

THE CHALLENGES OF REMOTE LEADERSHIP AND THEIR POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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Similarly, multinationals have been managing remote teams for years. In addition, the increasing globalization of the economy only increases the need to create more and more remote links with customers, suppliers, business partners or employees.

Leading remote teams, therefore, is not something new, but the increase in this way of working after the global Covid-19 pandemic is spectacular, as well as the possibilities that new technologies offer us.

The dynamics of relationships with remote teams depends on the nature of that relationship, although the challenges and possible solutions to them are similar.

A direct hierarchical relationship, for example the relationship between a multinational corporation and those responsible for a subsidiary in a distant country, is not the same as the relationship between two colleagues who are part of a regional or global project and have a relationship of peers or colleagues.

The most frequent remote relationship is that of an employee with his or her boss. The digitization of the economy allows a large number of people to perform roles and tasks out of their own homes in very remote locations and with no one from the company present for miles around. The consequences will be very interesting from different points of view, for example, the decongestion of large cities, wages, the labor legislation that applies, or the access of talent from third world countries to leading companies.

The biggest challenges for leading remote teams are: combining control and empowerment, making communication fluid and interesting, solving operational issues,

getting the right way to create commitment, knowing how to create more mutual trust, avoiding some cognitive distortions, and ultimately, find an effective way to provide feedback on performance.

Combining control and empowerment

The key to any leadership relationship is finding a dynamic balance between control and empowerment. In the case of remote leadership, control is necessary to ensure that results are achieved, that important projects are progressing and that aspects of execution that may have a dysfunctional outcome are not being hidden.

Empowerment because it is impossible to micromanage remotely, and because initiative, creativity and ingenuity are especially important values for those who face daily activities and have to decide with agility in geographically distant markets.

For empowerment to work, it is necessary to have remote teams aligned in two important dimensions: that they decide with good business criteria and that they execute according to guidelines that generate rigor in the administration.

In Brazil the expression “*pra ingles ver*” is still used, which means to pretend that something is being done when in reality it is not being done. The phrase emerged in the first half of the 19th century when England, for economic reasons, was trying to eradicate slavery. Brazil was in the spotlight because slaves were still used in many activities of its economy. The Brazilians decided to place many ships near the coast to send the English the wrong message that they were controlling and thus preventing the arrival of slaves from Africa. In practice, the reason that motivated them to do it was quite different ...

This anecdote is a warning of how remote management can end up being perverse.

A remote team has multiple ways to communicate

Communication is another key element to remote leadership. Technology provides us with more and more means so that communication is instant, effective and almost without cost.

Many years ago, communication was carried out through letters sent by the postal system or visits from delegations that traveled from one place to another; later it was carried out by telephone, later through email, instant messaging, videoconferencing, telepresence and all the ways we know today and that will surely continue to evolve in the future (Teams, Skype, Zoom, Meet, WhatsApp, etc). The capabilities these tools provide are increasingly extraordinary and could, in large part, respond to the challenges of leading remotely.

What will not disappear, even if they are reduced, are the trips, since the presence enriches the information, especially to guarantee the best functioning of remote operations (“the master’s eye makes the cattle fat”) and to build bonds of trust and affection between the parts. Let’s not forget that a screen provides information in two dimensions; On the other hand, a face-to-face meeting allows you to receive information in three dimensions with much more nuance and in greater depth.

The challenges of remote leadership and our recommendations

Remote leadership has to face operational challenges, greater difficulties in creating a sense of belonging and a relationship of trust, and the cognitive and emotional biases of leading people from a distance. Let’s start with the first.

1. Operational aspects

When remote teams are in different countries, some critical issues to take into account appear, such as differences in cultures, languages, time zones, holidays or vacations.

In the West, English has been established as the preferred language (for convenience) for doing business. It may happen that Spanish is widely used when it comes to a company with a majority presence in Spanish-speaking countries. Some multinationals in the past have tried to manage in French or German, requiring that their interlocutors in remote countries speak that language and as a consequence limiting the availability of talent.

Choosing a single language is necessary, but it does not guarantee fluent conversations. There is always someone who is more comfortable with their native language compared to someone who has adopted it as a second or third language. If it is not possible to use a single language, it is necessary to incorporate translators in the meetings, which makes it difficult for them to flow. What we should certainly avoid is that someone misinterprets what is being said or does not understand it due to language issues.

The hours available to establish a meeting with simultaneous people between America, Europe and Asia are very limited (in Europe the ideal time is 4 pm) and even so there will always be some more affected than others. A meeting scheduled in Europe at 10 am will create discomfort for those in America who have to be available at 3, 4 or 5 am. And if that meeting is scheduled after 5 pm in Europe, it will surely not cause much sympathy for those in Asia. The same goes for bank holidays, which no one questions locally. However, globally, not everyone is aware of other countries bank holidays, generating frustrations and significantly limiting the days on which you can interact.

Regarding vacations, in the northern hemisphere they tend to be concentrated between the months of July and August and in Latin America between January and February. When teams are located in different hemispheres, these four months present additional challenges for remote leadership. Everyone looks forward to their vacation and sometimes it is difficult to put themselves in the shoes of those who are about to go on vacation and are called to virtual meetings. Everyone cannot be forced to take their vacation in August.

Recommendations:

- › Set meeting dates taking into account the bank holidays of the different locations of the team members.
- › If meetings require international travel, avoid Monday or Friday as much as possible to ensure that participants do not miss part of their weekend traveling.
- › Set meeting times that are reasonable for everyone.
- › Limit meeting times when they are at uncomfortable hours.
- › Make meetings agile, to the point and short. Ask that the interventions be short.
- › Define a single language for the documentation to be shared, and for the development of the meetings.
- › Send the information to be treated in advance for prior reading.
- › Set the days of the week on which teams that telework in the same city must go to the office so that there is a minimum time of joint physical presence.
- › Respect vacations in accordance with local customs.

2. Conquer the commitment

An important challenge of remote leadership is to achieve the commitment of people to the project and regenerate a sense of belonging to the company.

When you are at the headquarters of the company, the corridors and the company dining room help a lot in the task of knowing what is happening, and therefore facilitate feeling more committed and connected.

Remotely, you have to find a formula for the information to flow that allows you to feed both the need to believe in the company (believing) and to be emotionally committed (belonging).

The challenge is to find the balance point in the amount of communication and in the formats of said communication.

It is not a good idea to replace the lack of closeness with an excessive number of virtual meetings, with meetings with too many participants (you do not want to leave anyone out) and with meetings that last for long periods of time. That cocktail is difficult for it to work.

In the months of confinement, many people have complained about the amount of “check-in” by their bosses to see how they were and of an exhaustion (“burnout”) due to excessive “reunionitis” (culture of excessive number of meetings).

When any of these factors occurs, the attention of the participants is lost, who will start to deal with other issues in parallel (answering emails, messages or simply paying attention to something else). This disconnection also occurs in face-to-face meetings and in the case of virtual meetings the risk is much higher.

Recommendations:

- › Articulate a good communication plan that reinforces the strategic story, the identity of the company, and those values that unite.
- › Make a calendar for this communication, sometimes mixing it with training, and make it attractive without cluttering people's agendas.
- › Use the same collaborative tools for projects and for communications to avoid incompatibilities and connection difficulties.
- › Create a style for remote communication that is inclusive and practical and give positive encouragement to those who act in this line.
- › Make an extra effort to highlight and make it easy to understand what is important and a priority.
- › Use tools so that people remotely participate and feel protagonists in the articulation of operational and strategic decisions.

- › Promote two-way communication so that everyone can contribute. Today there are tools (for example, Mentimeter and SurveyMonkey) that allow you to collect many comments, easily and instantly, from large geographically distributed teams.
- › Create a psychological safe environment that avoids the culture of fear of saying what one thinks or the conformism of pointing to the opinion that is politically correct.
- › Reinforce the processes of welcoming new employees so that they are cognitively and emotionally integrated even though they are going to work remotely.

3. Increase personal trust

Trust is based on mutual knowledge and empathy. Credibility, reliability, and having control on personal ego, also build trust. Trust accelerates reciprocities creating a virtuous spiral. Therefore, establishing trust between two people is very important for the effectiveness and efficiency in the medium and long term.

- The challenge of leading remotely is how to recreate these elements: mutual knowledge, credibility, reliability, empathy and ego control without frequent face-to-face contact. One possible strategy is to more precisely align the expectations of both parties in five major areas:
- The objectives to be achieved.
- The criteria and guidelines to be used to achieve the objectives.
- The resources that can and cannot be used to achieve the objectives.
- The moment and the people who are going to evaluate the work done.
- The possible consequences of achieving or not achieving the objectives, following or not following the agreed guidelines, etc.

Physical proximity, and intellectual and emotional in the case of remote teams, is power of execution. Closeness improves the

relationship between people, whether or not they are from the same department, a relationship that can then be capitalized to solve an interdepartmental problem, solve a problem in a project or help each other in their tasks. In the office environment, it is easy to go to a person who is nearby to ask for a favor and / or offer simple help to see how an issue is resolved within the company. The goal is to achieve something similar remotely.

In the case of new people who join the company, that access to other colleagues, who have been working for a long time, is essential to absorb the operating rules, or simply to know who is who and know where to go to solve an issue. Those little informal chats that take place at the coffee machine or in the hallways cause many simple questions to be resolved and projects flow spontaneously. Remote team leadership will have to make up for the lack of this spontaneous learning with other initiatives.

In remote contexts, the minutes leading up to a meeting are also lost in which unstructured conversations flow that allow bonding between people to be strengthened. They are usually used to ask about the progress of some other initiative, ask a colleague for a favor or simply to ask about a personal matter. The minutes after a meeting are also spaces for bilateral conversations that "grease" the execution of projects. Once again, remote team leadership will have to somehow overcome these limitations.

Recommendations:

- › Connect talent through virtual spaces, forums or communities where affinity groups can be established to resolve doubts or questions regarding the operation of the company.
- › At the beginning of virtual meetings, allow each participant to comment on how they are doing at the moment. That will increase the level of emotional commitment to the meeting.
- › Show empathy towards those who participate by being interested in local

events, good or bad, that may be happening elsewhere (for example, if the SuperBowl just happened, it is worth asking how it was experienced in the US; if a natural disaster has affected any country with which we are interacting, spend a few minutes to hear how they are dealing with this tragedy).

-) Force events or face-to-face meetings in the form of off-sites that allow the teams that interact virtually to know each other personally. In these meetings, best practices can be shared, design thinking methodologies used to solve problems and dynamics to align the team around strategic priorities. It should also include time for people to get to know each other, build mutual trust, and flow informal conversations with everyone.

4. Manage possible cognitive distortions

We all feel a greater affinity with the people who are closer, since we put our eyes and faces on them and, surely, we have had the opportunity to know each other more in depth. This explains why it is easier to make the decision from the headquarters of a large multinational to close a factory, or to make a massive layoff in a distant country, than to fire a small group of colleagues from the headquarters.

Distance can also cause a negative bias in the perception of the quality of work, and as a consequence in the variable remuneration or promotions of those who are far away. Many leaders try to be "fair" to those from afar by setting tangible and measurable objectives, but this does not incorporate subjective elements in evaluations of the performance of people who work remotely.

Giving feedback on negative aspects is always complicated, either in person or remotely. When things are not going well with a remote team, it is tough to have difficult conversations and give negative feedback.

With remote teams it is common that if

something does not work, the perception of the negative is amplified, and also that the remote team is not well involved in diagnosing the problem. The sum of these elements generates a greater emotional distance and a loss of trust between the two.

Recommendations:

-) Strive to put a face and eyes to all people even if they are physically far away.
-) Schedule spaces with a certain frequency to have those difficult conversations about performance and other related aspects creating an environment of psychological safety and great professionalism.
-) When giving feedback, always include positive aspects along with negative ones, showing empathy towards the person. Given the risk of an incorrect interpretation, leave space at the end of the conversation to hear how the other person has received the message. Remember that in life you succeed and fail from conversation to conversation.
-) Avoid the subjective favoritism of the people who are closest.

Conclusions

Leading teams remotely is not something new, but the magnitude of people who work remotely and the technology available to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their work is new. Working from home has come to stay.

This document has reviewed some of the challenges that remote team leadership entails in current circumstances and has provided solutions and recommendations to address their challenges.

Regardless if it is face-to-face, or the growing remotely way, leadership is about being exemplary, setting the direction, ensuring execution, building bridges between people and creating the conviction in the team that great things can be done together.