

Everything Has Changed—Has Your Leadership?

BY QUINN OAKS, CPA

For many of us, managing a virtual workforce last year went from theoretical conversation to stark reality overnight when the pandemic hit. And, after a few growing pains, we've proven that remote working works.

Working from home has changed so much more than just our location—it has fundamentally changed the way we work. The rules of work have changed. Life has definitely changed. Has your leadership changed?

For me, managing a remote team is somehow both exactly what I expected and nothing like I expected. And leading from afar takes more effort. Here are a few tips that have helped me navigate the last year—it's no coincidence that several of them center on virtual meetings.

Rethink Team Meetings

I think we can all admit there's nothing worse than a stale virtual team meeting. Dial up your energy so that team meetings don't fall flat. Flex your creativity to make meetings a bit more interactive (virtual holiday parties, trivia, games, etc.).

Manage Meeting Attendance

Death by a thousand Zoom calls is the new death by a thousand paper cuts. Encourage your team (and other teams) to include agendas in meeting invites and send post-meeting recaps. This helps everyone make attendance decisions and streamlines the invite pool. Commit to communicating decisions and action items far and wide.

Teach the Tools

We all jumped into the deep end with new virtual meeting tools. Some of us swam. Some of us sank. And some of us are still trying to keep our heads above water. It's not too late to

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throw a lifeline: set up a brown bag session where someone on your team can remind everyone of the basic tech functions, like how to share a screen, mute and unmute, annotate, react, and change your view, etc. And what about some of the lesser-known tips like adjusting for low light or easily sharing the meeting URL?

Talk About Etiquette

Watching the world adjust to productive virtual meetings has been interesting and at times entertaining and painful. Virtual meeting etiquette is new and different. Communicating basic best practices and, in some cases, manners, might seem unnecessary, but our teams could benefit from a little guidance. The following is some meeting etiquette:

- **Turn your video on.** Does it make it more personal? Yes. Is it more engaging? Yes. But it also helps you read nonverbal cues and reactions.
- **Chat with everyone or no one.** It's tempting to message a subset of people, but it rarely adds productivity or clarity to a meeting. The point of a meeting is a shared discussion.

- **Focus on the task at hand.** When you're responding to email, checking your phone, or working through a meeting, everyone knows. Trust me, it's obvious. And it sends a clear message, "This (and everyone in the meeting) isn't important." If you don't have time to attend, simply decline and ask for a meeting recap.
- **End early.** Zoom fatigue is real. Back-to-back meetings at the office had built-in breaks to walk from room to room, and you either had to leave one meeting early or arrive a few minutes late to the next. And you probably passed a water fountain or a restroom. With virtual calls, back-to-back meeting blocks can be brutal. Try to end two to five minutes early—the quick break and breather is a gift to everyone.
- **Extend a bit of grace.** When this all started, I erroneously expected the same level of professionalism at home. But it turns out working from home is personal—you're inviting your coworkers into your office (sometimes dining room or living room), and that means camcorders by kids, guest appearances in the background, ringing doorbells, and barking dogs. Set a precedent that it's OK to pause your video or mute your audio whenever needed.

Virtual conferences offer payroll education and networking. APA's Congress Xstream offers two Bonus Events this year. Register by March 5 at www.CongressXstream.com/attend

Communicate, Overcommunicate, Then Communicate Again

The nuances of observing nonverbal cues don't translate over the internet. When someone whirls into the workday flustered and frustrated, you don't see it anymore. Embrace the idea of direct, open communication: If you need something, say something. Encourage your team to do the same, give them opportunities to communicate, and be ready to receive their messages with empathy and understanding.

Reset Ground Rules

When we started working from home, most of us had a standard expectation of regular office hours. We quickly learned that this approach doesn't work for everyone, especially parents with kids schooling from home. The evolution of this idea is to have shared core hours of availability for calls and meetings, but to allow people to work when it works for them. Sometimes that means dedicated time in the early morning or late evening. If schedules aren't working, have immediate, direct conversations.

Invite Feedback

It takes more effort to be self-aware from a distance. Ask your people what's working for them and what's not working and be prepared to take action.

Set Specific, Clear Deadlines

"ASAP" is no longer clear enough. If you need it by the end of the week, the end of the day, or in the next hour, say it specifically.

Set Boundaries

It's suddenly all too easy to jump online first thing in the morning, work through lunch, and notice you're still online at dinner time. Remember to set your boundaries. Block your calendar and take a lunch (yes, a full 30 minutes, maybe more). It's not easy to prioritize your boundaries, but it's critical. Just because you can work around the clock in your living room doesn't mean you have to or should.

Encourage Connection

Some of our team members miss non-work, day-to-day interactions. Encourage your team to connect on a personal level. Remind them that catching up with a co-worker for 10 minutes over (virtual) coffee is fine.

Start With Trust

Maya Angelou said it best: "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time." Lead with an approach of trust and assume good intent. If you have doubts about a team member's work or productivity, have a direct conversation and have it early.

Be Human

For many people, the last year has been one of the hardest of their lives. Working from home, schooling from home, and the pressure of a pandemic, social injustice, isolation, and economic hardship has taken a toll on all of us. Our teams need understanding and empathy, but they also need us to show up with quiet, authentic optimism.

We've learned that we need each other more than ever. We need to check in with our colleagues, leaders, and teams, because adjusting to a new reality isn't easy. Everything around us has changed. Have we? If not, it's time. ■