



3 KEY STRATEGIES FOR REMOTE WORK: A LEADERSHIP PLAYBOOK

Sean Lemson

Since 2020, when many teams went suddenly remote, the benefits to employees have been far-reaching.

No commuting, lower costs of living, decreased childcare costs, (sometimes) quieter spaces that are more conducive to focus and productivity. It's completely understandable that many employees would like to keep this way of working.

But company leaders are also staring at empty buildings. For leaders who may not trust that work is actually getting done to the same level of performance – and you may be one of those leaders – it can be easy to be uneasy about having their team stay remote.

Both sides have numbers on their side and both sides are talking right past each other. Data from the National Bureau of Economic Research and numerous other studies show that individual productivity does, in fact, go up when employees work from home. Score one for employees. But an extensive study by Microsoft also shows that team synergy goes down. Score one for employers.

PAYING ATTENTION TO TEAM PERFORMANCE

When knowledge workers all suddenly found out we were working from home in 2020, we were working remotely with people we'd worked with in person for quite some time. We'd already built trust with our coworkers and that translated to seamless remote working.

But over the past few years, turnover, company reorgs, and layoffs have shuffled people up. Now we have many teams working remotely where none of the team members have *ever met in person*. From a human psychology perspective, this creates a problem. Patrick Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* model—along with studies done by Google on nearly 200 teams—show definitively that vulnerability and trust (psychological safety) are necessary ingredients for high performing teams. Getting that level of trust is much faster and easier if we're working together in person.

What would it look like to create stable, resilient, multi-talented teams to handle a variety of work tasks from beginning to end or with less coordination with other teams?

But before you pat yourself on the back for your demand to bring employees back into the office some number of days per week, I want to point out an obvious hypocrisy. The leaders who point to this science to create an in-office work policy are often the very same leaders who've argued for years to offshore teams and have them work with onshore teams, which creates the same dynamic we're dealing with now.

From a human connection standpoint, it makes no difference if one of my teammates is in Madison or Mumbai. But leaders seem to care if it's Madison and not when it's Mumbai. If you're one of those leaders, you can't have it both ways.

LIMITING ORGANIZATIONAL OVERREACH

Hypocrisy aside, there are many ways to respond to the challenge, and some are better than others. Some policies may look like good compromises but miss key factors that employees value about remote work.

For example, requiring employees to come into the office a certain number of days per week means that employees must now live within a reasonable driving distance of the office, jeopardizing all of the economic and extended family benefits they were enjoying by being able to choose where to live. The worst implementation of these kinds of policies doesn't specify that employees from the same team are in the office *on the same days*, which completely misses the point.

Solutions like these are just a throwback to early work-from-home policies pre-COVID, and it's possible that some leaders are hoping employees won't notice, but they will.

Here are three strategies to follow instead:

1. Let employees work remotely 92% of the year. Bring them together one week per quarter. This solution addresses the psychology of teamwork issues and gives employees the ability to live where it's less expensive or where they are closer to extended family. That in-person week could be from a hotel conference room or from the home office, but it must be in person. No video calls are allowed for that week.

2. Create "temporally co-located" teams. Companies might set limits on time zones to keep travel costs down and to maximize windows for collaboration. For example, to be on this team, you must reside within two time zones of Pacific time. I call these temporally collocated teams. This arrangement still allows employees huge swaths of the country to live in while keeping travel time down and maximizing the number of hours team members can collaborate remotely.

3. Rethink team formations. Most companies urgently bolted remote work onto their company formations in 2020. Those formations could be getting in the way of remote working. It may be worth looking at whether having specialized teams that need to heavily coordinate makes sense in a world where employees are working remotely.

There are solutions to the remote working debate that provide for both team connection and teammate flexibility.

Too many companies bring teams to work rather than bringing work to teams. The work will always be changing. What would it look like to create stable, resilient, multi-talented teams to handle a variety of work tasks from beginning to end or with less coordination with other teams? If we leave them together long enough, we might even be able to get through Bruce Tuckman's forming, storming, and norming stages to reach his fabled performing stage.

REMOTE AND RESILIENT

There are solutions to the remote working debate that provide for both team connection and teammate flexibility. But they require each side to recognize that the other side has a point and a lot at stake. Forcing employees to choose between moving and quitting is a lose-lose proposition. **Solving this problem with a win-win solution will build loyalty and engagement.** 📌



Info



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Sean Lemson is a leadership expert, executive and team performance coach, and the founder of Motivated Outcomes, an organization devoted to improving performance, engagement, and leadership in today's organizations. His new book is *One Drop of Poison: How One Bad Leader Can Slowly Kill Your Company*. Learn more at MotivatedOutcomes.com.

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