

Remote Work Revolution

Tags: [#remote-work](#)

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Dialogue

Common mindsets:

- People will work less if we let them work virtually.

Not only was working from home desirable, but comparing the time that each group spent logged on to take calls, they discovered that the remote workers increased their productivity by 13 percent compared to their colleagues.

When they looked at turnover they found a 50 percent drop compared to the group that continued to work at the office. Over the course of the experiment, Ctrip improved total productivity by 20–30 percent and saved about \$2,000 a year for each employee that worked remotely—largely from reduction in office space, increased performance, and reduced turnover.

- Surveillance software and services?
- Working from home doesn't mean the same thing for everyone:

Working from home depends a lot on what kind of home it is and who else is in it.

What is it about engagement that is so critical?

1. Structuring unstructured time for informal interactions

What is so important about this?

How?

Point --> Initiate it yourself.

2. Emphasizing individual differences

We often hear -- let's stay focused on the big picture -- we're all on the same team. You talk in an early part of the book about minimizing differences.

What's significant about differences?

What does that look like?

Key point here:

Leaders should avoid referring to people by their membership in a subgroup.

3. Forcing conflict

Most espouse value of conflict. Challenge is to not step in and quash it when it happens. Sounds like something even further?

What have you changed your mind on?

Quotes

Whether installed explicitly as a monitor for productivity or framed more innocuously as a passive facilitator for constant connection, employees despise surveillance tools. The experience makes them feel self-conscious to the point of heightened anxiety and demoralized to the point of losing loyalty to their employer. Many tolerate the intrusion only because they fear job loss if they push back, especially when the economy is not favorable. Those who can afford to leave their companies often do. An analysis by Accenture found that employees became highly stressed and felt disempowered under the gaze of monitoring tools.³ A survey conducted by Deloitte found that millennials had intentions to leave companies that they perceived as emphasizing profits over people's well-being.⁴ In fact, the study found that the tools were unsettling even to those who were meant to benefit from the gazing, so to speak: a staggering 70 percent of the surveyed C-suite executives were ill at ease about the effective use of surveillance data. Leaders must recognize the risks associated with digital supervision. Despite what may well be the best of intentions, digital surveillance by definition conveys a lack of trust between employers and employees—especially if these tools are an attempt to establish control after a sudden shift into remote work. When you signal mistrust in employees, you are eradicating the bedrock of effective teamwork. What good are “awareness technologies”—or any attempt to enhance productivity, for that matter—if the most basic conditions for a productive team don't exist?

To create the conditions for people to realize their own capacity and power, a leader must attend to the traditional, collocated aspects of team processes as well as initiate those that are unique to leading virtually.¹⁴ To this end, I have learned that three common practices are important for leaders to implement and practice regularly: 1) structuring unstructured time for informal interactions, 2) emphasizing individual differences, and 3) forcing conflict.

Casual, spontaneous communication is rare on distributed teams, which tend to convene for specific tasks and in contexts that put time at a premium. Leaders must therefore make a conscious effort to promote spontaneous interaction. A simple intervention is to set aside the initial six to seven minutes of a meeting for informal chat about nonwork matters. Members should be encouraged not only to talk about the weather but also to communicate—and, yes, complain—about constraints such as technical and work conditions. Leaders can also facilitate informal contact by scheduling virtual lunches, breaks for coffee, tea, or a snack, and even a virtual happy hour. Teams can also come up with plans for virtual recreational activities that they vary from time to time to hold their interest. Leaders should demonstrate the value of

informal talk by initiating it themselves. After a manager inherited a remote team as part of an acquisition, he made a point not only to involve those virtual employees in important decisions, contact them frequently to discuss ongoing projects, and thank them for good work; he also called team members personally to give them their birthdays off and to simply chat. However, leaders do not have to be present for every such instance; in fact, it's a good idea to also facilitate unstructured peer-to-peer time. Leaders can pair people up to check on each other regularly, at least once a week, for a virtual activity.

Another important practice for leaders—emphasizing individual differences—keeps the team abreast of peer strengths they can leverage. Unless a leader actively encourages differences of opinion, members are too often hesitant to voice their point of view. It's easy for leaders to place so much emphasis on organization and efficiency that they inadvertently quash the expression of divergent viewpoints, even from members with deep expertise. In one case I studied, a software developer was a member of a team whose leader brooked no dissent, so to protect his position he stayed mum and didn't express his disagreement with the design of a particular feature. Four weeks later, the team became ensnarled in the problem he had foreseen. To promote a free exchange of views, leaders should ask others for their opinions: "What do you think about the new proposal?" "Does anyone have additional comments?" Agenda items, too, should be open for discussion. Emphasizing such differences also highlights individuality while downplaying subgroup boundaries. Leaders should avoid referring to people by their membership in a subgroup ("As one of the New York guys mentioned . . .," "As one of the engineers said . . .") and should instead focus on the perspectives and knowledge of individuals.

To this end, teams should frame dissent as positive—as differences of viewpoint—and provide assurance that members will not be blamed for "rocking the boat." Divergent opinions should be met with comments such as "I like that idea . . . let's brainstorm more like it." If others are dismissive, their comments should be channeled into specifics: What are their concerns? That way the proponent of an idea can take an active role in shaping the discussion by addressing others' questions. If such a gentle approach is not working, leaders should force conflict into the open. This does not mean inviting team members to vent their grievances or harp on personal and cultural differences; it means intentionally eliciting open intellectual disagreement that can spur innovative thinking about a given task or a process.

When you lead virtually, you lose face-to-face contact and the in-person tool kit that made you so effective in the physical world. All of your hard-earned gains, built on the foundation of your leadership presence, fade to the background. The sights and sounds that embodied the world for you are moderated by a single and limited digital channel. Serendipitous and planned informal encounters are absent. You can't drop in on someone to invite them for a coffee break, nor can you take your team members to lunch to swap stories in order to strengthen your bond. Despite these losses, virtual leaders can still equip and empower their team. Your goal is to make sure the impact of

your leadership work continues in your absence by creating the conditions for people to realize their own capacity and power.

References