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Leadership Series

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Leading with Empathy

Connecting With Emotion Over Circumstance

My leadership style has always relied heavily on reading body language to better understand the feeling behind a co-worker's words—a change in posture, crossed arms or a furrowed brow can give many clues to state of mind, emotional well-being and meaning. By attuning myself to these non-verbal signals, I have been able to develop as a leader, co-worker, parent and friend.

In the traditional office setting in which I have spent the vast majority of my professional career, I had many opportunities to leverage interpersonal skills when developing relationships and coaching my teams. I could drop by someone's workspace, read the room in a meeting, enjoy lunch with co-workers, have breakroom conversations, etc.

However, the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic has vastly altered the way we work and interact with each other. Face-to-face meetings have given way to virtual interactions. Conference rooms are now chat rooms. Sometimes, we have the added luxury of video; but often, we interact solely with a profile picture or computer-generated avatar. We are limited to reading text replies or interpreting tone of voice alone. Now, as I sit in my home office reading only the body language of my two cats, I am not able to rely on my go-to tools.

So, what now? When experts propose 70-90% of all communication is nonverbal, and we are living in an increasingly virtual world, how can we, as leaders, adapt our interpersonal skills to this new professional arena of video calls and email exchanges? These solely computer-based interactions can make the challenge facing people leaders feel insurmountable. Leadership is hard and it just got harder.

While some team-development tools may be less accessible to us right now, there are additional skills we, as leaders, can leverage to adapt to this new remote work landscape. By understanding your team and the people you work with, you can better lead with empathy. Brené Brown describes empathy as connecting with the emotion someone is experiencing, not the event or the circumstance. Empathy doesn't require having the exact same experiences as the person sharing their story with us.

Leading with empathy builds a stronger connection with co-workers based on trust. It also increases job satisfaction and fosters work productivity. If you are leading a remote team, here are a few practices to help ensure you continue to lead, rather than simply manage.

Supporting Shifting Work Environments

Migrating to a flexible work arrangements model, leaders will be challenged by the fundamental change in where, when and how work gets done. As co-workers prepare for the flexible workforce model, it will be important to reiterate the changes in the world, encouraging the organization to "reset" vs. just "restart." Highlighting some things are not changing, such as company values, is also important.

Leaders who were effective in primarily in-person arrangements may struggle in a flexible workforce approach without upskilling and focus. Leaders need to be intentional about how they "show up" when interacting with co-workers in-person and others virtually. By defining and embracing new observable behaviors, and by deliberately creating opportunities for remote co-workers to interact, leaders can facilitate engagement, connectedness and productivity in their teams.

Embrace Flexibility

The biggest hurdle is the mindset shift required to be successful. Working remotely poses a strong challenge to the traditional idea of a workday and does not mean or require people to be tied to their desks from 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. Rather, a remote work environment provides an opportunity to align with what co-workers have long been saying they want: trust and flexibility.

In a recent Deloitte study, 94% of respondents said they would benefit from one thing: workplace flexibility in the form of remote work and flexible hours. Trust your people. Make sure they know they have the flexibility to manage their own time. One of the significant benefits of remote work is an increased work/life balance with opportunities to take a break by going for a walk, enjoying a workout, tending to household tasks or having lunch/dinner with family. Not to mention, many people are balancing their children being home during this time as well.

Oftentimes, if your team knows you trust them to accomplish their performance goals on time, and you afford them the freedom to accomplish these goals in a way best suiting their needs and work style, your team will reward that trust with increased productivity, engagement and innovation in problem-solving.

Culture and Connectedness

It can be challenging to create connections in a flexible workforce model. Communicating regularly and having a good cadence for team and individual connections (formal and informal) will make a big impact. For new co-workers, onboarding is key to establishing an early connection to culture, mission, vision and team.

Wellbeing

Physical and psychological safety are critical for co-workers and core to a focus on co-worker well-being. Based on survey feedback, we know there are co-workers who are feeling very isolated and down on the mood elevator while working from home during the pandemic. Acquaint yourself with all of the resources your organization makes available in order to assist co-workers who may be struggling. Leader focus on co-worker well-being remains just as critical for remote and onsite workers.

Address Struggles Head-On

Most professionals are formally working from home for the first time, and it's essential to ensure the entire team is on the same page. Educate your teams on the common struggles they may face while working remotely.

Studies show some of the biggest challenges for remote workers are:

- Collaboration and communication

- Loneliness

- Not being able to unplug

- Distractions

Instead of avoiding these, make your team aware of the struggles they are likely to face and work together to create solutions to overcome them.

Maintain Team Meetings for the Win

If you are leading a remote team, your ability to run effective team meetings can make or break you. Not only do they provide a platform for communication and connection, but most importantly, they will keep everyone engaged and accountable if done correctly.

Set weekly video meetings and ensure everyone on the team attends. An effective structure for a remote team meeting may look like this:

1. Personal updates – Weekend activities, news, etc.

2. Overview message about current priorities and recent wins

3. Individual updates – Each team member updates the entire group with three things: one thing they did last week that helped, what they are working on this week and where they need help

Show Authentic Appreciation and Care

Since you won't have the opportunity to show appreciation for the work your team is doing in person, it is essential to show them authentic appreciation in other ways. The reason is simple: co-workers who feel appreciated will always do more than what's expected. Take time to show authentic appreciation and that you care about them. Something as simple as a "thank you" text will go a long way. An even better approach is to be specific and timely in your feedback, such as "I really appreciated the way you worked with the customer this morning to find a win/win solution."

Closing

Whether you have been leading a remote team for a while or you are brand new, know you are capable of leading through this unprecedented time. Adapting to a virtual environment is a change we're all navigating. Listening and communicating openly with your team, working through challenges together and embracing your virtual environment are keys to elevating each other to higher levels of performance.