Leading A Remote Workforce

It's All About Communication

Author: Juanita Vorster

As the mobile workforce trend gains momentum many companies are struggling to effectively manage a remote workforce.

Remote communication technology and policies are not the answer!

What you need is to shift the culture of the organisation, the focus of skills development, and the leadership style of your managers. Top leadership, line managers, HR and employees need to work together to create a remote work style that helps the company win in this new game of business. *(See more on this at https://www.juanitavorster.com/books.html)*

Understand the difference

In an office setting there are many opportunities for unscheduled, informal interactions; bumping into each other at the coffee machine, popping our head into someone's office, having a quick chat in the elevator and so on. This makes it easier and quicker to check our understanding, adjust expectations or help us make decisions.

When we work physically apart these interactions don't happen. We can't rely on seeing someone to remind us that we wanted to ask them something. We have less informal chats that trigger great ideas. When we work apart everything has to be scheduled, accepted, and follow a set agenda.

Working apart also puts massive pressure on everyone to be better at talking about issues before they become big problems and listening when others raise those issues.

Communication platforms can't compensate for a lack of communication skills. Just because you sent an email or hosted a video call does not mean that all communication boxes are ticked.

Albert Mehrabian's Communication Theory says that only 7% of communication is verbal and 93% is non-verbal. To effectively manage a remote workforce, managers must become experts at listening to tone of voice, reading facial cues during video calls, and reading between the lines of text messages and emails.

Train your talent

Some people have personality traits that make it easier for them to work without being surrounded by colleagues and without regular supervision. If you're hiring someone that will have to work remotely, use psychometric testing to make sure they have this trait.

Employees that were part of your workforce before you had to shift to remote work might not have this personality trait or the skills they need to be great remote workers. In my view you are partly responsibly for helping them to learn these new skills:

- Time management
- Prioritising tasks
- Active listening
- Constructive feedback
- Conflict management

Meet for mojo

You don't need a meeting for everything!

There are more communication tools available to keep in touch with remote workers, and I recommend that you use a variety of different tools for different things:

- If you need to decide something with a just a few people, use a text-based chat platform.
- If you need to discuss something more complex, have a voice call.
- If you need to do a quick check-in on how someone is coming along on a project, send them a short text message or email.

Recent research shows that one-on-one check-ins by managers have a more positive impact on the productivity of remote workers than group meetings.

Meetings should be special occasions – especially when you're managing a remote workforce. Make sure every meeting has a specific purpose, and schedule special meetings that is more about the social interaction between the team that it is about you talking through an agenda.

Manage with trust

You've got to make sure that everyone knows what is expected of them and that they are capable of getting the job done. It's not enough to tell them what you expect, you've got to ask them how they understand their role. This role clarity is the first step of managing with trust and not with interference.

The second step is to share the progress of tasks on a technology platform. It can be as simple as a shared spreadsheet that logs everyone's progress – I use Google Sheets in my company. This helps managers to spot and help solve issues before they become problems.

The trick is to design these progress platforms as a logical step in the workflow of remote workers, not as something that tracks their every move. A user-friendly system that takes seconds to complete – and makes them look good – is indispensable in managing a remote workforce.

Share the responsibility

Effective remote management is a shared responsibility and it's got to be based on two-way communication, not one-way orders.

The table below includes a few areas of responsibility throughout your business.

	TOP MANAGEMENT	LINE MANAGERS	EMPLOYEES
STRATEGY	Share with everyone what the purpose, strategy and focus of the business is and share changes to this as soon as they arise.	Tell each person how you see their role in achieving the objectives of the business. Ask them how they see their role and what tasks they will perform to fulfil their role. Discuss any discrepancies or misunderstanding and come to an agreement. This enables a manager to review the suitability of the output rather than micro-manage the effort and time spent on input.	Understand how your job helps your employer achieve its goals, and why your employer needs to achieve those goals. Ask your manager to help with prioritising everything you have to do. Knowing what needs to be done right away versus what is important but can wait for a little bit helps to make a to-do list feel less overwhelming.
EXPECTATIONS	Don't let a fear of missed opportunities set unrealistic expectations. Decide when something is truly urgent versus when something is important but can wait until the urgent matters are dealt with. Explain to line managers what creates the urgency and ask what the knock-on effect on other projects might be.	Be honest about work in progress and communicate proactively if a project isn't going according to expectation. Don't just wait until the next scheduled meeting.	Keep your manager in the loop with things that aren't going to plan. Don't wait for them to ask. The sooner they know, the sooner they can help you to make adjustments, or ask top management for adjustments.

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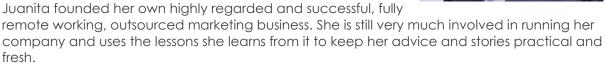|	TOP MANAGEMENT	LINE MANAGERS	EMPLOYEES
PROFESSIONALISM	Understand that everyone is working from a basic setting of hyper-vigilance that depletes energy and focus at a rapid pace. It doesn't excuse laziness and a lack of discipline, but it is a reality forces top management to have to plan for times of high performance as well as times of more flexible delivery speed. While insubordination should still not be allowed, a culture where more informality and bottom-up feedback is allowed will help employees to focus their energy on productivity rather than protocol.	Give those you manage the space to be fully human. In the traditional workplace everyone was expected to leave their problems at home. Working from home means there is no physical separation between those problems and their workplace. Balance compassion and patience with the skill to recognise true laziness or lack of competence and manage individual team members accordingly. More than ever before it's about managing people rather than tasks.	Your employer still expects quality work from you, no matter what your circumstances at home is. Talk to those you share a home with about what you need from them to get the job done. Also ask them what they need from you to get their jobs done. Decide together what will work best in terms of balancing work and home responsibilities. Tell your manager if this plan has an impact on your standard work hours and how to plan to compensate for the impact so you can still adhere to your employment contract and job responsibilities.
SYSTEMS	Ensure systems measure output relating to the business strategy. Systems that measure only discipline-driven input (like time and attendance) are nowhere near effective as an investment to create a culture of self-motivated productivity. Keep systems as simple and user friendly as possible by avoiding "nice to have" fields that need to be completed with data that doesn't form part of reports.	Understand what systems are supposed to measure and what decisions will be made based on the reports generated by the system. Ensure your team understands the same. Monitoring the systems on a very regular basis will help you to keep tabs on what your team is producing without having to ask them for updates. Create systems of your own, even if it is as simple as an online spreadsheet where your team indicates whether a task is pending, in progress, almost done, awaiting approval or completed.	Don't circumvent systems or skip steps. If you give a system everything it requires, the system will give your manager everything they require, and they won't need to micro-manage you.

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DSICIPLINE	Set boundaries for when you will work, when you won't work, and when you will sleep. Communicate those boundaries to your colleagues and those you share your home with. Be disciplined in sticking to those boundaries (except for when true crises arise). Allow others to have boundaries and respect those boundaries.	Set boundaries for when you will work, when you won't work, and when you will sleep. Communicate those boundaries to your colleagues and those you share your home with. Be disciplined in sticking to those boundaries (except for when true crises arise). Allow others to have boundaries and respect those boundaries.	Set boundaries for when you will work, when you won't work, and when you will sleep. Communicate those boundaries to your colleagues and those you share your home with. Be disciplined in sticking to those boundaries (except for when true crises arise). Allow others to have boundaries and respect those boundaries.

ABOUT JUANITA – FOUNDER | AUTHOR | SPEAKER

Juanita Vorster *Cert.Dir, EO*

Juanita Vorster is a successful entrepreneur with a knack for turning complex business concepts into simplified, practical advice. She also holds the designations of Certified Directors and Ethics Officer.

As an "old millennial" she has experienced the world of work how it used to be, as well as where it has already shifted to.

Juanita founded her own highly regarded and successful, fully remote working, outsourced marketing business. She is still very much involved in running her company and uses the lessons she learns from it to keep her advice and stories practical and fresh.

Based in South Africa, Juanita is also an international speaker, author of a number of articles in highly respected publications, a regular guest on business podcasts and a former radio programme host.

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