A GUIDE TO
LEADING REMOTE TEAMS

A Robert Walters Group Company

changeosity

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is placing unprecedented demands on us, as business leaders. The extent of the problem is not yet understood. The long-term impact of emergency measures remains unknown. How long it will last remains an open question. We are seeing some evidence of reactive response in the businesses we encounter; unclear directions, uncertain policies and flip-flop decisions, to name a few examples.

The differing reactions of businesses around the world show that the slower and less effective the response, the greater the risk of prolonging the economic, political and social consequences of COVID-19. In case of doubt, now is the time to take up the mantle of leading through change. The focus must be on impact on leaders to respond deliberately, rather than merely "react" to the situation. The reality is that the Future of Work is already upon us. If there is any legacy that comes from COVID-19 it is this; uncertainty is the new constant and leaders must embrace sustainable practices that future-proof their businesses from crises to come.

Robert Walters has partnered with changeosity, a Dubai-based business consultancy and, with their co-founder, Kiran Scarr, we share advice on what it takes to lead remote teams in the time of COVID-19.

The 4 systematic behaviours to lead through change

According to changeosity there are 4 systematic behaviours to adopt in order to lead through change. **Collaboration, curiosity, courage and caring** will insulate people and business from harm and ensure you come through this uncertainty stronger than ever into the Future of Work.

1. Collaboration

Now is not the time for command and control style leadership; authoritative decision-making based on a singular expertise and experience. This is because COVID-19 is not a regular emergency situation. It is an unprecedented and complex situation with interdependencies that are not fully understood. No one leader can have all the answers.

Be visionary
Your role is to set direction for the company and to empower your trusted leaders to create and implement solutions that will ensure you fully navigate what lies ahead to achieve this vision. You are behaving responsibly if you are devolving decision-making to the right people at the right time.

Adopt dynamic thinking
Have a team to advise you on ongoing priorities in managing and mitigating the impact of COVID-19. Your 'board of advisors' should be adept at dealing with high-stress, everchanging conditions in a calm and systematic way. They should come from different disciplines – finance, HR, legal – in order to give you varied perspectives.

Transparency and clarity are key
Share fact-based information that is current. Be clear about what you know, what you don't know and what you are doing to learn more. Your communication should be thoughtful, sensitive and frequent. Clear and simple language should be used to explain what standards are expected to be maintained. We should be open to adapting policies and approaches as we learn more about the pandemic and how best to deal with its evolution.

2-way communication channels
Reassure your customers and stakeholders that you are confronting the crisis head-on, and address their concerns directly and with compassion. Encourage cross-department and function strategies when developing solutions to real-time problems.

Avoid judgement
Be open to course corrections without judgement or adverse reaction. Mistakes are opportunities for learning and growth when you are dealing with quicksand.

Role model responsible behavior
Discuss issues and share best practices with your peers in industry or beyond. It's a time for an abundance of thinking not competitive advantage. Adopting the collective purpose of sustainable business practices will make the Future of Work inevitable.

2. Curiosity

It's not about a plug and play of a crisis management plan that has been prepared for emergencies. That plan might be difficult or impossible to execute in this on-going global situation. The reality is that we just don't know the proportions of this pandemic nor its likely impact on the economy, business and society at large. What we do know, however, is that we might need to make a permanent adjustment to business practices to ensure we remain resilient and future-proof in times to come.

Be open

Acknowledge to yourself and others that your business is facing uncertainty. Only then can you gain credibility that you are responding in a manner that meets people's expectations of you as a leader.

Go on the balcony

Take a helicopter view of your status to size up the extent of the problem as a reality for your business. This means pause, reflect, assess from different perspectives, consider pre-emptive measures and decide necessary strategic priority actions.

Start with customer and stakeholder engagement

Have open, honest discussions about pain points affecting your and their businesses. Encourage risk transparency to start generating options for mutually agreeable solutions such as payment breaks, repayment plans or varied terms of business.

Bottom-line the key issues

The priority must be to secure access to vital assets necessary for sustainable business. Identify any weak points and sensitivities and come up with a roadmap to address priority risks and threats. Prioritisation of strategies and plans are key here. Your business needs a pragmatic and flexible roadmap to navigate the path ahead. Seek expertise and advice, where necessary.

3. Courage

It's time to submerge our egos. Focus must be on what is and not what we fear may come. We must face up to the possibility of a deeper, more protracted down-turn in order to create sensible and sustainable solutions. More radical cost-cutting decisions may save businesses in the long-term. Early divestments may attract higher returns than in a recessionary environment.

Explore potential implications on customer and supply chains

Focus should be on stabilizing your customer and supply chains in the short as well as long-term. Adopt bridging strategies such as supply rationing, pre-booking logistics capacity, using existing stock, and placing priority status on orders. Also consider replacement arrangements such as low-cost outsourcing, automation and alternative suppliers.

Critically assess your cash-flows, profit & loss and balance sheets

Look at different scenarios and stress test different outcomes e.g. working capital requirements. The purpose is to identify key triggers that may significantly impair liquidity. Have brave discussions with banks and creditors about re-scheduling, lease breaks etc to assist in alleviating pressure points. Optimise cost reduction measures and look at ways to improve cash positions through divestment of non-core business.

Confront solvency implications and ability to meet debt obligations

Review the position of your accounts payable and receivable and the likely impact on both. Respond with intention, rather than merely 'react' rather than react by re-negotiating credit terms, renewing efforts to collect payments or create payment plans and proactively manage cash flows by pushing out creditors.

Innovate opportunities

It may be time for whole-scale change through process, inventory, production and other operations optimization. Be open to challenging assumptions such as the speed or affordability of implementing automated solutions. Look for solutions that are resilient and future-proof.

Create a long-term resource strategy

There may be an urgent need to build in an organisational re-design as part of your strategy to minimize payroll costs. Think big and put in place a solution that has long-term efficiency with the Future of Work in mind.

4. Caring

In these times of challenge, our paramount consideration is the cost on human life of this pandemic. At the forefront of our minds, we must consider the personal and professional challenges that employees and families are facing during this crisis. Aside from our health and safety responsibilities as an employer, we have a fundamental duty of care to our workforce to protect them from harm; moral as much as legal.

Be human
Behave with empathy and humility. Embrace these times of uncertainty with calm, composure and confidence. Do this, and you build trust and credibility as a leader to overcome any obstacle, challenge or adversity.

Care for yourself
Be aware of the impact of fatigue and stress in these difficult times. How can you lead yourself and others if you yourself are on an empty tank? Compassion for others starts with compassion for yourself.

Focus on the pain points of others
Ask yourself "How are my customers, stakeholders and employees affected by these developments as they unfold?" "How can I alleviate harm and suffering during this time?" "How can I help others?" Come from a place of abundance rather than scarcity.

Actively promote psychological safety
Encourage employees and stakeholders to openly discuss ideas, questions, concerns and fears, without repercussion. Express care about their concerns and offer solutions that address or mitigate their impact.

Incentivise your employees and stakeholders to act responsibly
Better to keep home a sick worker than cope with putting the entire workforce at risk. Guideline papers are useful for non-mandatory issues to assist employees to understand how to behave or make choices for themselves.

Customise your approach to personnel issues
Personnel issues cannot be tackled with a broad brush. Tailor and tier your response based on individual needs. Consider a variety of leave options in a respectful and caring manner sick leave, unpaid leave, holiday, severance package, reduced hours / days by mutual agreement). Provide necessary support and resources to enable safe and productive home working.

See this as a blueprint for the Future of Work
Wide-scale adoption of social distancing is an experiment in action. Embrace the opportunity to fine-tune your home-working practices to better enable industries to move into the Future of Work.

Successful remote team management

As a leader, it can be a challenge to manage team members who are working remotely. It takes a strong bond of trust to overcome the desire for 'presenteeism'; the traditional approach of correlating physical presence with productivity.

We look at how you can ensure your remote team is working productively, collaboratively and with fulfillment.

Communicate frequently and with clarity
Create the optimum environment for your employees to perform as valued team members.

- Have a weekly team collaboration meeting, by video conference, to discuss 'the 3 P's': Priorities, Problems, Plans. Have everyone contribute as an open forum for ideas and actions.

- Create clear guidelines on what channels are to be used for communication, by whom and for what purposes and expected levels of frequency to enhance team collaboration, cooperation, and engagement.

- Check in with your individual team members, once or twice a week at agreed times, but be careful not to micro-manage.

- Do not let distance lead you to react rather than respond. For instance, if you receive feedback on a team member from a third party, first communicate with the individual directly by video call to hear their side of events before you respond or jump to conclusions.

Prioritise reporting, updates and recognition
A consistent flow of information regarding priorities, achievements and accomplishments keeps employees engaged, empowered and motivated.

- Regular dashboard updates are critical for nurturing team members' understanding of team direction and goals. They are also a great way of giving public recognition for individual or team accomplishments.

- Tailor your approach to each team member. If you have a team member who is less prone to self-motivation, find ways to increase transparency through daily reporting of actions and accomplishments.
- If you detect that a team member has 'gone quiet' or progress is slow, check in with them and explore the root cause of the issue.

The age of video call is here

The most effective and human way to collaborate is through video calls. They are critical to productive remote working because:

- They allow you to observe and use non-verbal communication and body language.
  - They encourage active participation (contrast with a passive telephone call whilst you attend to other matters).
- It is good for the human psychology to feel connected by seeing and hearing other people.

Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype etc. make it much easier to communicate across teams.

Tailor your approach to each team member

Diversity is the key to strong, successful and high performing team.

- Prioritise time spent on each team member; the more senior you are the greater time you should be dedicating to people development.

- One size does not fit all:
  - Each team member is an individual, with different needs, wants and desires.
  - Some team members may require greater levels of supervision and support from you; do not judge and be flexible.
- Some team members may have external, environmental factors affecting their productivity or ability to deliver; be curious about their remote circumstances and speak openly about challenges.
- Be mindful that different people have different tension responses, some freeze, some fight, and others resort to flight. Be versatile with those you lead.

Care for each team member as an individual

As a leader, you have a duty of care to your team members for their health and wellbeing, whether or not they are physically located close to you.

- Ensure your team members are working from a safe workstation and environment and have the required tools to perform e.g. good back support and a raised screen.
- Create guidelines for healthy and productive work practices such as regular screen breaks, exercise, and mindfulness practices.
- Monitor working hours to ensure they are maintaining healthy and sustainable practices whether working from home or remote offices.

How to maintain company culture while working remotely

The term work culture may bring to mind office perks, like ping-pong tables and happy hours, but true culture goes deeper. It forms the fabric of your organisation and makes a big difference to your bottom line. In fact, research shows that employees with a strong connection to their organisation's culture are more engaged. Companies with great cultures attract the most qualified candidates, too.

For managers and CEOs, the COVID-19 pandemic is creating an unprecedented challenge: how to maintain their hard-earned culture when most employees are working from home, some for the first time ever.

Here are a few strategies to ensure that your cultural initiatives do not get lost during the coronavirus pandemic:

Reflect on your purpose and values

During these times, never lose sight of your company's original mission statement. Decisions must still align with the overarching purpose and values, remaining in line with the company's "DNA", even if the strategies in the short term are a change of direction.

Create a culture grounded in trust

Trust between employer and employee can naturally be eroded during these difficult periods. Leaders must attempt to build a better vision than even was in place before - designing new office best practices, new ways of working effectively, and making sure that's always time for fun. When employees see the effort being made for their comfort and success, trust will start to build again.

Employees must always feel safe to be able to communicate with management what is and isn't working for them. This environment can be fostered through open communication and transparency.

Communicate and connect with your community

In light of COVID-19, some brands have risen to the occasion to offer comfort to their customers and followers. As Slack cofounder and CEO Stewart Butterfield recently commented at an online webinar, "People really, really remember when you care about them and are respectful, even when the news is bad."

In short, the tone of communications during a crisis is more important in reiterating company culture, than at any other time.
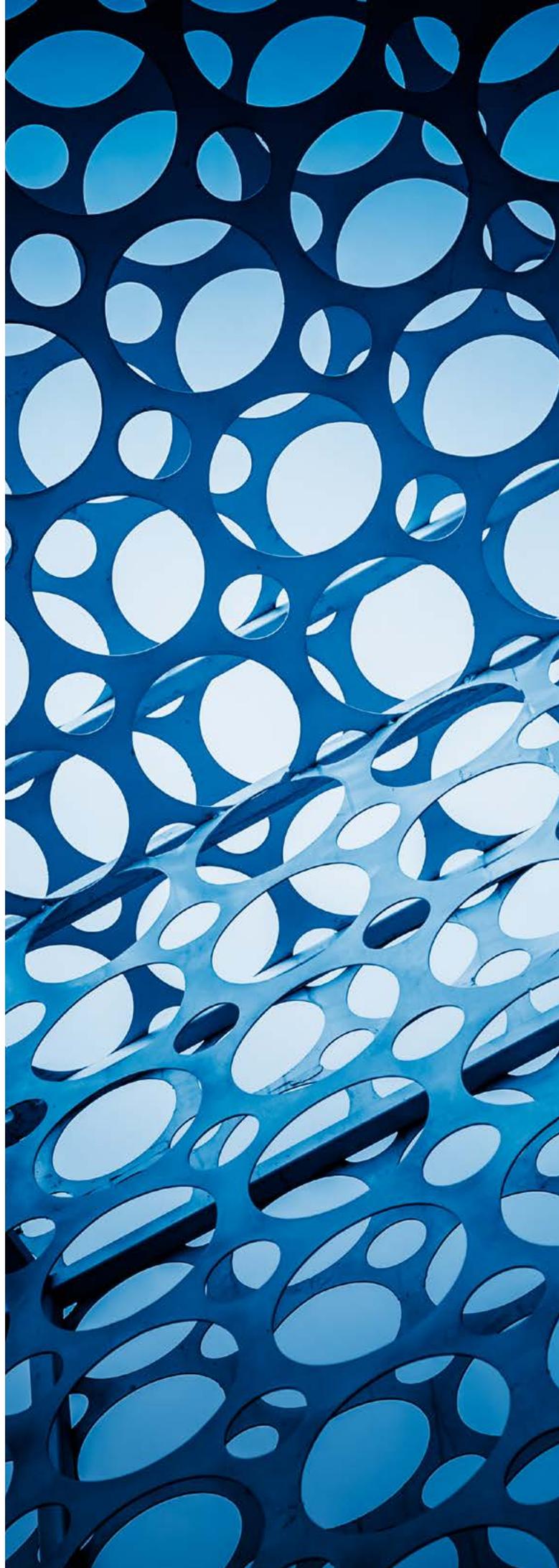
Remote work - The new normal

Businesses who embrace remote work and work to improve remote processes will succeed over those who stubbornly wait for things to return to "normal". Research around remote work has proven that remote workers are in general, more productive, satisfied, and engaged.

So what can you do to ensure your business is ready to embrace remote work for the long term (or foreseeable future)?

"We currently work with companies that were fully remote before the COVID-19 crisis. These businesses are successful because they've created a company culture that doesn't rely on in-person communication. With the right technologies, remote on-boarding, hiring, and a completely remote workforce is definitely possible."

Jason Grundy, Managing Director, Middle East & Africa, Robert Walters

Focus on the people

Your HR and Operations teams will play a critical role during this time. We love this HR Toolkit by Lattice. HR departments will need to focus on making trade-offs with company benefits when costs need to be cut across the board, but that doesn't mean that you can't look into other resources and opportunities to support your employees.

Implement strong procedures for remote hiring and onboarding

Hiring managers will need to learn to master the art of video interviewing and explore tools and resources that will allow your company to complete new-hire paper digitally.

• Read our advice on **how to manage the hiring process remotely.**

Check in on technology and processes

Ensure that your communication channels are defined. Do employees know which channel should be used for socialization, and which channels should be used strictly for communicating progress on work?

To help to keep an ongoing communication culture, e.g. create groups in chat programmes like Skype for business or Microsoft Teams, or use video conferences. It gives the feeling of staying connected, you can make jokes and it could help to solve a problem quicker, because you can address an inquiry directly to all team members without formulating an email. Some of those programmes also allow to share your screen, so you can show your task to find a quicker solution in the team.

Virtual coffee breaks via video chat can also help to increase the team spirit. Invite all team members to attend a virtual meeting and ask them to share success stories and celebrate together.

Perhaps consider just turning on your Facetime/Whatsapp video chat, while working on your tasks. This can help to create the feeling the feeling as if you are sitting next to each other in the office but still working safely from home.

• Check out our webinar on **how to facilitate engaging online meetings with your team**.

"Don't assume that everyone's remote work set-up is optimal. Many people right now are working from their couches, their beds, or their kitchen table. Proactively reaching out and setting them up for success shows that you care about their wellness, and not just the bottom line."

Chris Hickey, CEO, UKMEA & Switzerland, Robert Walters

Check in on hardware

Productivity can be majorly impacted by something as simple as an employee not having an extra screen that they need. Make allowances in the budget to set teams up with the right monitor, desk, and ergonomic set-up.

• This is a great article from Range that explains **how to get remote work right.**

Also consider testing out different video conferencing technologies. Depending on the size and needs of your teams, some video chat services may be better than others. Collaborative documents like Google Docs and virtual whiteboard can also make a positive impact in the productivity of remote workforces.

Conclusion

Remote working is an opportunity for companies to change their ways of working in a sustainable manner and reap the benefits over the medium to long term. Imagine less office space, less commuting, fewer business trips, shorter breaks and greater focus for employees. Research indicates that remote workers are also less likely to take short absences due to illness. Remote working on a larger scale also offers companies the flexibility to deal with unexpected events in the future, such as the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, remote working can give a renewed boost to cooperation and cohesion.

Investing in remote working will have far-reaching consequences on the way we work after the crisis. It is too early to say to what extent we will ever return to the old ways of working but business leaders should already think about the potential of these investments:

- A new operational model based on higher flexibility and more agile and remote ways of working:

- A corporate culture that is more connected internally and externally and where an analysis of collaboration can provide valuable data;

- An alignment of business goals to the new cultural standard and employee expectations.

- Data driven methods of analysis to get deeper insights into new learning patterns, employee sentiments, etc.

Remote working is here to stay and will more than ever become an integral part of the way we work. Now is the time for companies to prepare to return to the new normal.

About changeosity

A Dubai-based boutique consultancy firm. The three founders have over 70 years of leadership experience in government and multi-national corporates in 50 countries, including 30 years in the Middle East. They deliver highly profitable and award-winning transformation in the organisations with whom they work. Their diagnostic, development and implementation programs, together with their coaching, facilitation and leadership services, enable businesses to regenerate, grow and inspire.

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Robert Walters is a global, specialist professional recruitment consultancy.

Over the last 35 years the business has grown and so has our ambition. We now operate across 31 countries and employ over 3,900 people. It's a powerful success story built on the strength of our people. Organisations rely on us to find high-quality professionals for a range of specialist roles. Professionals who are looking for a new role, whether it's on a permanent, interim or contract basis, trust us to find them their ideal job.

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