NUTURING YOUR PEOPLE FROM AFAR:

SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF VIRTUAL WORKING

A Communicorp White Paper

PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AT WORK

NURTURING YOUR PEOPLE FROM AFAR: SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF VIRTUAL WORKING

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Key Takeaways

1. In the wake of recent crises such as COVID-19, there is no doubt that such options for virtual working – including telecommuting, flexible working arrangements, and working from home – are becoming more popular now than ever before.

2. These working arrangements are associated with a number of unique challenges related to an increase in the distance between team members and leadership.

3. In the context of virtual working environments, leaders should ensure that they adapt their communication style to the needs of their people, set clear expectations regarding team behaviour, and promote regular opportunities for team interaction and the development and maintenance of trust.

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Nurturing Your People from Afar: Supportive Leadership in the Age of Virtual Working

Global advances in technology and interconnectedness have increased our capacity for virtual working at an unprecedented rate. The "floodgates" have now opened for a wide range of virtual options – including telecommuting, flexible working arrangements, working from home, and virtual teams – that have brought people together from across every corner of the world. In the wake of recent crises such as COVID-19, there is no doubt that such options for virtual working are becoming more popular now than ever before.[i]

Despite the vast evidence to suggest that supportive leaders play an important role in bolstering the job satisfaction and emotional wellbeing of their people,[ii] remarkably little research has clarified the implications of these arrangements for how leaders should support their teams from afar.[iii] As a leader working from home, how can you support the health and wellbeing of your staff from a distance? What aspects of your leadership style should change or remain the same?

> "In the wake of recent crises such as COVID-19... distance need not be a barrier when it comes to promoting a flourishing workplace".

COVID-19 represents an invaluable opportunity for us to take stock of how we lead our people and champion workplace mental health, both now and after this crisis has passed. The evidence is becoming increasingly clear that distance need not be a barrier when it comes to promoting a flourishing workplace.

What are the Unique Challenges faced by Virtual Leaders – And how can they be Overcome?

There is no doubt that an increase in the distance between team members and leadership is associated with a number of unique challenges. Although these challenges are not insurmountable, acknowledging them and taking steps to proactively address them – both now and after the COVID-19 crisis has passed – will be essential for optimising how we continue to work virtually.

> **Communication can be stripped of its richness.** It is common, when working in virtual teams, to rely less on face-to-face communication and more on contact by phone, email, teleconference, and other digital platforms. These options, despite their efficiency, can often strip communication of its richness[iv] due to the absence of critical social cues – such as body language – that convey important social information.[v] In support of this view, a recent study found that employees perceived face-to-face communication to be of a significantly higher quality than telephone and email communication in their workplace.[vi] Furthermore, the employees in the study indicated they would like to receive more face-to-face communication from their supervisors than they were currently receiving. This would suggest that communication between leadership and staff, particularly of a face-to-face nature, plays a critical role in the workplace.

Communicorp Tips for Enriching Your Communication

1 **Communicate *regularly* with your people.** This could occur through formal meetings about a work-related topic or project, as well as informal opportunities for virtual morning teas or social gatherings that allow team members to catch-up, informally debrief, and strengthen relationships with one another.

2 **Acknowledge and respect the unique social needs of your team members.** Your team members are likely to vary in their personal need for social connection and interaction – although the outgoing members of your team may crave regular opportunities to decompress together, others may prefer the peace and focus of solitude. Acknowledging these differences and striving to find an appropriate middle ground is an important part of your role as a virtual leader. Try asking your team what works for them and coming to a consensus.

3 **If you notice that someone isn't coping well, don't be afraid to ask "Are you OK?"** Times of rapid change and ongoing uncertainty, be it COVID-19 or otherwise, can have a significant effect on our mental health. If you notice a significant and negative change in the behaviour of someone in your team, consider whether it may be appropriate to have a supportive and confidential conversation with that person.

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> **Trust can be jeopardised.** Changes in the way that team members interact over time can pose significant risks to how trust is developed and maintained.[vii] Although trust lies at the heart of successful team relationships and leads to marked increases in proactivity, optimism, and a greater focus on task output,[viii] the development of trust can be hindered by the absence of subtle, day-to-day, informal interactions that provide us with the opportunity to build relationships and determine the reliability and dependability of a team member.[ix]

Communicorp Tips for Building
Trust

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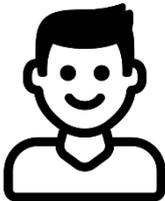
1. **Where possible, use modes of communication that put a face to the name.** Being able to see a person's face, even if it is only a still image or a video of yourself during a teleconference, may go a long way towards the development and maintenance of trust.
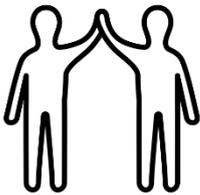
2. **Acknowledge key strengths and achievements within your team.** Although taking the time to recognise the strengths and achievements of your people is important advice for all teams, it may be especially important to do so at times when your team members can't directly observe the achievements of others. You will also be well-positioned to reinforce the behaviours you hope to see more of in the future.

3. **Provide reassurance about things that matter.** Times of rapid change and ongoing uncertainty, related to COVID-19 or otherwise, may trigger fear in your team members about whether organisations have their best interests at heart. Where possible, draw attention to the steps that you and your organisation are taking to protect your people and keep them safe (e.g., physical distancing measures).

"Trust lies at the heart of successful team relationships and leads to marked increases in proactivity, optimism, and a greater focus on task output".

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> Shared expectations about appropriate workplace behaviour may need to be redefined. Making the shift from in-person working to working in a virtual environment can alter shared expectations about appropriate workplace behaviour. For example, those working in virtual environments, compared to those working in in-person environments, may demonstrate less awareness of the impact of their own behaviour on others – leading to a higher risk of poor inhibition, impoliteness, and – in some cases – increased aggression.[x] However, setting clear expectations for collaboration at the outset of a virtual working arrangement may help to reduce some of these risks by enhancing trust.[xi]

Communicorp Tips for Encouraging
Appropriate Workplace Behaviour

1 **Set clear, up-front expectations about acceptable team behaviour.** This could be as simple as letting your team members know about the expectations you have regarding day-to-day behaviour (e.g., the importance of communicating frequently with one another and acknowledging important emails), as well as the shared values that matter most to your team.
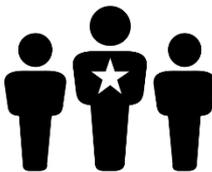
2 **Lead by example.** Practise what you preach! Your willingness to adhere to your own expectations regarding appropriate workplace behaviour will have a significant influence on the willingness of your team members to do the same.

3 **Call out unacceptable team behaviour.** Uncivil or aggressive behaviour can still occur in a virtual environment, even if it looks and sounds different to how it might manifest in an in-person environment. Being assertive and proactively calling out this behaviour is important, both in virtual as well as in in-person settings.

"Setting clear expectations for collaboration at the outset of a virtual working arrangement may help to reduce risks by enhancing trust."

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> ### The boundaries between work life and personal life may become blurred.
Although capitalising on opportunities to work from home has been essential for many organisations during the COVID-19 crisis, virtual working arrangements also pose challenges in terms of managing the delicate balance between work life and personal life. For example, research has demonstrated that people working from home tend to work longer hours,[xii] find it more difficult to "switch off" from work,[xiii] and may experience additional challenges relating to caring for family members and other caring responsibilities.[xiv]

Communicorp Tips for Supporting Boundaries Between Work and Life

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1 **Encourage your team members to prioritise healthy habits during the workday.** Small actions that promote a healthier work-life balance, such as taking a lunch break and getting some physical activity each day, are as important when working from home as they are when working in the office.
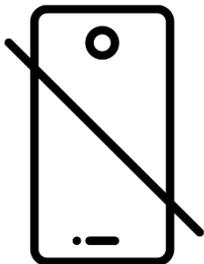
2 **Remind team members about the importance of "switching off" and spending time offline.** Working from home can sometimes be associated with the assumption you or your team need to be available and online at all times – leading to an elevated risk of poorer work-life balance as a result. To minimise this risk, consider encouraging your staff to set a daily schedule that makes sense for them and be mindful of safeguarding their personal time. You may also wish avoid inadvertently communicating to your team that they should be online at all times, such as by avoiding sending emails very early in the morning or in the middle of the night.

3 **Be sensitive to the needs and challenges currently facing your team.** Transitioning into a working from home arrangement may involve unique challenges for some of your team members, particularly those balancing the care of children or other dependents with the demands of their job. During these challenging times, it will be more important than ever to check in with these team members regularly, let them know about the support available, and demonstrate flexibility when it is most needed.

Final Comments

Taken together, the evidence is clear that opportunities for telecommuting, flexible working arrangements, working from home, and virtual teams can create powerful opportunities for collaboration, both in the wake of COVID-19 and more generally. Although distance need not be a barrier when it comes to promoting a flourishing workplace, leaders should ensure that they adapt their communication style to the needs of their people, set clear expectations regarding team behaviour, and promote regular opportunities for team interaction and the development and maintenance of trust.

"Food for Thought"

- What has been your experience of working in a virtual environment? What aspects have been enjoyable and challenging about it?

- How does the way that you lead and interact with others **change** when you are working in a virtual team?

- How does the way that you lead and interact with others **stay the same** when you are working in a virtual team?

- What steps could you take to be a more supportive leader and team member in the future?

ABOUT COMMUNICORP

Communicorp is a specialist psychological services firm focusing on developing positive workplace mental health, wellbeing and resilience capabilities – Australia wide.

Communicorp is committed to improving individual, team and corporate capability and performance through the delivery of practical programs and services that recognise the commercial implications of psychological wellbeing and optimal performance in the workplace.

If you want to read more about Communicorp, who we work with, or our range of services, please visit our corporate website:

www.communicorpgroup.com **|** Ph: 1300 855 140 **|** info@communicorpgroup.com

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