Harvard Business Review

LEADING TEAMS

15 Questions About Remote Work, Answered

by Tsedal Neeley

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The coronavirus pandemic is expected to fundamentally change the way many organizations operate for the foreseeable future. As governments and businesses around the world tell those with symptoms to self-quarantine and everyone else to practice social distancing, remote work is our new reality. How do corporate leaders, managers, and individual workers make this sudden shift? Tsedal Neeley, a professor at Harvard Business School, has spent two decades helping companies learn how

to manage dispersed teams. In this edited Q&A, drawn from a recent HBR subscriber video call in which listeners were able to ask questions, she offers guidance on how to work productively at home, manage virtual meetings, and lead teams through this time of crisis.

Are organizations prepared for this sudden transition?

The scale and scope of what we're seeing, with organizations of 5,000 or 10,000 employees asking people to work from home very quickly, is unprecedented. So, no, organizations are not set up for this.

What's the first thing that leaders and individual managers can do to help their employees get ready?

Get the infrastructure right. Do people have the requisite technology or access to it? Who has a laptop? Will those who do [have laptops] be able to dial into their organizations easily? Will they have the software they need to be able to do work, have conference calls, etc? What about the employees who don't have laptops or mobile devices? How do you make sure that they have access to the resources they need to do work? Direct managers have to very quickly ensure that every employee has full access, so no one feels left behind.

What should people who aren't accustomed to remote work do to get psychologically ready for it?

Develop rituals and have a disciplined way of managing the day. Schedule a start and an end time. Have a rhythm. Take a shower, get dressed, even if it's not what you'd usually wear to work, then get started on the day's activities. If you're used to moving physically, make sure you build that into your day. If you're an extrovert and accustomed to a lot of contact and collaboration with others, make sure that still happens. Ask yourself: *How will I protect myself from feeling lonely or isolated and stay healthy, productive, and vibrant?* Create that for yourself.

Remember that you might actually enjoy working from home. You can play the music you like. You can think flexibly about your time. It can be fun. As for managers, they need to check in on people. Make sure not only that they're set up but also that they have a rhythm to their day and contact with others. Ask: "What can I do to make sure that this sudden and quick transition is working for you?"

How should those check-ins happen? As a group? In one-on-ones? Via phone calls? Or video chats?

First, you should have a group conversation about the new state of affairs. Say, "Hey, folks, it's a different world. We don't know how long this is going to last. But I want to make sure you all feel that you have what you need." This should be followed by a team launch to jump-start this new way of working. Figure out: How often should we communicate? Should it be video, phone, or Slack/Jive/ Yammer. If you're not using one of those social media systems, should you? What's the best way for

us to work together? You've got to help people understand how to do remote work and give them confidence that it will work.

Once those things are sorted out, meet with your group at least once a week. In a remote environment, frequency of contact cannot go down. If you're used to having meetings, continue to do so. In fact, contact should probably go up for the whole team and its members. Newer employees, those working on critical projects, and people who need more contact will require extra one-on-ones. Remember, too, that you can do fun things virtually: happy hour, coffee breaks, lunch together. All these things can help maintain the connections you had at the office. There's ample research showing that virtual teams can be completely equal to co-located ones in terms of trust and collaboration. It just requires discipline.

How does working from home affect psychological health? What can employers do to make sure that people are staying focused, committed, and happy?

People lose the unplanned watercooler or cappuccino conversations with colleagues in remote work. These are actually big and important parts of the workday that have a direct impact on performance. How do we create those virtually? For some groups and individuals, it will be constant instant messaging. For others, it will be live phone conversations or video conferences. Some people might want to use WhatsApp, WeChat, or Viber. A manager can encourage those types of contact points for psychological health. People are not going to be able to figure these things out organically. You've got to coach them. One more piece of advice: Exercise. It's critical for mental well-being.

What are the top three things that leaders can do to create a good remote culture?

There are more than 10,000 books in the English language on Amazon on virtuality and how to lead remotely or at a distance. Why is that? Because this is very difficult to do, and managers have to actively work on it. Number one, make sure that team members constantly feel like they know what's going on. You need to communicate what's happening at the organizational level because, when they're at home, they feel like they've been extracted from the mothership. They wonder what's happening at the company, with clients, and with common objectives. The communication around those are extremely important. So you're emailing more, sharing more.

During this period, people will also start to get nervous about revenue goals and other deliverables. You'll have to make sure they feel like they're going to be OK. Another thing is to ensure that no members feel like they have less access to you than others. At home, people's imaginations begin to go wild. So you have to be available to everyone equally. Finally, when you run your group meetings, aim for inclusion and balance the airtime, so everyone feels seen and heard.

How will these changes affect productivity?

Productivity does not have to go down at all. It can be maintained, even enhanced, because commutes and office distractions are gone. Of course, you might be at home with your partner or kids, and those issues will need to be worked out. Another problem might be your ability to resolve problems quickly when you can't meet in person, in real time. That might create delays. But other than that, I don't see productivity going down. There's robust evidence showing that it shouldn't change.

If the social distancing policies go on for a while, how do you measure your employees' productivity and eventually review them on that work?

I'll say this to every manager out there: you have to trust your employees. This is an era and a time in which we have to heed Ernest Hemingway's advice: "The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them." You can't see what people are doing. But equip them in the right ways, give them the tasks, check on them like you've always done, and hope they produce in the ways you want them to. You can't monitor the process, so your review will have to be outcome-based. But there's no reason to believe that, in this new environment, people won't do the work that they've been assigned. Remote work has been around for a very long time. And today we have all of the technologies we need to not only do work but also collaborate. We have enterprise-wide social media tools that allow us to store and capture data, to have one-to-many conversations, to share best practices, and to learn.

Let's talk about virtual meetings. What are some best practices, beyond the general advice to clarify your purpose, circulate an agenda, prepare people to be called on, and so forth?

First, you have to have some explicit ground rules. Say, "Folks, when we have these meetings, we do it in a nice way, we turn off of phones, we don't check emails or multitask." I highly recommend video conferencing if you have the ability to do that. When people are able to see one another, it really makes a difference. And then you trust people to follow the ground rules.

Number two, because you no longer have watercooler conversations, and people might be just learning how to work from home, spend the first six to seven minutes of a meeting checking in. Don't go straight to your agenda items. Instead, go around and ask everyone, "How are you guys doing?" Start with whomever is the newest or lowest status person or the one who usually speaks the least. You should share as well, so that you're modeling the behavior. After that, you introduce the key things you want to talk about and again model what you want to see, whether it's connecting, asking questions, or even just using your preferred technology, like Zoom or Skype for Business.

The last thing is you have to follow up these virtual meetings with redundant communication to ensure that people have heard you and that they're OK with the outcome. Say you have a video conference about a topic. You follow it up with an email or a Slack message. You should have multiple touchpoints through various media to continue the trail of conversation.

And how do you facilitate highly complex or emotionally charged conversations when people aren't face to face?

You can only raise one or two of these topics because you don't have the time or opportunity to work things through after the meeting. You can't just walk to people's offices to follow up. So, be very thoughtful about what you bring up and when and how you do it. But you can still have these conversations. Allowing people to disagree in order to sharpen the team's thinking is a very positive thing. Sometimes, in virtual environments, people don't feel psychologically safe, so they might not speak up when they should. And so you might even want to generate or model a little of disagreement — always over work, tasks or processes, of course, never anything personal.

In light of various daycare and school closings, how do you discuss children and childcare?

Leaders should be prepared for that conversation and to help people think those issues through. The blurring of boundaries between work and home has suddenly come upon us, so managers have got to develop the skills and policies to support their teams. This might involve being more flexible about the hours in which employees work. You don't have to eat lunch at 12pm. You might walk your dog at 2pm. Things are much more fluid, and managers just have to trust that employees will do their best to get their work done.

We've talked about internal communication, but what advice do you have for people in client-facing functions?

We've been seeing virtual sales calls and client engagements. You do the exact same things. Here, it's even more important to use visual media. Take whatever you would be doing face-to-face and keep doing it. Maybe you can't wine and dine. But you can do a lot. Be creative.

What do you do in an organization where you have a mix of both blue- and white-collar workers? Or for those colleagues who aren't properly equipped?

The organizations have to figure out a way to support those workers: some kind of collective action to help them because otherwise you're completely isolating people who are critically important to your operation. I would put together a task force, and I would find solutions to keep them connected and ensure that they still feel valued. And include them in the planning.

If you sense that, despite your best efforts, an employee is struggling — not focused, lonely — what can you do?

When you see the signs — like fewer emails or more inhibition in group conversations — talk to them. Increase contact and encourage others to, as well. Understand where they are. And get them what they need. Organizations should also make sure to have employee assistance services at this time. When you're suddenly taking away people's regular routines and connection with others, and it's

open-ended, some will struggle and need extra help. I would add that every CEO of every organization needs to be much more visible right now — through video conferencing or taped recordings — to give people confidence, calm them down, and be healers- or hope-givers-in-chief.

Do you see this crisis changing the way all teams and organizations operate going forward?

I think it's going to broaden their repertoires. Organizations, teams, and people will experiment more with virtual work. Many of them have always wanted to test it as way of expanding their reach or labor force. It's not that people are going to permanently adopt this new format of work, but this experience will expand everyone's capacity. If there's a tiny positive aspect to this mess we're finding ourselves in, it's that we're developing certain skills that could helpful in the future. That's my deepest hope.

Tsedal Neeley is the Naylor Fitzhugh Professor of Business Administration in the Organizational Behavior Unit at Harvard Business School and the founder of the consulting firm Global Matters. She is the author of *The Language of Global Success*. Twitter: @tsedal

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