Managing and Leading (and Learning) During Interesting Times:

Old Lessons in New Times of Remote Work in the Spring of 2020

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Introduction

These have not been normal circumstances. We each have been dumped into something we did not imagine six months ago. I was at work on a Friday expecting to come back on Monday. My boss called on Sunday, "Don't go to the office. They won't let you in the building." He was allowed in the building for a few moments on Monday and brought me a few things from my desk that I wanted.

I spent the first morning of remote work in a comfortable coffee shop. This was going to be a good remote work location. A few hours here followed by a few at the local library, and all would be well. That afternoon, however, the governor cancelled school for the year and closed all the restaurants, coffee shops, libraries, etc. Nothing was the way it was supposed to be.

"Interesting times," as the ancient Chinese curse described them, bring challenges and opportunities to managers and leaders. The challenges include keeping the organization operating and being a good person to everyone at work and in the community. The opportunities are to learn from the new situation and remember fundamentals that were forgotten in the tyranny of the urgent.

This article will discuss: (1) managing the worked that was jerked from "normal" to remote, (2) change and returning to (a different) normal, and (3) learning from experience and using the lessons.

Managing the Remote Work

Teams comprise different persons who do different jobs. The highly visible jobs are easy: developer, tester, writer, etc.

Then there are the real jobs—the ones that aren't listed in any org chart. There is the person who everyone is glad to see walk in the door in the morning. There is the person who can talk with that difficult person. There is the person who stands when someone's parent dies. You know these persons and the value they bring. With remote work, there is no physical office for the joy bringer to enter. There is no candy dish for the person to deposit everyone's favorite chocolate. No one sits closest to the door to give the initial impression of the day.

Now what do you do as a manager and leader? There are plenty of suggestions, but one stark reality: it is your responsibility to understand not only the official jobs persons have, but their

unofficial roles and it is your responsibility to create a situation where everyone succeeds on the team in a completely different situation.

There is no lack of advice for managing and leading in the remote work that fell on us. Everyone has a top ten list of lessons learned.

I studied some dozen different articles on the subject. Three different searches were conducted with references listed below. One search was a general one with no limitations of date published. Another search was for articles published only during April of 2020—the first full calendar month of all this. The third search was for articles published in the years 2017 and 2018—before the virus pushed us quickly into remote work.

I found little difference in the lessons learned from these three different time periods and their situations. Common lessons for remote work include:

Trust
Trust the people you have hired. This is one of the more irrational fears that many managers have. They trusted a person enough to hire them, but don't trust them enough to work. You can check their product—both the amount and the quality. If there is a problem with either, endeavor to improve the product, but not the person.

Communicate.
Knowing what people are doing and wanting and how they are excelling can be difficult. In remote work, you can't stick your head in the door and shout, "How's it goin' here?"

Most advice for communication revolves around pushing or posting information to "radiators." Put notes on a bulletin board like a wiki, blog, or website. Colleagues can look at that place at regular intervals. This is known as information "pull" in that colleagues pull the information from the community site. Minimize the use of information "push" or emails to everyone. Those interrupt their persons when they are working. Remote work is difficult enough without interruptions, especially those that carry little information. The call all this, "asynchronous communication most of the time, and synchronous only when necessary."

Understand that some of the persons who work with you are simply bad communicators. They struggle to express themselves clearly let alone briefly. Their co-workers tilt their heads to the side when reading emails or listening on ZoomTeam. Try coaching these poor communicators. You may be a poor coach, so find a good communications coach for them. Avoid "If you don't improve, you are fired." You hired this person to sit in the same room all day with co-workers. Now you are not allowing them to do so. Fairness isn't guaranteed, but recall the suggestion earlier about being a good person.

Adapt
You probably didn't hire any member of your group to work remotely. I wasn't hired to work to do so, but here we are. Now we all must adapt.

First understand that remote work isn't for everyone. Some persons are constantly distracted and cannot start work. Others are the opposite and cannot stop working. They will work until they drop—and they will eventually drop.

Help the distracted to focus. Give them a task they can finish in half an hour and check progress in half an hour. Repeat this until they learn to do it for themselves. Create a sign for them that lets others know they are working.

For those who cannot stop working, help them create space to disconnect. The workday ends; find a way they can declare to themselves that they are at home, not at work.

During the workday, help them make time to walk away from the computer and think. Do not become slaves to the green indicator on Skype showing that you're are online.

Fundamentals

Emphasize fundamentals. We know how to accomplish work. Remote work creates a different context, but the work is the same. If you provide services, keep providing the. If you provide products, keep providing them. Check with your customers. They are also in this strange remote world. Are they happy with your team? How should you adjust to their new needs?

Your organization has a culture or a purpose. Reinforce that. Don't let it fade away.

Materials

Physical equipment: People at home should be given funds to work from home. There is no company supply room at home. Some companies have the policy, "You're working from home. You're saving money by not commuting. Use that savings to buy what you need." This may be true for some persons, but not for others. To continue the theme, no one was hired to work remotely, and there was little prior notice.

A good chair is essential. My greatest challenge the first two weeks of remote work was severe back pain. I had to experiment to find a combination of chairs and seating movement for the pain to subside. I discovered that a $5 metal folding chair stashed away in a closet relieved my back pain. That was good fortune. Not everyone is so fortunate.

Change and the Return to Normal

We all change. Consider pebbles in a stream. Little by little, moment by moment, the trickling water erodes and shapes the pebbles. One day, years later, we notice that sharp rocks became smooth pebbles.

We are like the pebbles being shaped by the trickling water. We each change a little each day. While working face-to-face, we don't notice the inevitable changes in our colleagues.

As of this writing, we are still at "alternate work locations." I am certainly different than I was five (has it been ten or twelve?) weeks ago. I haven't hugged my grandkids in many weeks. A long-time neighbor across the street died (not related to the current virus) without a funeral. My wife and I will not attend my son's wedding in California. I have video calls with some colleagues. Other colleagues require one computer to see PowerPoint combined with a telephone call to discuss it. I work off and on from 5 a.m. to 6 p.m.

My situation is relatively calm. My children are grown and out of the house. Nevertheless, I have changed.

I am certain that my colleagues have changed, but in unknown ways. I look forward to being in the same room with them. I am uncertain of how that that will be because I am certain that things won't be the way they used to be. None of us will be the way we used to be. We were kicked from a comfortable place to an uncertain one. Water trickled over us for weeks. We were displaced and settled onto a different sandbank.

And we will return to work with a group of strangers. Where did our old, comfortable colleagues go? They don't exist any longer. And they will look for me and wonder where I went because I don't exist any longer either.

Once we return to work, not to normal, there will be a few days of jubilation. We will be excited to escape seclusion and see others. Then the air will escape from the balloon. About the end of the first week, persons will fall into a funk as they find that they cannot find the people they used to know.

Allow mourning.

Hold a special event to celebrate the passing of an era. Seclusion is over. That is good. People have passed, i.e., changed without us witnessing the day-by-day change. That will be sad. Allow people to laugh so hard they cry and cry so hard they laugh. Some persons will literally do both. Others will shrug outwardly, and we won't know what is happening on the inside. Accept both.

Learning from the Experience

The current situation, like all other situations, will end. We will go back to a situation that will resemble our old working arrangement, but, as we noted above, will not be the same.

Then what do we do? Refer to the lessons learned shown earlier.

Trust

Communicate

Adapt

Fundamentals

Materials

Everything in the list will apply to our return to something that resembles our old workplace. (Hey, everything in the list applied to our workplace way back when in January 2020.)

Remote work is different from our old situation. Our next situation will differ from both our old situation and our remote work.

Regardless of these differences, the lessons and prescriptions are the same. We will still be attempting work with a group of persons.

This (continuing) time of remote work was and still is a great opportunity. It gives us enough jolt to notice what we may have overlooked. We may have implicitly trusted our co-workers last year. This plunge into remote work forced us to explicitly trust our co-workers. The same applies to the other items in the short list above. We must communicate effectively without

burden. We must adapt to each new day and the challenges it brings. We must focus on fundamentals that we know succeed. Everyone needs materials.

We paid a high tuition these past weeks. Let us learn proportionately. Anything less would be wasteful.

Gather learnings with your co-workers upon return. Fill in the blanks.

While working remotely,

- I liked blank.
- I liked being blank.
- I disliked blank.
- I disliked being blank.
- And what I really want to say to everyone is blank.

Conclusion

Two notes:

(1) Things have changed dramatically.

(2) Things haven't changed much.

The spring of 2020 jolted us into noticing how to continue effectively. Upon consideration, however, what we noticed are the same things we already knew. Perhaps we have not learned so much as we have remembered.

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