

Swift trust and letting go: remote leadership at work

Jude Tavanyar explores the importance of trust in ensuring the successful leadership of remote teams.

“When you start to collaborate a lot virtually with your colleagues and boss, you first need to build a certain level of trust. This will happen over time, but you can also push this process a little by simply trusting from the start — what we call ‘swift trust’.

It’s also really important to know early on how often you can contact your boss individually and as a team, and when he or she will be informally available to you for a quick ‘catch up’ chat.

This may sound like a heavy demand on the boss, but this kind of encouraging, informal contact is essential in motivating and energising teams where there is limited or no face-to-face contact.” So says Sven Cune, who is one of the millions of executives worldwide who communicates with their team and their boss “remotely”, through a range of technologies and across time zones, continents and cultural boundaries.

His organisation, **Nomadic International Business Psychology**, are experts in virtual communication and run training and consulting projects for leaders globally, focusing in particular on supporting remote teams and their leaders in achieving high performance.

In Cune’s experience, despite the rapid rise in prevalence of the remote team, it is not a way of working that appeals to the faint-hearted, making considerable demands even on senior executives with significant experience and skills in good, old-fashioned, “co-located” leadership. “People often don’t like leading virtually, or think they are no good at it, or both,” says Cune.

“We notice that some team leaders just don’t recognise that remote team leadership requires different skills, processes and behaviours — overall, a different way of working that is quite distinct from co-located leadership. As a result, some highly dedicated virtual teams fail to perform simply because their team leaders are just doing what they have always done, without considering what is required by their new circumstances.”

Cune maintains that at the very heart of successful remote leadership is the core theme of establishing trust. He suggests that the kind of “swift trust” Nomadic refers to has to be established and expressed from the outset — a tough call for leaders who are used to trusting employees only once they have proved their worth.

“It is not possible to see and know what your team is doing across massive distances and without face-to-face meetings; so leaders have to manage without that kind of immediate, tangible evidence of effectiveness and productivity,” says Cune. “Without a bedrock of trust, the most finely-tuned performance management and communication processes will fail.”

Virtual teamwork as an approach is certainly inconsistent in performance — recent research suggests that only 30% of teams working virtually can be said to achieve success according to agreed goals – but Cune suggests that with a trained and skilled team leader there is no inherent reason why they should not equal, or even out-perform, their face-to-face colleagues.

But that is no small challenge. According to Cune, the successful remote leader may need to adapt — if not fully reconsider — his or her approach to leadership, and the balance of flexibility and control that it may require. Those who like to know the detail of everything their team members are doing — and how — at any given moment of the day are probably not natural recruits for remote leadership, partly because their efforts will

be doomed to failure, and partly because the “swift trust” Cune refers to cannot be achieved in a “command and control” leadership environment.

Virtual teams need to maintain, it seems, a careful balance of consistent team processes, and flexible individualised ways of working in order to maintain energy and commitment. While systems of appraisal need to be clearly established and consistent in any kind of team, with a remote team they must focus on output more than input — on results that are achieved more than the process to achieve them. While this is partly due to the fact that remote leaders have to relinquish control over their team members’ daily, or even weekly, activity because they are not there to witness it, it is also because all teams, remote or otherwise, achieve results in different ways, through individualised processes — there is no “one size fits all” approach to achieving excellence.

Such a focus on results rather than on working approach shows considerable trust and bestows a level of flexibility that many co-located teams would envy; enabling team members to follow their own approaches to achieve goals, and creating in many cases an improved work-life balance. Cune quotes a Dutch CEO who rejected remote team-working because he saw it as an open invitation to team members to catch up on their laundry, or sleep — but the reality is more likely to be raised levels of motivation and work satisfaction, a team with greater individual well-being, and confidence as a result of this more trusting, “hands off” leadership approach.

While enabling individuals to work independently is key, research suggests that effective remote team leaders approach goal-setting and reward systems collaboratively, agreed by all team members at an early stage in the team-building process. The remote team needs to know what success will look like and that it will be rewarded as a “whole team” achievement. Without that understanding, the possibility of disagreements, blame, decreased motivation and focus is considerably higher.

Looking at this list, it is perhaps not surprising that many prospective remote leaders are put off their task before they have begun. As Cune states, remote team leadership can achieve astonishing results, bringing together multiple talents across the globe and achieving high performance on a fraction of the corporate budget required for face-to-face meetings and co-located working. Or it can be a recipe for disaster — unchallenged assumptions, mistrust, disengagement and hostility.

Of course, some leaders, just like team members, are not cut out for this way of working, but many could achieve success through honing specific skills and behaviours.

“The remote team leader is not only an excellent communicator across distance and cultural ‘boundaries’ with a strong ability to motivate, challenge and reward using appropriate technologies to engage as well as instruct team members,” says Cune. “He or she must also be an expert listener, rather like a leadership coach — showing great sensitivity not only to what is said, but what is unsaid, able to ‘decode’ tone of voice and silence often without the aid of visual cues and to ask powerful questions in order to uncover any latent misunderstandings or confused interpretations.”

Above all, the remote leader has to manage the delicate balance between fulfilling a usually over-loaded leadership role and signalling a supportive approach of availability, encouragement and support, fitting around team members’ individual needs and preferences.

No team leader can be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, especially when working across multiple time zones. However, those who show their teams a consistent approach to informal responsiveness and support — signalling to all their availability for online contact, say, or how/when they will respond to information and other requests — are likely to enable a calmer, more confident and usually more competent team than those who quietly disappear into the “cyber abyss” until their next online team meeting is scheduled.

Letting go of the reins on operational details while showing a supportive, consistent virtual presence; encouraging individual approaches to task completion while developing team commitment overall — remote leadership may not be easy, but it is increasingly in demand, and it is an approach that can be learned and

developed to achieve powerful and far-reaching individual and corporate success.

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