Guidelines on how to manage Virtual teams

 Author: Tatenda Sayenda . January 2021

Just when we thought things were getting better in regards to the COVID 19 pandemic in Zimbabwe, we find ourselves back to square one, back to the same situation we were round about March 2020. In Zimbabwe and the world over we are beginning to see COVID 19 cases increasing rapidly, forcing the country to go back into lockdown and companies to close up and work remotely. In the first phase, most companies were able to put in place systems and processes to cope with this pandemic, but now with the coming of this rather harsh second phase, McKinsey suggests that companies need to come up with a more sophisticated approach to keep companies operational during this time.

Change in Workplace Practices

COVID 19 has come with several changes in the workplace. Since its start many trends have come up, the following are examples of two major trends that have come up as a result of the COVID 19:

- **Working from Home**

A survey by Gartner (2020) of 229 Human Resources (HR) departments showed that approximately one-half of the companies had more than 80% of their employees working from home during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and estimated substantial long-term increases for remote work after the pandemic. The need for millions of workers to work from home in response to COVID-19 has accelerated recent remote work trends facilitated by the rise of connectivity and communication technologies. With this second wave of COVID 19 more and more employees will be working from home. Working from home will soon be the new normal for most companies come year-end.

- **Virtual Teams**

COVID-19 has accelerated the expansion of *virtual teams*. Unlike working in a physical space, teams are having to work remotely, communicating via virtual platforms. According to Gartner, 74% of surveyed CFOs plan to keep part of their workforce permanently remote after the COVID-19 crisis. Both organizations and employees see opportunities and benefits from *remote working* including flexibility, increased productivity, and employee satisfaction. In an article by McKinsey, it is stated that several companies have already announced plans to shift to a hybrid or completely remote working model after the pandemic.

Tactics on managing virtual teams

This pandemic has most organizations operating in new scenarios where they are driven in an accelerated fashion to reshape how they work, engage with their people, and interact with and deliver services to their external and internal customers. Leaders all over the world are being forced to adopt

more efficient and human-centric approaches to coaching, productivity, and management practice, quickly, to keep businesses operating efficiently.

It goes without saying, virtual is not physical, and team connection and productivity will not automatically continue in a virtual world. *Virtual teaming* affords many benefits but presents a higher risk of misalignment and lack of collaboration, which may take a toll on team trust and employee engagement if not done right. But the truth is virtual working is here to stay and leaders need to take steps to make it work. In an article by Deloitte Denmark, the following are principles that leaders can make use of to lead *virtual teams* effectively:

Re-ignite team purpose & clarify roles As a leader when managing *virtual teams* it is important to revisit your purpose and team roles as this will help drive direction and provide a sense of belonging. When managing virtual teams it is imperative to have an intentional, clear, and structured approach. As a leader it is important to ensure the following:

- Ensure that your team knows its purpose both at a team level and at a project level. The purpose and principles you work by the need to be clear and well understood and well committed by all members.
- In a virtual setup, some roles might become irrelevant and some might be missing. It is important to identify what roles are needed to deliver on your purpose.
- Delegate to avoid being the bottleneck. Let go of control where you can and trusting your team members will deliver.

1. **Establish a new rhythm**

The first 30 days as a *virtual team* will determine how you work together for as long as the team lasts. Make sure to deliberately decide what should and should not become a tradition for your team:

- Encourage your team to be creative
- Ensure you have regular team meetings or check-in and make these recurrent activities as they are key in making your team deliver on its purpose.
- If virtual working is something new to your team then awkwardness is bound to happen, embrace it, laugh about it even! Your team will get used to it.

1. **Track capacity & progress**

Awareness of your team's individual and collective capacity and having a continuous overview of task progression is key to engagement and productivity. However, getting it right requires extreme discipline and consistent use of technology.

- Help the team prioritize their tasks. As a leader, you need to be structured in prioritizing your team's tasks. You need to reassess what tasks are no longer relevant and what tasks are critical or even missing in this new virtual setup.
- Proactively and continuously update your team's capacity.

- As a team maintains a shared overview of tasks.

1. **Leverage technology to collaborate**70% of business professionals expect the use of online collaboration platforms to increase in the future. *Virtual teams* truly need to explore and incorporate technology into their ways of working to succeed. Make use of technology to keep your team well connected, leverage new technology and trends.
2. **Be visible & check-in frequently**

According to an article by Harvard Business Review (2014), Virtual distance can lower your team member's trust by 83%, the ability to innovate by 93%, and engagement by 80%. To counter this distance, you need to make yourself available:

- As a leader, you need to stay open-minded to the shift in each team member's needs.
- With working virtually, past high performers may struggle to adapt to virtual ways of working whilst others perform better than before. Tackle the possible barriers that may hinder performance and try by all means to remove them. Help those who are struggling and accelerate those who are thriving.
- Do not forget to show your team that you are available and there for them.

1. **Strategically over-communicate**

Leaders often question how they should communicate with their teams virtually, which typically results in radio silence. However, there is no such thing as communicating too much when it comes to virtual leadership. Constant and clear communication is vital especially when leading a virtual team. Sending emails is not the only option, you will need to make use of other formats and platforms of communication.

Prior research shows that virtual teamwork tends to lack the communication richness available to face-to-face teams (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004) and that traditional teamwork problems such as conflict and coordination can escalate quickly in virtual teams (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001).

1. **Empower & promote self-leadership**

Leading remotely presents a paradox, as you need to keep the full overview, but you cannot lead everything all at once. Instead, you will have to build trust with, and empower your team to, take action and initiative to keep the wheels turning.

- Mistakes will happen that never used to happen when you were working as a physical team. Embrace failures and learn from them.
- Trust your team. By trusting them you allow them to be able to think outside the box and try out new ideas, and as a result, you will see innovation emerging.

1. **Ensure well-being**

The well-being of your team members is critical to their engagement. Yet, well-being is considerably challenged by the virtual nature of your team, and you need to be more alert than ever to create the right conditions. As a leader do not focus on just productivity but also focus on the well-being of your team. Lead also by example, and guide your team as they embrace this new normal. As a leader, you will need to set the standard in behavior.

Strong management practices and routines that may have been neglected in an office setting must now come to the fore. A key part of this is how we continue to drive performance with readjusted capacity levels. In an article by PWC Singapore, they outline the importance of leaders making sure they provide their employees with the right tools. Providing teams, the resources they need to be high functioning, promoting transparency, and efficiently identifying risks, gaps, and opportunities in delivering business outcomes should form the baseline of any remote-working protocol. As a leader look at the policies that you have in place in your organization regarding remote working. Set clear guidelines on what is encouraged and boundaries to operate in.

Virtual work practices are likely to spread as organizations realize the cost-savings from structuring labor with fewer full-time employees and more contractors connected technologically (Spreitzer, Cameron & Garrett, 2017) – and perhaps with less office space in light of the health risks known to be associated with conventional open-plan offices (Pejtersen et al., 2011). The challenges for individuals working in this manner are clear: more of us will need to learn to work in ways far different than how people did before. According to Deloitte, the success of remote working or virtual teams will be the shared responsibility of employees, managers, and leadership.

Tatenda Sayenda-Havire is a consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd a management and human resources consulting firm. Phone +263 4 481946-48/481950/2900276/2900966 or email: tatenda@ipcconsultants.com or visit our website at www.ipcconsultants.com

https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/Guidelines-On-How-To-Manage-Virtual-Teams