Spotlight on Leading Distributed Teams

> "Instil a sense of balance across your team – monitor workloads, watch out for signs of stress or isolation and create an open culture where employees can raise concerns.
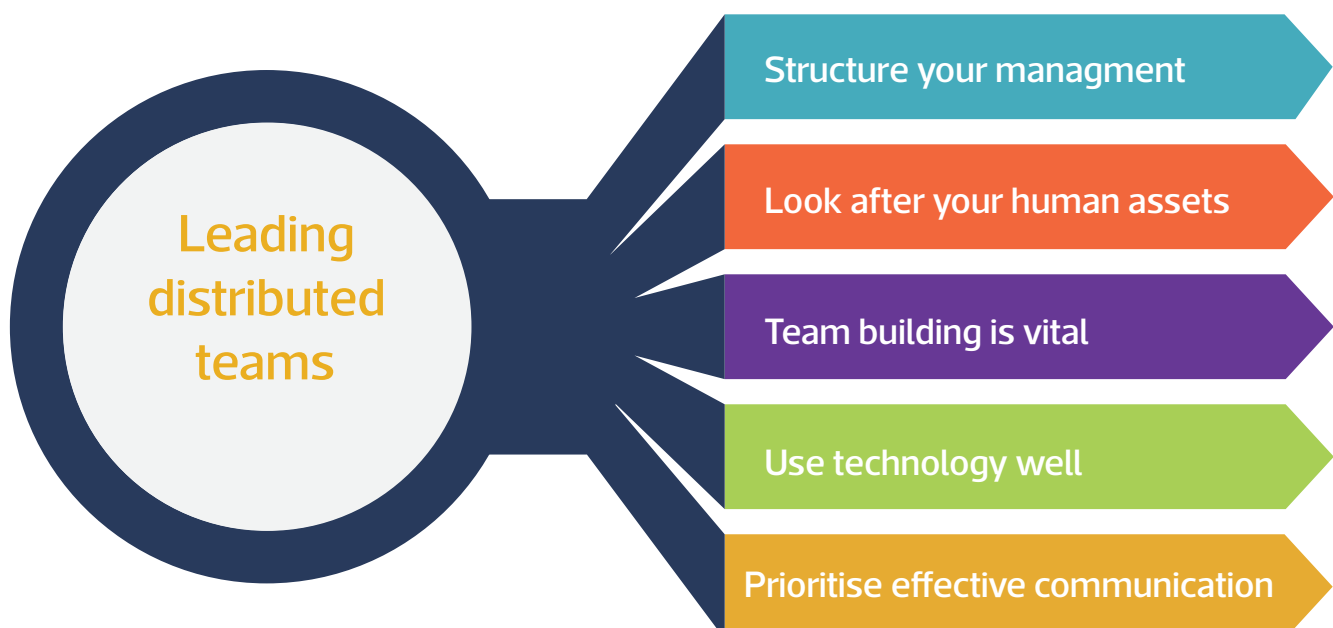>
> **The Institute of Leadership & Management (2017)**

Remote Working and Working From Home

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges to organisations' 'business as usual,' resulting in many employees working at home for the first time in their lives. According to YouGov, during May 2020 38% of the UK workforce was working at home, a significant increase from 7% pre-Covid-19. Whilst there are clear organisational benefits to this style of working, managing teams which are not co-located in a physical office, ''virtual'' team management, requires an adapted skill-set.

Distributed Team Management Skills

Research in this field is still in its infancy, but there is a broad consensus on how managers need to develop their approach.

Leading distributed teams

- Structure your managment
- Look after your human assets
- Team building is vital
- Use technology well
- Prioritise effective communication

Clarity and focus needs to come from you. It is harder to read the organisational mood when there are no informal conversations in the kitchen or by the water cooler. You need to have a transparent **structure of management processes** which are understood. This means creating and sharing a vision and clear expectations of performance and rewards too. The vision needs to even sharper if you are working across cultures and continents.

Informal communication suffers in distributed teams. You will need to **prioritise effective communication**. This means making time to speak to people face-to-face is desirable, but if this is not possible, via conference calls and video conferencing. People respond better to voice and the subtleties of gestures which can be read from face and voice tone. Email should be used as a last resort since it is easy to overwhelm people and even seeking clarification is more stilted. The written word too often does not convey the intention and the more informal aspects of communication. If you are working across continents and cultures be aware of differences in hidden meanings in responses. It is important that leaders of distributed teams working across cultures develop a ''Global'' way of seeing themselves rather than a hierarchy of cultures (Harush et al 2018). Tuning in to sensitive cultural communication achieves more. Pick the right time to communicate with your distributed team is vital; just because it is 2pm in San Francisco doesn't make it a good time for a conference call to London!

Together with improved access to face-to-face communication, **using technology well** can improve other aspects of the management of distributed teams. Enterprise technology platforms can facilitate dispersed team working, including such features as: collaborative software, managed social media, blogs, forums, and bookmarking, which together encourage collaboration – if enough people use them (Brzozowski, 2009). Opportunities for social chat also help to build team identity and loyalty, even if work partners are 9,000 miles apart.

Team building is vital and, although it could be judged a cost (travel, hotels, activities etc.) it is an investment. Seeing the faces of team members, finding out about them and building in social time, is vital to build a sense of identity. Slogans, collective memory, laughing together and branding are crucial. Team building must have time for a social element, breaking bread together, and even going on a journey or challenge are key aspects of building a team identity. Whilst communication technology is improving, nothing has yet been invented that sends a signal of trust and partnership as much as a handshake.

When you have distributed teams, it is less easy to gauge their needs as much as those you see in the office every day. You therefore must make a special effort to look after **your human assets** who work remotely, from managing expectations of delivery timescales to developing online training so that everyone has equal access to opportunities to develop their skills portfolio. Finally, help them to look after their mental health by keeping a check on workloads and offering local mental health support when needed. Leading remotely can have advantages but it can also mean it is possible for staff to drift from an ideal state when social cues are missing or weak.

'Technology has changed the workplace beyond recognition. Managers now need to embrace the freedom and flexibility it can offer to meet the changing needs of our teams and capitalize on the business benefits.'

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