Important Soft Skills and Leadership Practices for Navigating the Virtual Workplace

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It is an understatement to say that the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the business world. As many organizations have had to pivot to remote work, both management and staff have been forced to adjust quickly to the new realities of working virtually. According to a recent study by Stanford economist Nicholas Bloom, “an incredible 42 percent of the U.S. labor force is now working from home full-time,” with this “enlarged group of work-from-home employees” accounting “for more than two-thirds of U.S. economic activity.”

The long-term impact of this historic shift to virtual workplaces has yet to be realized, of course, but one real-time challenge facing almost every organization and business unit is being felt already: how to navigate the new realities of a virtual workplace. The answer lies in the soft skills, those interpersonal, problem-solving, critical thinking and leadership practices that drive such non-standardized, difficult-to-quantify traits and connections.

Leaders have had to navigate steep learning curves to keep themselves and their staff productive, focused and healthy during the pandemic. With this learning curve in mind, here are some important soft skills and leadership tactics that you

will need for navigating the new virtual workplace.

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Trustworthiness

Leadership gurus from Guy Kawasaki to Patrick Lencioni underscore this message: Trustworthiness is always critical to leading high-performing teams. Without trust, workplaces become defined by artificial harmony (or worse, toxic positivity), ambiguity of purpose and ego. As Lencioni points out, these conditions inevitably result in a lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability and inattention to results that can be devastating to performance and organizational culture. Virtual workplaces are the ultimate test of trustworthiness. In the best-case scenario, everyone is engaged and ready to work during the daily or bi-weekly Zoom meeting. But questions inevitably linger about what happens during those other hours when off-screen responsibilities and distractions come into play?

The best way to optimize trustworthiness within your virtual workplace is to openly communicate that you trust your staff to get the work done on time even while managing a quick run to the grocery store or mid-afternoon break to walk the dog. Acknowledging these challenges openly and giving staff the autonomy to take care of their physical and emotional needs while staying productive is the ideal balance when navigating a virtual workplace. Working within a trusting culture allows people to feel productive and valuable professionally while caring for themselves and their families.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Unfortunately, many leaders still see empathy as a

soft skill that gets in the way of making tough decisions or leading a company through challenging times. But as Maëlle Gavet argues in her recent book *Trampled by Unicorns: Big Tech's Empathy Problem and How to Fix It*, nothing could be farther from the truth. Gavet asserts that "If you define corporate empathy as the ability of a company and its leadership to understand what's happening in the world around them —and how their decisions impact people inside and outside the company —I think you actually have a better company."

The reality is, the stress associated with Covid-19, along with the challenges of working from home, are taking a significant toll on American families. As the American Psychological Association points out, 70 percent of American adults self-report that work and economic issues are a leading source of stress in their lives. In some cases, these stressors can be equal to or higher than concerns for basic needs, access to health care services and missing out on major personal or family milestones. Approaching employees and coworkers from a place of understanding surrounding their current environments and stressors can not only reduce friction but increase communication and productivity across an organization.

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Get creative and keep communication pathways open

If anything positive comes out of the widespread deployment of virtual workplaces, it might be the impetus to rethink the traditional meeting format. The bottom line is that one- or two-hour video conferences do not work. Attention spans and lower back muscles are strained, post-meeting productivity drops dramatically and frustration levels spike.

In the place of long virtual meetings, create a schedule of short, project- or team-focused check-in meetings, virtual water cooler chats or Q&A sessions. Keep the list of invitees to the minimum size needed to gather relevant information and make informed decisions, and ensure the conversation remains focused and purposeful. Meeting frequency might increase in the short term, but meeting effectiveness, productivity and staff wellness will benefit as a result.

Restructure decision-making and problem-solving

Having the confidence to move away from a top-down or centralized decision-making model is a challenging thing to master. But with decentralized workplaces comes an opportunity to disperse some non-critical decision-making to team leaders or even to individual team members. The result, if managed carefully, provides immediate and long-term benefits to most businesses.

Sharing decision-making responsibility does not mean throwing people into the metaphoric deep end of the pool. A virtual workplace does, however, provide an excellent opportunity to teach your staff how a decision-making matrix functions, how to build a simple but effective root-cause analysis, or how to take advantage of a broader reach of experience from across your business unit to make slower, more fully evidence-based decisions.

Never underestimate the power of a smile

Authentic leaders know that a self-deprecating comment or playful aside is not only a great icebreaker but also goes a long way to enchanting people as well as keeping them engaged and connected. The pandemic is not a laughing matter, and

neither is unemployment caused by the lockdown or the protests erupting across the country. But an unexpected smile or flash of levity provides what psychologists call “a moment of benevolent amnesia,” a personal invitation to push the stress and anxiety from the front of our brain for even a few seconds.

In short, a brief pivot to playfulness, when used appropriately, is a powerful coping mechanism. A quick all-team survey of “What are we binging on Netflix these days?” or “What did we eat for breakfast this morning?” takes only a few seconds to answer but can lift the feeling of isolation and dread that can become pervasive when working from home.

The Covid pandemic has turned the workplace upside down, moving millions of people out of offices to kitchen tables, basement rec rooms and home offices. Work is anything but business-as-usual these days, but relying more on soft skills as complements to traditional business and technical skills can go a long way to keeping your staff and business engaged, healthy and productive.

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