, 29% weren't sure their employees had the required knowledge to effectively perform their role, and 27% agreed their employees lacked essential abilities. This means more than half of supervisors and managers do not have a positive view of remote work. The data indicated a strong influence of these leaders' beliefs was how their own boss treats them. Those whose boss doesn't trust them, micromanages them, and questions their ability did the same to their followers.

**What Managers Believe About Remote Worker Performance**

Percentage of managers who agree/disagree with the statement: "The performance of remote workers is usually lower than that of people who work in an office setting."
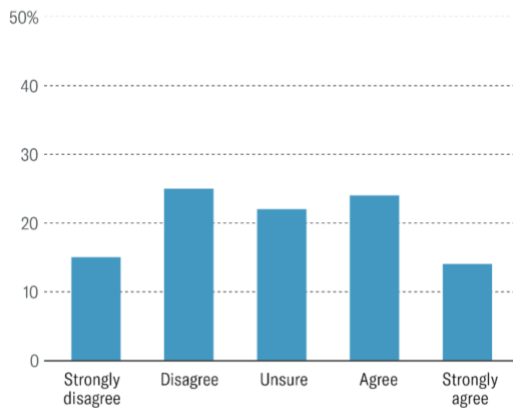
Source: Centre for Transformative Work Design survey of 215 global supervisors between April 21, 2020, and May 5, 2020
HBR

How Remote Workers Experience Being Managed at Home

Percentage of workers who agree/disagree with the statement: "Over the past week, I was expected to respond to electronic/telephone messages immediately."
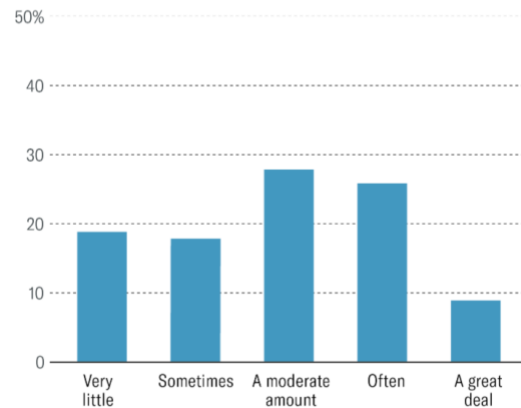
Source: Centre for Transformative Work Design survey of 617 global workers between April 21, 2020, and May 5, 2020
HBR

Employees of this type of leader reported high levels of close supervision. They believed their boss had low confidence in their work skills. Over half the surveyed remote workers reported feeling they had to always be available. They believed they were expected to respond to calls or messages immediately, be available at all times, and respond to work-related activities during non-work hours. Almost half of participants (49%) reported feeling always anxious about doing their job when they reported high levels of monitoring and lack of trust by their boss (4 or more on a five-point scale), and more than half (56%) reported high interference between work and their personal demands (i.e., home or family). Based on the results of this survey, the authors noted there is an urgent need to develop managers' skills when they lead remote teams.
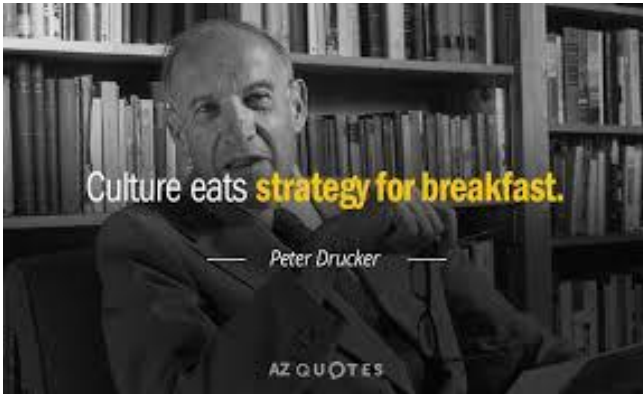
Leaders must be aware of the culture of their organization to begin to consider how to improve their ability to lead remote teams. If the organizational norm is to micromanage, mistrust, and doubt workers' ability, the strategies, tips, and advice to improve leadership of remote teams are not going to help. Leaders must be willing to take a different approach to improve their confidence and effectiveness.

The main reason leaders continue to struggle is because the most effective way to lead a remote team is rarely addressed. Cultivating Relational Leadership with remote followers will increase leader effectiveness and reduce employee stress. Relational Leadership is built on trust, loyalty, caring, commitment, and wanting the best for one another in the leader/follower exchange. Leaders must maintain an awareness of their followers' world and appropriately share their own, demonstrate behaviors that followers perceive as indicating their value and worth to the leader and the organization, and listen and be responsive to the needs and concerns of their followers. They should keep a positive view of their followers – not in a butterflies and rainbows way, but remember they are human beings who deserve respect even when things aren't going perfectly. Perfect is not an option; don't forget this.

Leaders need to learn how to manage conflict, address concerns as they arise (rather than waiting for performance reviews), be open to compromise, understand where their direct reports struggle so they can respond to their issue, and know what their followers' long term goals are to assist, where possible, in helping them achieve their ambitions. Relational leaders should have a vision for their team to build a shared sense of purpose, support the organization's mission, and create a positive legacy.[1] Leaders who can convey to remote workers that they matter, their work is important and valued, and the leader has their back when difficulties arise will have remote teams that are engaged which, research has shown, reduces workers' negative perception of their job.[2]

This may sound like a lot of work. It may be at first, but as a leader practices and gets comfortable with being a secure base and safe harbor for their followers, it will become second nature. Relational Leadership is really about doing little things often – touching base just because, following up when a direct report or coworker has experienced a challenge or setback to see how they are doing,

reaching out when you know they are struggling, scheduling a digital coffee or happy hour one-on-one to get to know your teammates better – reduce the formal and increase the relational interactions. Imagine yourself on the beach having a conversation with your remote workers that seems to reduce the distance between you.

If you would like more information about Relational Leadership, please contact us at leadershipbeach.com.

References

1. Navarra, M. E. R. J., Gottman, J. M., & Gottman, J. S. (2015). Sound relationship house theory and relationship and marriage education. In *Evidence-based approaches to relationship and marriage education* (pp. 115-129). Routledge.

2. Derks, D., van Duin, D., Tims, M., & Bakker, A. B. (2015). Smartphone use and work–home interference: The moderating role of social norms and employee work engagement. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *88*(1), 155-177.