
Leading Remote Teams

Learn the 6 Truths for successful leadership and engagement of remote teams



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Introduction

Although over the last year or so, the world seems to have become smaller with countries becoming more insular and some very large organisations recalling people back into offices, the reality is that it is too late, organisations and individuals have seen the good that can come from opening borders, tearing down walls and opening up markets around the globe. Advances in technology are making it increasingly easy to work in a way that is effective, regardless of location, so if Joe wants to work from the beach one day he can and if Mary wants to travel the world whilst she works she can do that too.

And yet, even for those who embrace it, it does require adjusting to. Systems and processes that we are used to, may no longer exist, be relevant or appropriate. Our beliefs about what is possible get challenged. Generational differences can create conflict and all of this can lead to a general feeling of discomfort and unease.

With the best will in the world, some if not all of the following can arise:

- A sense that you are always on, working around the clock
- Becoming distracted – twitter, facebook, the phone, the view...
- Feeling a lack of control – who is doing what, how and by when?
- Social isolation
- Getting problems resolved takes too long
- Meetings can be torturous
- Internet malfunction!
- Building enough of a relationship to really performance manage
- A sense that you don't know what is going on so you can't help or influence

The leader of a remote team can make or break the team. Leadership always has a huge influence on the team they lead, but when it comes to remote teams everything is heightened. Leadership on steroids is what is required!

So even if you are an experienced leader, leading a remote team will require you to up level your skills.

Over the last 5 years I have put together and lead a team of over 80 fantastic professionals in more than 30 countries, crossing all time zones, and it has been the best experience ever. Did I always get it right? Oh no! Did it get better and better? Absolutely! And I am proud to say that not only was it a fantastic experience during which I learned lots and made firm friends, but the team was also hugely successful, both as a team of people who trusted, respected and supported each other and as professionals who delivered to a very high level, individually and as a team.

When thinking about what we learned that made it so successful, it boiled down to 6 key things, which I have called the 6 truths.

On the next pages, you will find these truths, an explanation of what they are and some questions for you to work through. Answering them AND taking action, will help you lead but also most importantly, engage and motivate the team and the individuals within it to extraordinary levels of performance.

Now is it all up to you? Of course not. But can you as a leader make a HUGE difference. YESSSSSS!

So let's get to it

Truth number 1

Mindset is Key

This refers to your mindset as the leader first and foremost. Your belief about what is possible and what isn't will not only influence what you do but also what those in your team will do and what they will believe is possible. This requires a certain level of self awareness and an ability to know what you are good at, what motivates you and what you struggle with, so that you can ensure that you have things in place to manage those areas that you are less comfortable with or enjoy less. Start here and this will lead to an ability to transfer that learning to others by being curious about what they are good at, what motivates them and what they struggle with.

Questions to start your journey:

1. What are the benefits of leading a remote team and working remotely?
2. What are the disadvantages?
3. What do you struggle with?

Take each of the points from the three questions above and write down what the underlying belief is.

For example

Disadvantage	Belief
Not being able to conduct all exchanges face to face	I need to be face to face in order to truly get my message across and see how it lands

Then take the belief and reframe, by asking "What else could be true?"

I need to be face to face in order to truly get my message across and see how it lands	I need to see their face to ensure that my message gets across so a video call would be great
	OR
	I need to learn to read their tone of voice more so that I can be confident that my message has got across
	OR

Truth number 2

We are relational beings

One of the things that makes humans human, is their need for relationships. We are relational beings and need to connect with others like us in some way, for us to function well.

As a leader of a team, our relationship with the team as a whole and with individuals in the team is important not only for us but also for the individuals we lead. We have a responsibility to ensure their wellbeing whilst at work, to give them opportunities to develop and to ensure that the team functions in a way that meets objectives. I am sure you can think of more things that we are responsible for!

A remote environment means that some of the normal rules of engagement and ways in which we would normally build relationships will be different – little or no face to face contact, different timezones, no opportunities to just bump into someone and have an “informal” chat, etc.

Regardless it is still our responsibility to ensure that good relationships exist and that they serve the needs of individuals and the team as a whole.

These are some things that worked for me:

- Use video conferencing – skype, zoom, webex, gotowebinar or any other system available to you – for 1:1 and group meetings so that everyone can see each other
- Set up whatsapp groups so that messages and photos can be shared quickly
- Set the tone by being the one to share first – I went on a business trip to central America and shared pictures of us working and relaxing. This gave permission for others to do the same. I also used it when I needed help as I could send out one message saying “help, who is available to speak?!” and everyone would get it and someone would always respond
- I would respond to those messages from others

Questions to explore relationships:

1. What are the relationship challenges in your environment?
2. What kind of relationships do you want?
3. What technology can you use to change the way you communicate?
4. What are your beliefs around sharing personal information?
5. Which beliefs are helpful and which are not?
6. How well do you know your team?
7. What motivates them as a team and individually?
8. How can you create an environment where each person can find their motivation?
9. What motivates you?

Truth number 3

Cannot over communicate

There are some issues that need to be resolved and you worry that if you tell the team, they will worry? Not sure whether to tell them yet that some changes are afoot? In both these situations and in countless others, my response is the same. Tell them. The only time I can think of to not divulge what may be going on is when there is a legal requirement for you not to or if the information is confidential until a particular date.

What happens if you do not keep people informed? What happens is that they fill in the gaps and make things up and what they make up is usually an exaggerated version of the truth or completely wrong.

There are very few occasions where you can be accused of over communicating, particularly when you lead a remote team as they are not all together in an office where they can see meetings going on or hear conversations. Now you may feel that this could be an advantage as it could mean that the rumour mill doesn't therefore exist. And you would be wrong. It may take a little longer to get going sometimes, but it definitely exists and because they are not in an environment where concerns can also be assuaged as well as raised, the rumour mill can take on a life of its own far quicker and getting the right message out can take more time.

Tips:

- Be very clear and explicit in your communication. If there are things that you cannot divulge, tell them and tell them why.
- Communicate for information not for effect
- If you are expressing an opinion, state that it is your opinion
- Stick to the facts as often as possible
- If you don't know say you don't know
- Listen to questions and go back to them with answers

Questions to help with communication:

1. How do you like to communicate?
2. What are the key themes you need to communicate?
3. What challenges are you facing in terms of communication in this remote environment?
4. Which ones can you resolve?
5. Which ones do you need help to resolve?
6. Who in the team can help you?

Truth number 4

To gain control you have to let go

You can't see them walk through the door; you don't know if they are working or playing; you don't hear every voice in a meeting and you can't always see their faces. All of this can lead to a sense of lack of control especially if you have bosses who are asking you questions about this.

Now, there are all sorts of applications available that can make people clock in and out even if they are working remotely, and you could create checklists for people to complete. But is this really good use of your time and theirs? Does it really mean you are in control?

Most people who work remotely do so in part because they are motivated by freedom. This does not mean that they are out of control or that you need to be. It just means that more space has to be given for people to complete their work on time, on budget and to the objectives in their way.

Setting the ground rules that everyone goes by, ensuring there is free and ample communication and then letting go to allow people to deliver, is the way that will in the end, give you all the respect and control that you need.

Tips:

- Spend time talking about the values that you all live by
- Understand individual motivators
- Be very clear on objectives, action plans, timelines and budgets
- Be available for questions and concerns
- Ensure that any potential issues are communicated as they arise
- Respond by helping and thanking them for their openness and vulnerability
- Praise and say thank you when things are done well

Questions around control:

1. What control do you need?
2. When do you feel out of control?
3. What happens?
4. What will the ground rules be? (one of my rules was that if anything went wrong I wanted to know first so that I would not be surprised by the client and as long as I knew it would be ok. We would solve the issue and make sure it didn't happen again. My team felt I had their back)
5. How will you agree and communicate them?

Truth number 5

Give trust to get trust

This one is very closely tied to truth number 4 and may be very easy for some of you to do and harder for others.

Some people build trust slowly, one action at a time. Others build it slowly over time and others give trust first and you have to lose it. There is no good way or bad way to do it, there is only the one that suits you and one can be faster than the others.

If you give your trust first, you create an environment where trust already exists because you have put it there. It will help others in your team feel trusted and take your lead by accepting and then offering trust back.

Tips:

- Assume positive intent – no one does anything to hurt themselves so they expect their actions to achieve something positive
- Be open about your desire for trust to exist and how you are leading by example
- Make it a core value for the team

Questions:

1. How do you trust?
2. What enables you to trust?
3. How easy/hard will it be for you to give trust first?
4. What needs to exist?
5. Is trust a core value for you?
6. What will having trust within the team give you and them?

Truth number 6

Evolution is key

Will you get it all right on day one? NO. Will the team get it all right on day one? NO. Will circumstances change? YES. Will priorities change? YES. Will technology change? YES.

All this means, is that it will be essential for you to learn and evolve as things change. Is this any different in the remote world than it is in the non-remote world? A little, for now, in terms of the pace of change. There is a need to make things easier, faster, more accessible and so the environment for remote teams is changing faster.

Tips:

- Be receptive to ideas from the team in terms of improving how you work
- Be vigilant when it comes to new technology and what it can provide
- Get agreement from the team to try new things out and get feedback quickly on the changes
- Be agile
- Change things if something doesn't work

Questions:

1. How receptive are you to change?
2. How quickly can you make changes?
3. How inclusive are you?
4. How will you communicate the need to be agile and responsive?
5. How will you get buy in to try things out?
6. How responsive is the team to change?
7. Are there individuals who are less or more responsive?
8. How do you differentiate?

I hope that this has given you some ideas to work on to engage and motivate your remote team.

If you have any questions or comments do not hesitate to get in touch at

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Like the questions but want some support in really getting to the bottom of them and taking your leadership skills to the next level? Please [see here](#)