

THE RISE OF REMOTE WORKING

In our more global, complex and technologically-evolving world, more people are working remotely. 43% of US workers work remotely and this trend is growing as more people want a more flexible working life.

Two overarching types of remote working are:

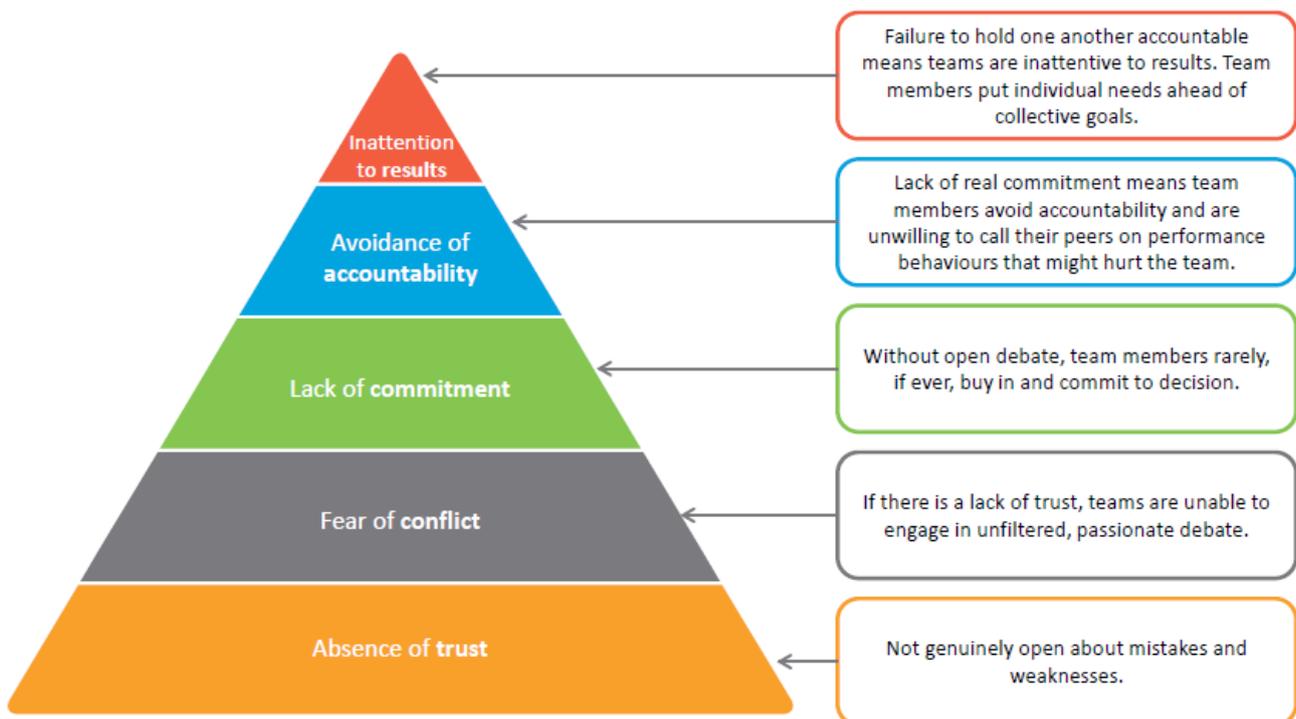
1. from different offices, either in the same country or internationally
2. from home.

A NEW CHALLENGE...OR IS IT?

Leading remotely isn't just a modern day challenge. Roman Emperors led their empire and governors directly from Rome. How much easier would they have found it to keep in touch with the provinces via Skype instead of mounted messenger?!

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

It's tempting to think of remote management as an entirely different beast to leading an onsite team. But in some ways, it's fundamentally the same: you're still working with people to achieve organisational goals and get stuff done. So building a great virtual or remote team requires the same building blocks—trust, conflict management, commitment, accountability and a focus on results (from Lencioni's 5 dysfunctions of a team).



WORKING REMOTELY - PAIN POINTS

But what's different? We think it boils down to some pain points for leaders and others:

- Building genuine trust is more difficult when you're not meeting face-to-face and don't have the same opportunities to connect informally.
- People may look for leadership from leaders they're co-located with. This is a potential source of contention and confusion.
- It's easier for people to build trust and commitment with those they're co-located with rather than with the team they belong to. So people can identify more with other team members rather than their own.
- There can be a veneer of trust between team members because it only needs to be maintained for short periods e.g. quarterly team days. There's no driving need to develop more trust.
- Keeping lines of communication open can be more challenging when working remotely and without face-to-face interaction: misunderstandings are more likely.
- Managing conflict remotely is trickier, so it's easier for it to be swept under the carpet or handled poorly. If remote workers choose to withdraw from conflict, avoidance is easier.
- Some people aren't motivated to make the most of technology and can use it as an excuse to be less connected with the virtual group.
- People working remotely can feel more isolated. Out of sight, out of mind, right?
- People's Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness (SCARF) needs are harder to meet because daily micro-interactions aren't happening as much as they would onsite. And people may more easily perceive a SCARF threat where none is intended.
- One issue with working from home can be boundaries. A workplace gives people psychological boundaries. People have to create them for themselves at home. That's hard for many. For others, they make it work and leaders need to be aware their "work day hours" may look different. (Leaders can agree specific work hours, email response times etc in advance.)
- Lack of visibility over work process can cause anxiety—some leaders can feel like they're losing 'control' because they aren't there to see what's happening.
- You can unwittingly end up with "us and them" thinking since people are likely to build stronger bonds with people they're co-located with. If you couple this with the reduced visibility over what they're doing, you can find some team members don't see or value others' contributions.



Question: Which of these "pain points" have you experienced or witnessed happening in remote teams? Are there any of your own you'd add?



BRIDGING THE DISTANCE – TRUST

When you lead remotely, you need to put in extra effort to make relationships work, and build trust. Let's look now at different kinds of trust—we like Blanchard's ABCD model of trust which was developed after six years of research and uncovered four core characteristics needed for trust to grow in relationships.

- **Able:** demonstrate competence, and high standards; use initiative; solve problems.
- **Believable:** have integrity; admit when wrong; don't gossip or undermine others; tell it straight.
- **Connected:** interested in and care about others; have good relationships; prepared to disclose and be vulnerable.
- **Dependable:** keeps word; reliable; organised, accountable; walks the talk.

Question: How do you build trust from a distance?

Leaders can build trust regardless of distance; but the challenge can be how to **create space** to demonstrate trust when you're not together.



In an office setting, people build relationships and trust through social interaction and collaborative work. There's more opportunity to build interpersonal **Connected** trust. In virtual teams, since the **Connected** is dialled down, the others need to be dialled up to compensate. So it's important for a leader to keep their word and do what they say they'll do. Something as simple as responding quickly to emails and other requests sends a good message.

To address the **Connected** aspect for remote workers, Atlassian asks their people to create an "intro blog" when they join the team, including personal and professional information. Knowledge sharing sessions can also work well to promote internal bonding. Is one of your team a wine connoisseur? Ask them to give a short presentation on how to buy your next bottle. Demos like this give people a chance to share their passions with each other.

BRIDGING THE DISTANCE – COMMUNICATION

Communicating effectively can be a challenge, especially when a virtual team includes members from different countries and cultures. Communicating by email, IM or telephone can be difficult because of the lack of visual cues (such as body language) to help them understand each other and build trust.



We recommend deciding as a team how you'll communicate up front. And consider the two main types of communication over distance:

- **Synchronous:** real-time communication between two people (e.g. face-to-face, voice, IM, via technology that allows virtual meetings such as Skype).
- **Asynchronous:** exchange of messages by reading and responding as schedules permit (e.g. email, text, Yammer, Slack, Asana, content management systems)

Emotional and creative activities are better carried out in real time. This includes brainstorming, team building, retrospectives, performance discussions etc.

Use the golden hours when local and remote teams connect together and make sure the time works equally well for all concerned. If not, vary the schedule.

Asynchronous communication can be good for work updates and keeping each other informed—as long as everyone on the team gets the value of the tool and feels comfortable using it. These kind of tools are often searchable which is great for recording decisions that people may need to go back to later.

The right set of communications systems will change over time so be prepared to review them regularly.

Question: How many here have experience with asynchronous tools. Which ones and what would you say to others who are thinking about using them?

BRIDGING THE DISTANCE – MANAGING CONFLICT

It's hard to avoid conflict entirely, both in the workplace and elsewhere in life. It's human nature to disagree. And without conflict, we'd get no diverse thinking and resulting innovation and improvement.

Managing conflict can be challenging—even when you're co-located. And conflicts that are allowed to fester and grow will ultimately diminish productivity and damage staff morale.

Conflict situations are unique and should be addressed individually. But some rules of thumb for leaders and team members dealing with conflict for co-located and remote teams are as follows:



- Address problems early so they don't escalate.
- Co-create ground rules for conflict as a team—before you need them.
- Share feelings and impact without blaming.
- Listen and demonstrate empathy without necessarily agreeing with a viewpoint.
- Commit to resolving problems and identifying potential solutions together.
- Draw out the perspective and feelings of reluctant participants.
- Identify triggers to conflict.
- Set expectations about professional and harmonious behaviour: avoid being the 'referee'.
- Deal fairly and proactively with performance issues.
- If you're worried about team conflict and how to handle it, test your ideas with another colleague or HR.

As a remote leader, you'll need to have your antennae up for conflict as it may be easier to miss if you're not on the spot. This is why your one-to-ones are critical with team members in your office or working remotely. So don't just focus on the work, focus on how people feel about the work, the workplace and their team.

Question: What kinds of signals can a leader look out for that might point to brewing conflict?

BRIDGING THE DISTANCE – BUILDING COMMITMENT, ESTABLISHING ACCOUNTABILITY AND FOCUSING ON RESULTS



As a leader, you need to set clear, deliberate expectations in advance. Establish ground rules for how interactions will take place. Make sure there are clear lines of accountability from the start of the working relationship by setting monthly, quarterly, six-monthly and yearly performance goals. Check regularly on progress through an agreed schedule. Make sure the metrics are universally applied to everyone in the team, regardless of where they're working.

Also, take time to understand what motivates each team member. One way to find out is to ask them to tell you about a time they felt really satisfied at work: what were they doing, who with, how, which skills they were using etc. You will likely get some real gems of information here!

GROWING TREND, BUT...

Some organisations have reversed the remote working trend, e.g. Aetna, a tech giant; Yahoo; and IBM. Why? In IBM's case—innovation trumps productivity. (Some research suggests people are more productive working at home: Best Buy, a US company, reported productivity rose 35%.) But you just get what you've always done, possibly better, but not something new—innovation.

The benefits of working together are: speed, agility, creativity and true, shared learning experiences.

But even if some people are reversing the trend and co-locating, we think there's value in the remote leadership tools and ideas presented.

FINAL TIPS

So here are our tips for leading your remote team:

1. Build great working relationship with your people. Job satisfaction is closely tied to having an effective and emotionally intelligent leader.
2. Don't create two classes of employees: remote and in-office. Remote workers reported 25% fewer conversations with their manager about career growth, compared with office-based colleagues. So, schedule quarterly career catch-up meetings.
3. Lead with trust, not control. If you don't trust people working remotely, then you've either hired the wrong people or you haven't built enough trust. Leaders need to spend time just getting to know their staff. Hold personal check ins, not just work check ins.
4. Lead with emotional intelligence. Listen to remote employees. You don't have the physical cues from face-to-face conversations. Dig deeper when you're having conversations. Understand their motivators.
5. Use a variety of synchronous and asynchronous communication methods appropriately. Make sure people feel comfortable using them and review your team communication methods and effectiveness regularly.
6. Talk about the tough stuff—avoid emotional gridlock. Get conflict out into the open and manage it effectively.
7. Agree specific expectations and accountability, e.g. how quickly staff respond to email and calls, hours worked, flexibility etc. Consider creating a team charter.
8. Meet face to face—predictability may be more important than frequency. It helps build trust.
9. Make decision-making processes clear and keep everyone informed of decisions.
10. Emphasise the why, not just the what of your team.

REMOTE WORKING PLATFORMS

Some remote workflow platforms you might like to investigate are:

- AceProject
- Britrix24
- Dropbox
- OneDrive
- Microsoft OneNote
- Evernote
- Google Drive
- Trello
- Asana
- Slack

VIDEO CHAT PLATFORMS

- Google Hangout
- Skype
- WebEx
- GoToMeeting
- FaceTime
- WhatsApp
- Viber
- Talky
- WeChat

