

# How to be a virtual leader

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The rise in remote working is putting managers under pressure to engage and motivate staff who are increasingly removed from the physical constraints of the conventional office. Managers need to do more than issue instructions to maintain productivity, writes Sue Weekes

How confident are you about managing remote workers? If you think the answer is simply a case of re-working tried and tested techniques from the bricks and mortar world, then you will be in for a crude shock.

What is clear is that opinion is divided about the ideal make-up of a remote manager. Some say the skill set is the same as traditional face to face management, only everything needs to be amplified. Others believe it is less about being a manager, and more about being a leader and guide. The reality is probably a mixture of these factors.

“The trick the manager needs to pull off is to be present while absent,” says Alex Swarbrick, senior consultant at Roffey Park Institute.

## **Trust people up front; the mindset should be ‘I will trust you until I’m proved wrong’**

*Ghislaine Caulat, Ashridge Consulting*

With the emergence of hot desking and increasing reliance on technology many people have been managing remotely for years. But this doesn’t mean they have been doing it effectively and this needs to change, says Ghislaine Caulat, who heads up the virtual working practice at Ashridge Consulting and works remotely.

“The necessity to lead, work and learn virtually will become the new normal,” says Caulat, citing the continued focus on reducing costs following the recession, globalisation and ongoing concern for the environment as key factors in the move to virtual work.

The figures stack up too. A CBI/Pertemps Employment Trends survey carried out before the downturn in 2008 found that almost half of employers (46%) in the UK offer tele- or virtual working to employees. This figure is likely to increase as organisations look to virtual working as a way of cutting overheads and streamlining business processes. This is the case at equipment manufacturer Alfa Laval, which is working with Caulat, to develop a virtual strategy. So far the company has made savings of around £60,000 in flight and accommodation costs. But it is not all about cost savings.

## Learning new skills

Managers need to ensure they are equipped not only with the necessary new skills but also that they understand how to apply the old ones in a virtual world where things can appear very different. Any communication with employees, for instance, must be clear, unambiguous and regular since you can't rely on body language and subtle nuances to get your message across or pick up on how an individual feels about a task. "When someone is in the room and says they can do a task, it's written in their body language what they really think," says Chris Smith, principal consultant at leadership development company, Bath Consultancy Group. "But across email, or even in videoconferencing, you won't get these same clues." When it comes to virtual communication, Caulat recommends avoiding traditional videoconferencing etiquette like formally introducing yourself every time you speak and instead suggests adopting a more freeform approach. "Saying your name and not interrupting can make for sterile conversation," she says. "This is fine if you're in broadcast mode but not if you want to think together. Good leaders will know who is speaking and the group will learn to self-regulate." Virtual leaders and managers should also learn how to listen in the virtual world. "We've all learned to listen rationally to what is being said. I invite people to listen to the silence and what is not being said."

The downside to virtual working is that there is more potential for misunderstanding. "How do you ensure that what matters to you is on the agenda of the team and, reciprocally, how confident is the team that what matters to them is on your agenda?," asks Swarbrick. This is why a manager's relationship building abilities take on even more importance. "From good relationships you build trust, understanding and a recognition of how you can work together to get things done and avoid some of the 'out of sight, out of mind' challenges," says Smith.

He recommends some upfront face to face familiarisation to help the team get to know each other and then build in 'connecting mechanisms' whenever the group meets virtually, such as asking everyone to spend a minute telling the group how they are.

## Face to face engagement

David MacLeod, co-author of *Engaging for Success*, the 2009 report into the importance of engagement, warns that there is a tendency for conversations

with remote employees to be too transactional. “They can often leave out that deeper sense of relationship, which is important,” he says.

Without doubt a solid, two-way relationship will help to increase employee engagement which should lead to higher performance. A challenge for managers is to ensure that some of the tenets required for high levels of engagement transfer to the virtual space. People need to see how their role fits into the bigger picture and the long-term aims of the organisation. “It’s the old ‘are you chipping away at a block of stone or building a cathedral’? And in remote working this is even more important,” says MacLeod. “When out by yourself, you need to be reminded of what you are working towards.”

While new skills can be acquired and old ones adapted, there are some essential personal characteristics for remote managers. Roffey’s research into distance management highlighted the qualities of high personal energy and resilience. “Maintaining momentum and simply keeping things going takes effort,” says Swarbrick. “The recurrent message is that whatever it takes to skillfully manage a team based close to you, it takes umpteen more times to do so at a distance.”

Managers also need to change their mindset. Peter Thomson, director of consultancy Wisework and a visiting fellow at Henley Business School, says managers are often reluctant to embrace remote working because they fear it will mean a loss of control and a threat to their status. “They think, ‘my empire in the organisation is the people sitting at all of these desks and if I can’t see my empire any more, my status is lowered within the company’.”

## Avoiding presenteeism

Stemming from this, an even bigger problem is, “if I can no longer see my team, how do I know they are doing their job?”. For remote working to stand any chance of success, managers have to become more outcome-driven and learn to judge an individual on what they achieve and not on how much time they spend on a task.

“We’re good at measuring input and hours worked but bad at measuring output,” says Thomson. “Our reward system doesn’t reward or improve productivity but does the reverse. A bad plumber who is slow gets paid more than a good one just because he takes longer to do the job.”

Clearly, for this shift to happen, managers must set clear goals and have key performance indicators (KPIs) in place but, crucially, they must also learn to trust their remote workers to get on with the job. Caulat believes this is more about leading than managing, and individuals need to resist the natural management urge to try to control everything. “Trust people up front; the mindset should be ‘I will trust you until I’m proved wrong’,” she says.

Penny Power, founder of business networking site Ecademy, which has only five people on the payroll but draws on its global community for a host of

suppliers and services, agrees that it is wrong to try to control people when operating remotely. She believes managers must unite people behind a common purpose. If you achieve this, individuals will become almost self-managing. “We trust that the output will happen because the individuals believe in the cause,” says Powers. “If you stay on track and constantly keep delivering that message everyone knows how to play their part. You need to manage your needs at a micro level but your people at a macro level.”

## Effective socialising

As a remote manager, it can be easy to forget that the social side of work has a huge part to play in team and relationship building. The traditional sales manager approach of bringing the team together in a pub to discuss business and socialise is effective, says Thomson. Managers also need to build social time into the virtual workspace by embracing social media sites rather than banning them. While an initial face to face meeting is helpful, if a team develops virtually and then meets in person, it can set the group back, “because they have to spend time re-adjusting to how they relate to each other,” says Caulat.

Online social activities are preferable for this type of group. For example, some clients holds a virtual ‘popcorn time’, which Caulat likens to conversations around the water-cooler, while another convenes a meeting every second week where “the agenda is to have no agenda”.

“People come and talk and depending on the time zone they might have coffee and a bagel, coffee and a piece of cake, coffee and a sandwich or even a glass of wine because it’s Friday and the end of their week,” she says. “It may be paradoxical but as a leader you need to engineer informal exchange.”

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