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Lessons from a Crisis: Identity as a Means of Leading Remote Workforces Effectively

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Society has been tackling a problem that many of us — from generation Z to baby boomers — have not before encountered. The spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 is a world-wide event — a pandemic — and nations across the world have struggled to contain it. We have lived through pandemics before, but what makes this one distinctive is how widespread it has affected the modern economy. Among other changes, this pandemic has broadly increased uncertainty, anxiety and grief. It has shaped how people do business. It has temporarily retooled manufacturing and other industries to assist the healthcare system. It’s also unique in another way; unlike any other pandemic, people are working together remotely at an unprecedented level. Signs also indicate that this greater remote work is likely to persist, at least in part, even post-pandemic.

Remote work is defined as “work that is physically portable and/or can be done online.” We now see many organizations — when the work allows it — with operations shifted to a mostly remote workforce, usually one working from home. Remote work has given businesses a way to maintain continuity when, in times past, that work might have stopped altogether. Working together in the same space, or what we could call co-located work, has historically been fundamental to managerial authority and control. The manager’s presence helps to ensure the work is completed and meets standards, and employees do what they are expected. Without that co-location, managers have lost some of their typical sources of influence. Moreover, there is a typical assumption that cooperation and communication, necessary features of the interdependent work organizations conduct, are better accomplished in-person. In 2013, Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer gained a great deal of attention by ending remote work at the web services provider, citing the need for greater collaboration as a reason. There’s also a bit of irony in that companies like Facebook (known for its remote social network) and IBM (known for making much of the technology — such as cloud computing and IT infrastructure — that facilitates remote work) both have in the recent past touted open-design concepts at their office headquarters to facilitate co-located communication. Even with companies whose organizational purpose is committed to the remote lifestyle, we see preferences for co-located work.

As of the writing of this paper, the world community is taking steps to move past the pandemic. It is also clear that the pandemic has created enduring implications for the workforce. Companies such as Spotify, Ford, and Target, as well as big banks and law firms, have released workspace to accommodate a longer-term commitment to remote work. Microsoft has committed to a hybrid workplace, a blend of remote and in-person work. Twitter and Square are allowing employees to work from home “forever.” As Matthew Haag reported in the New York Times, “... A year after the coronavirus sparked an extraordinary exodus of workers from office buildings, what had seemed like a short-term inconvenience is now clearly becoming a permanent and tectonic shift in how and where people work.”

Such a circumstance leaves leaders uncertain of their influence with a remote workforce. This paper offers reassurance and helps leaders take stock of their decisions, by providing a perspective and a chance to reflect on how to

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lead remote workforces effectively. Leadership defined here is about inducing voluntary compliance, that is, of influencing others to achieve a common goal. Although it may seem difficult to lead remotely, managers can do so effectively by following the lessons in this article. In particular, leadership can be enhanced remotely, namely through homing in on the single most important concept that brings meaning to work and collaboration: group identities.

Pulling from my own contributions to this literature, as well as from those of many others, this paper summarizes some of the lessons managers can apply to lead remote workforces effectively through a better understanding of group identity. Complementing and elaborating on these best practices are stories and experiences that seven contacts — interviewees, panelists, and coworkers — have shared with me about their recent experiences managing remote workforces. Their experiences draw from fields as diverse as law, finance, psychology, education, and fast food and reflect and reinforce how these lessons about group identity translate into leading a remote workforce.

LEADERSHIP AND REMOTE WORK: THE FUTURE HAS POTENTIAL FOR THIS MARRIAGE AT GUNPOINT

Identity is the crux of the insight, but before we get to that, let’s recognize that leading remotely has historically faced resistance. Remote work strips away context and nonverbals that serve as additional sources of information to address an age-old question: can I trust my coworkers, boss, or subordinates to work with me? Perhaps more deeply, is the person or people I’m interacting with online who they claim to be?

Work in organizations is necessarily defined by interdependence, of working together with others. People want the intangible rewards for their labor too, for example, respect, recognition for contributions, kindness, compliance and acceptance. People question whether their workplace allows it, scanning others and their context for additional information. Online, however, the notion of a “workplace” is impoverished at best and non-existent at worst. People anticipate that questions of trust arise and feel they not easily reconcilable, as Sirkka Jarvenpaa and her colleagues have revealed in a large body of work. The loss of typical sources of authority and control may leave some predicting a dismal future.

Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged these assumptions. Although organizations have turned to remote work out of necessity, for many, it has gone remarkably well. Soon after the pandemic began, in April 2020, I served as a panelist for a webinar on leading remote workforces during this crisis. The panel occurred about three weeks after much of Canada and the United States began shutting their offices. During the webinar, the audience was polled on how moving to a remote workforce has affected their own personal productivity. Those data are summarized in the left bar in Fig. 1. With about 400 responding, 75% reported their personal productivity had remained the same or increased now that they were working remotely. These data are similar to those reported by INSEAD researchers, with 78% of people surveyed indicating their personal productivity maintained or increased. For those in the know, this is perhaps not surprising. Quantitative reviews tend to find boosts to performance when transitioning to remote work.

What the data also reveal is that a noteworthy percentage did wish for greater management support (26%). The INSEAD study, focusing specifically on support for remote work, found a starker conclusion: 50% of their sample reported wishing for greater support from management. This can be attributed, at least in part, to the remote nature of work. This is worth noting; According to Gallup, managers account for 70% of variance in employee engagement. What a manager does has significant implications for voluntary compliance.

The sense that that work can be maintained, or perhaps enhanced, offers potential to organizations to adapt to circumstance when the need to move work remotely arises. It also points to the importance of leaders and what might be needed for them to gain voluntary compliance from their workforces. What is also clear is that the current age of computing has provided an ample range of tools by which to do so.

REMOTE WORK ON STEROIDS: A NEW STAGE OF COMPUTING

It is hard to imagine another time where an entire workforce could operate remotely, at least prior to the 1970s when personal computing was first introduced. Wayne Cascio and Ramiro Montaleagre, experts on technology’s integration with the workplace, note that we are now in a fourth stage of computing, what has been called “ubiquitous computing.” In the words of a writer for Korn Ferry’s Briefings magazine, it is “a world that is hyper-connected and data saturated, a world in which the Internet of everyone is linked to the Internet of everything”.

Remote work, when it was first discussed back in the 1970s, would have been relegated to work by phone and courier (hence its ongoing name in the research literature: telecommuting). That is no more. Ubiquitous computing has brought increasingly diversified modes of communication, tools to enhance productivity, and a new wealth of information. These communication media differ by their features, and also on the advantages and disadvantages that come along with them.

Varieties of Communication Media

Take, for example, the tools available for communication and how they differ from each other. Table 1 presents a list of communication media and how we can differentiate among them. Conferencing refers to ongoing communication between two or more people; messaging typically refers to media where a message is put forth by one party to one or more people.

Every single one of these communication media can be used to communicate about work, yet they differ in important ways. For example, there are verbal (words) and non-verbal channels of information. Hearing someone’s voice crack (vocal) or seeing a shift in a person’s gaze (visual) can inform us about their emotional reaction or their level of distraction. A third kind of nonverbal is what we might call
“in situ”. This channel refers to whether information is available about the communicator’s context or surroundings. Access to their background can be informative in a variety of ways; someone in a quiet room may be taken more seriously than someone calling from an amusement park. With many forms of remote media, people can reduce, enhance or transform what nonverbal channels they share; backgrounds can be edited or strategically designed, and mics and videos turned off or on.

They also differ in synchronicity, which is the ability to respond immediately to what has been communicated. Synchronicity is evident with in-person meetings and conferencing, but an immediate response to an email is not guaranteed.

Presence refers to whether people are experiencing the sense of being present, or of being seen as present, by others (also called immersion in the literature). Technology attempts to recreate this through telepresence (i.e., a sense of presence through a communication medium), allowing the creation of presence even though one or more people reside at different locations. Companies such as Spatial are working to create 3D holographic images of people, embedding an image within the observer’s local space. Although not 3-dimensional, some types of video conferencing such as those created by Cisco or Micron Technologies are attempting to do that too. These technologies could be considered forms of virtual reality, all attempting to create a sense of space, ideally one that can be shared with others. That noted, some forms of virtual reality, such as those that use avatars and fabricated environments (in online gaming), can dampen access to nonverbal or contextual channels.

Finally, these media differ in physical presence. Physical presence is definitional a sense of presence, but the physical co-location includes other elements as well. Co-located work has the potential for more readily creating a sense of shared identity. The late great psychologist Donald Campbell theorized that such physical proximity can itself imply a sense of a “common entity”. It also includes vulnerability, such as physical harm or intimacy, or a shared coping with natural disasters and inclement weather. An earthquake can be felt by the entire San Francisco office, but not by those on video conference from New York.

Communication Media Differ in their Assets

These differences have important consequences for how we communicate with others, and can enhance or reduce a person’s influence based on choice of technology. For example, synchronicity has been shown to increase the likelihood of common ground; it helps to build a common understanding about a topic, such as a problem or work assignment. While it increases the likelihood of common ground, synchronicity also requires coordinating a time where those involved can discuss.

People turn to multiple nonverbal channels when they remain uncertain about the other’s intention or veracity. Sometimes, though, such channels can leave people misinterpreting intent or accuracy by interpreting nondiagnostic behaviors. Remote nonverbals may also be suboptimal; eye contact, which has been associated with creating greater

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**Table 1** Communication media differentiated by their features: channels of information, synchronicity, sense of presence, and physical presence

| Medium                  | Nonverbal Channels | Sense of Presence | Physical Presence |
|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|
|                         | Vocal        | Visual    | In Situ | Synchronicity |                         |                         |
| In-person Meetings      | ✓            | ✓         | ✓       | ✓           | ✓                        | ✓                        |
| Virtual Reality         | ✓            | ✓         | ✓       | ✓           | ✓                        | ✓                        |
| Video Conferencing      | ✓            | ✓         | ✓       | ✓           | ✓                        | ✓                        |
| Audio Conferencing      | ✓            | ✓         | ✓       | ✓           | ✓                        | ✓                        |
| Instant Messaging        | ✓            | ✓         | ✓       | ✓           | ✓                        | ✓                        |
| Video Messaging         | ✓            | ✓         | ✓       | ✓           | ✓                        | ✓                        |
| Audio Messaging         | ✓            | ✓         | ✓       | ✓           | ✓                        | ✓                        |
| Text Messaging a         | ✓            | ✓         | ✓       | ✓           | ✓                        | ✓                        |
| Email                   | ✓            | ✓         | ✓       | ✓           | ✓                        | ✓                        |

Conferencing refers to ongoing communication between two or more people; messaging typically refers to media where a message is put forth by one party to one or more people. Verbal (Words) and nonverbal channels (Audio, Visual, In Situ) of information are identified. “In situ” refers to the observations about a person’s context. An “✓” indicates that the medium has this feature. A “✓” indicates that the feature can be, but is not always, available.

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**Figure 1** Webinar Audience’s Responses to Questions on Leading Remotely.

Webinar audience’s responses to questions about, after moving to remote work, their level of personal productivity and their wish for support from their managers. For this group, a majority felt their performance was about the same or better now; also, most felt they were getting sufficient support from their managers, although almost 26% wished for more.

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Lessons from a Crisis

"Lessons from a Crisis" is a collection of insights and strategies for navigating the challenges and opportunities of remote work. The book is aimed at managers, leaders, and teams who are transitioning to remote work and looking for guidance on how to maintain productivity, foster collaboration, and ensure employee well-being. The lessons are based on research, case studies, and expert interviews, providing a comprehensive overview of the remote work landscape. Whether you are a seasoned remote worker or new to the gig, "Lessons from a Crisis" offers practical tips and innovative ideas for success in the new normal of remote work. It covers a wide range of topics, from leadership and communication to employee engagement and productivity. It also explores the impact of remote work on personal life, self-care, and mental health. The lessons are designed to be accessible and actionable, helping you and your team adapt to the challenges of remote work and thrive in the new environment. By learning from the lessons of others, you can avoid common pitfalls and make the most of your remote work experience. Whether you are looking to improve your own skills or support your team, "Lessons from a Crisis" is a must-read for anyone navigating the world of remote work.
connection to others, is hard to do through video conferencing, at least if you also want to pay attention to what others are saying.

A sense of presence is intended to make the remote experience more immersive and involving, but this presumes that tech beyond virtual reality is not sufficiently immersive. Also, efforts at making more immersive technology may do so unevenly — create immersion for some but not for others (holographic imagery creates a different experiences for those being and receiving the holograph) — or may do so in fabricated environments, creating tradeoffs between immersion and trust.

Finally, physical presence, distinctive to co-located work, can create a sense of shared group membership. It is also associated with more memorable interactions and greater implied cooperation. Being in the same room as a loved one eases pain. However, there are downsides. Physical harassment and some forms of sexual harassment are uniquely relegated to co-located work. It is also restrictive in other ways, as work can be harder to access for people with disabilities or require greater expense through travel to create co-location.

Remote work, too, has been found to bring benefits that are not otherwise easily identified. For example, remote collaboration can expand social networks, and some evidence indicates that remote work increases group participation and flattens hierarchies.

Social influence — our success at it and how people seek to implement it — can change based on the communication medium we choose. However, it necessitates a way forward to understanding what leaders can do on how to lead a remote workforce successfully. As this paper concludes, many of the same benefits that come along with co-location can also occur when leading remotely, by considering something that can endure across distance and time, and exist in an online environment: identity.

LEADING REMOTELY

Without in-person presence as a source of control, leaders will have to rely more on gaining voluntary compliance, and the best way to do so is to focus on identity. Identity as I discuss it here refers to what defines a person or group of people. In leadership activities, it may be tempting to conclude that it’s about the one big “us,” that sense of collective identity. Although a part of the whole story, it is also necessary to define what it means to be a remote workforce and anticipate what they understand of those leading them. Leading workforces is necessarily an intergroup activity, with leaders and the workforce as defined by and as different groups of people, ones that have different purposes but ultimately must work together. In a remote context, people become more reliant on what is believed or known about a person or group. Intergroup identities — theirs and the leader’s own — becomes a way to orient remote work.

The approach to identity described in this paper originates from what is called self-categorization, which refers to peoples’ tendency to define people — themselves and others — by categories. It is typically used to describe what defines an “us” (what is called an ingroup) or “them” (called an outgroup). A difficulty for leaders, made more so by this remote environment, is dealing with the unknown, and in social influence, it refers to the question of how will others respond? People often assume that others will be most willing to comply with their leaders when they see their leaders as like them. Being different — seeing leaders as a “them”, as different than the workforce — has typically been associated with being at odds to the group.

However, my work concludes that a partitioning of leaders and the workforce — seeing leaders and the remote workforce as members of different groups of people — is necessary to creating voluntary compliance. In collaboration with scholars such as Soo Min Toh and Marilyn Brewer, this research highlights the importance of understanding that ingroups and outgroups are not necessarily in opposition with each other, that defining an outgroup as a “them” can inform others of their needs and value, and that what may be more helpful is building trust across the intergroup divide, while maintaining it. With little else to work with in a remote context, three activities become necessary to building and sustaining a healthy intergroup relationship between leaders and their remote workforce.

First, it helps for leaders to recognize the remote workforce as a “them” — a different group of people going through a set of experiences distinctive from those that leaders are confronting. A remote environment can create competing demands on employees, and a remote workforce is likely to be more effective when given greater autonomy to manage those competing demands.

Second, it recognizes that employees are likely to see leaders as a “them”. This is usually a necessity at work, as it helps the workforce recognize that leaders serve a different purpose than they do. It also leaves leaders without the benefit of trust that comes along with being “one of us.” The remote environment is likely to make the question of whether to trust leaders more urgent and necessary, as it reduces spontaneous access to nonverbal communication that people use to assess the trustworthiness of others. To build that trust, and increase employees’ openness to voluntary compliance, leaders must strategically target ways to communicate that sense of trust, and one way they can do so is with a focus on honest relationships.

Finally, the remote environment makes it more difficult to observe the organization’s culture, to observe the best practices and values that define the organization’s identity. Not only that, remote environments are often socially isolating, suggesting that at least some of the remote workforce is looking for a way to stay connected. With a workforce ready for it, the leader can also increase voluntary compliance by acting as a cultural champion, not only by defining what it means to belong to this group or organization, but by creating opportunities for people to connect to each other. These broad strategies for leading remote workforces are summarized in Table 2, as well as some of the different potential outcomes the leader gains from doing so.

Such takeaways parallel the general principles of contemporary leadership theories, such as John Kotter’s notion of leading, Jim Fisher’s recent book, The Thoughtful Leader, and arguably as far back as the 1920s — as Simone Phipps and Leon Prieto identify — with Charles Clinton Spaulding’s theorizing about leading big businesses. Such frameworks identify the importance of understanding the needs of out-group-stakeholders — with employees as an important such
group — to creating that voluntary compliance. Such models can be simplified to three takeaways.

First, it helps leaders to establish a goal they think others might be willing to adopt (what has been called a vision). Second, in case another’s interests in these goals are not obvious to them, it helps to align those outgroups with this goal, by having leaders reach out and communicate with those stakeholders, persuading them that it would be in their interests, or revising the leader’s own assumptions about what those stakeholders care about.

Third, understanding an outgroup’s needs helps leaders identify how to motivate those stakeholders, helping the stakeholders see that it is in their best interests to act in favor of this goal. If such frameworks are already familiar to the reader, one might notice a natural parallel to the recommendations offered in these theories — setting a vision, align and motivate — and the recommendations to give “Them” greater autonomy (a vision or goal leaders might anticipate employees will support), build honest intergroup relationships (communicate alignment), and act as a cultural champion of “Us” (help motivate employees in the service of organizational goals).

These are recommendations I would give to leaders of colocated workforces. What is distinctive about this paper’s framework is the increasing importance of and convenience by which identity can facilitate leading a remote workforce. Identity is the bridge that helps to translate those behaviors. What makes identity so important to a remote setting is that it becomes even more necessary, given the stripped-down environment, the weaker connections with the organization, and the questions of trust and accountability that can manifest in remote environments. Identity fills this void; it is defining and directional, helping to reduce uncertainty and increase a sense of purpose in an impoverished environment. Moreover, identity is also convenient for the remote environment, in that it is easily portable; it can be inferred, communicated, and strengthened using a wide range of communication technologies. Its importance and convenience make it a useful tool. By addressing employee needs — their needs of working remotely, of needing to trust a leader without the usual signals that communicate it, and to reduce that sense of social isolation — managers can use identity as a powerful source of influence, one that can be enhanced through the tools available with remote communication.

**Give “Them” Greater Autonomy**

Workforces can differ in many ways, but what managers do know about the identity of any remote workforce will seem obvious, but is remarkably neglected in often simple ways. These are 1) employees doing work 2) away from the workplace, 3) often under the presumption that their 3) work is remote-capable (physically portable and/or can be done online). Although so simple, this definition of a remote workforce can run into remarkable amounts of slippage and leadership error. It may be tempting for managers, for example, to see their own transition to remote work as the same experience their employees confront. However, the manager is at risk for falling prey to the “false consensus effect”. A remote workforce can include, but is not limited to management, and their work is not strictly the same as management’s work. Research indicates that those higher in the organizational hierarchy tend to transition more easily to remote work perhaps because they already have a home office or previous experience doing remote work, their work is more easily remote-capable, or both. However, a workforce might require assistance to make their work remote-capable (assuming it can be made so). Too, people have come to equate remote work with “work-from-home”. While that

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### Table 2: Identity as a Means to Clarify Needs, Solutions and Gains When Leading Remotely

| Perspective | Identity | Inferred Needs about Remote Workforce | What Solutions the leader can implement: What the Leader Gains |
|-------------|----------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| How leaders see . . . the remote workforce (a “them”) | Non-dedicated work time; work competes with other demands | Give ‘Them” greater autonomy:  
- Redefine goals for asynchronous work  
- Empower remote work  
- Selectively call for meetings | Work facilitated |
| How the workforce sees . . . their leaders “them”) (aSeeking trust in leadership | Build honest intergroup relationships:  
- Create opportunities for professional growth  
- Address difficult events directly  
- Allow yourself to express vulnerability | Greater openness to leader’s influence |
| How the workforce sees . . . the organization (an “us”) | A need for belonging | Become a champion of “Us” :  
- Create opportunities for a shared identity  
- Encourage an inclusive workplace  
- Allow for employee self-expression | Greater morale and socialization |

*Note: When leading a remote workforce, attending to identity becomes more crucial for enhancing voluntary compliance.*
may define the experiences of many, others may be unable to work from home, and must do their remote work elsewhere.

Leaders need to recognize their workforce as a “them”, a different group of people defined by different needs and circumstances than those of management. What managers can infer about a remote workforce is the challenge that remote work creates. Office work provides a boundedness that remote work does not; there is a time and place for office work, the tools to do work are readily available, but working remotely often entails a blending of work and non-work life, without the constraints of arrival and departure times. With that blending comes divided attention from moment to moment. The solution, then, is to free the employees to do the work with fewer requirements that could impede them. To that end, here are three recommendations.

**Redefine goals for asynchronous work**

Work is often, although usually not always, interdependent, requiring input from multiple coworkers to achieve a goal or require clarification over what the work should be. When it is, such work has rested on synchronous communication, which requires real-time conferencing between two or more people. It also requires that people find a common time in their schedule to do so, complicating accessibility, especially so for remote workers, who no longer benefit from the boundedness a workplace provides. One solution is to define, partition, or structure work — or more of it — so that it reduces some of the dependency of responding from colleagues.

Managers can increase their employees’ autonomy by making the work asynchronous, and do so in two ways. First, managers can define more precise work goals. Goals, perhaps especially when they are first formed, are often lofty, but can be vague. Thanks to the pioneering research by Edwin Locke and Gary Latham, organizational scholars have known about the benefits that precise (and challenging) goals produce; challenging goals that help specify what and how to achieve them are useful for motivating employees. There’s an added benefit too; they motivate the employee to work independently, because they know what it is they need to do. George Doran has even gone so far as to propose that precise goals can be defined as SMART - specific, measurable, assignable to someone, realistic, and time-bounded.

Arguably, such goal precision becomes ever more necessary in remote work. When they see greater physical distance between themselves and others, people think and communicate more abstractly. Alas, more abstract goals can inject ambiguity and misinterpretation. One colleague recounted that goal setting for remote work was a bit like the game of “telephone”. She passed on the goal to one direct report, who then passed it to another, and to another, and by the time it got back to her, it was a completely different goal! Some ambitious employees will anticipate the problems this can create and reach out for clarification, but this necessitates greater synchrony, clarifying what exactly needs to be done and how to evaluate it. The greater the need for contact and clarification, the slower the work moves forward. A simpler solution, which brings along the added benefit of motivating the work, is to establish goals that are precise.

The second shift is to free the work from additional requirements of coordination. One of my contacts — a lawyer working at a financial company in the United States — reflected about a particular event that happened soon after their shift to a remote work. She needed some information to make a deadline, reached out to a coworker that she knew had that information, and got no response. After repeated attempts, my contact decided to go around this coworker, collect the information from other sources she knew would have the information she needed, and completed the report on time. It was a hassle and created a good deal of frustration, much of which could have been avoided had there been more direct access available, such as through an online file repository or database.

Goals that can be made more precise, with the work made more asynchronous, will go far at lending greater autonomy to the remote workforce, with the added potential benefit of greater motivation to work, along with the added benefit of allowing managers to emphasize precise results or outcomes. However, one contact of mine — a financial risk consultant - commented that while most employees naturally gravitate to more autonomous work, on at least one occasion he had to coach an employee on how to become more self-reliant. Some coaching may be needed to shift employees into a more autonomous work role.

**Empower remote work**

It often seems obvious, but this is also where a shift to remote work can be upended. It is necessary for a workforce moving remotely to ensure their work is remote-capable. As a starting point, identify whether employees have the technology they require to communicate with coworkers, and do the remote work required, and if not, see what the company can do to make it possible. It is not only about equipment needed to communicate with coworkers (e.g., cameras, headphones, space to speak freely); it is also about familiarity and comfort with using technology. Surveys reveal some real differences in employees’ comfort and familiarity with technology. According to a 2016 Gallup poll, some 43% of respondents indicated that they have worked remotely; while substantial, it is not universal, and research has demonstrated those who have done remote work previously are more successful in their transition to back to remote work. It helps, then, to identify their employees’ comfort level and what can be done to assist them with this transition.

**Selectively call for team meetings**

Much of the work that organizations do requires some degree of interdependence, integration, or problem-solving that goes beyond the work of a single individual. Team meetings are often a necessity, but not all team meetings are necessary. Like in-person meetings, remote team meetings are defined by synchronous interaction about work, although they differ in that they typically occur through a (video or audio) conferencing tool, instant messaging, or some blend of communication modes. Prior to this forced shift to a remote workforce, working professionals reported spending 31 hours a month in unnecessary meetings, estimated to cost companies in wasted salary at about $37 Billion USD. Heavy reliance on in-person meetings and the abysmal value they
have in the eyes of employees suggest they were already used too much, perhaps more for management’s reassurance than for any real value. Polling students and executives today on this issue, and management consultants are likely to find the same reaction.

To produce a more autonomous workforce, and gain those benefits, it helps to identify when it truly is useful to call a team meeting compared to sending out an e-blast. There are three criteria that can be used to identify when to selectively call a team meeting.

First, team meetings can be helpful for establishing common ground, so that the team members view the work goal in the same way. Consider earlier the story about my contact who equated goal setting to a game of “telephone”. Given that several people were involved in that task, it would have been helpful to meet together early on, establish the goal and allow a discussion for clarification. As a new task begins, start with a meeting to clarify what needs to be done, who needs to do it, and by when. Then, to the extent it is possible, create a circumstance where employees can freely do their work with occasional team check-ins. At least two of my contacts reflected on having standing weekly meeting times, usually at the beginning or end of the week, and were defined as check-ins, and meeting times shortened as needed.

Second and third, it is also about the complexity of the work. As Susanne Scott and Walter Einstein identified, the more complex the work, the more benefit people receive from input by others, the more teams require synchronous communication. Consider deliberative bodies such as governance boards, investigative committees, or cross-functional teams. Their discussions of strategy, process or discovery often necessitate synchronous communication. Reserving team meetings for work that is truly teamwork is a second criterion, then, and move the rest to subgroups or communicate asynchronously.

Finally, Scott and Einstein also note the importance of the fluidity of group membership too. People also often think of teams as unitary constructs, composed of a specific group of people. However, organizations often require that teams be more flexibly defined, with membership defined by what the work requires. More recently, this concept has been popularized by Amy Edmondson’s notion of “teaming”. Managers define teams not so much as who reports to them, but as to what the work requires. From this point of view, virtual meetings would only require attendance from those doing the work. Managers can be tempted to invite other staff as a way to maintain team morale or keeping people in-the-know. However, the first can be remedied with optional attendance (or even better, maintaining morale in other ways), and the second can be more easily communicated with an email.

The meetings themselves can also be made less burdensome. Some interviewees indicated a preference for remote meetings to use audio over video conferencing, particularly with weekly check-ins. At least one contact explained why. Video conferencing requires greater preparation of a visual image; with audio conferencing, the obligation to shower, dress nicely, and groom accordingly is not necessary. A way to make those weekly check-ins less burdensome for the remote workforce, then, will be to turn off videos when conferencing. The downside to doing so is that it reduces access to nonverbal cues that can reinforce trust. That noted, if trust is already presumed to be high which can often be the case with a team reliably meeting on an ongoing basis, this will be less of a concern.

Conclusion
A remote workforce, then, is a defined outgroup, a group of employees differentiated from leaders who will benefit from more autonomous work, whether by defining the work more asynchronously, empowering the workforce by assisting them make their work remote-capable, or by selectively enacting team meetings.

Build Honest Intergroup Relationships

Identity is a two-way street, meaning that while leaders seek to understand their employees, their employees are also looking to understand their leaders. This is definitionally an intergroup context; these are two different groups of people. This is in part necessary to facilitate the different functions each group serves to the organization; but research also acknowledges that boundaries between groups often delimit trust to within group boundaries. This is arguably aggravated by the remote environment; with communication limited, questions of trust can arise over whether to trust their leaders’ actions.

The question of trust — of knowing who leaders are and whether employees can trust what leaders claim — has been a big topic in leadership theory, embodied in discussion of authentic leadership. This literature hangs on the question of whether leaders can create an honest relationship with their employees, one where they reflect employees’ interests by allowing a true expression of themselves as leaders. However, what is often unrecognized in this literature is that authentic leadership is necessarily intergroup leadership. It is not so much random expressions of themselves, such as what they ate for breakfast or how many push-ups they can do. It is about leaders’ true expressions of themselves as leaders, namely that it recognizes what the workforce might care about, such as a sense of the difficulties the company might confront with COVID-19, and second, what organizational leaders are doing about it. Building honest intergroup relationships — by communicating what leaders are doing about what employees care about - recognizes how buffing the leader’s image as an authentic leader, in the eyes of the workforce, can enhance the leader’s influence.

When leading a remote workforce, restricted communication resulting from remote work reduces spontaneous opportunities of building honest intergroup relationships. There are behaviors managers can implement to strategically strengthen their authentic leadership in the eyes of their remote workforce. Moreover, such efforts can be enhanced through the choice of remote technology. In particular, the more nonverbal channels that leaders can provide (audio, video, and in situ), the more powerful the effects of these behaviors are likely to be in creating an image of an authentic intergroup leader.

Address difficult events directly
Meetings can serve an important purpose when dealing with difficult events (crisis included), to communicate what leaders are doing to help the business through it. Acknowledging the difficult event and its consequences for business, and
what leaders are doing about it, can be quite reassuring to employees or other stakeholders in attendance. This was perhaps made more important during COVID-19, as people had to regularly resort to technology to communicate remotely. Silence can indeed be threatening, and with a remote workforce, isolating. However, even a remote acknowledgment of the difficult event, versus no communication on the topic, is an acknowledgment of reality and makes the communication more authentic. This, however, depends in large part on the significance of the crisis. In the experiences reported to me by interviewees, the COVID-19 crisis has necessitated a meeting. It not only allows for direct communication, which can communicate a sense of authenticity, it allows people to seek clarification.

This is exactly what executives at a popular fast-food chain had been doing in their weekly meetings with franchisees. Restaurants have been strongly affected by this crisis; they can be argued to be essential services while also requiring a radical shift away from in-store eating. With a great deal of uncertainty faced by franchisees over whether their businesses will remain open or closed, executive leaders have found it necessary to communicate with them regularly about changes in strategy and what head office can do to accommodate and support all stores as the business adjusts.

What was also striking is how they did so with remote technology. Executive leadership kept their video on while leaving franchisees to remain audio only. I suspect video under such circumstances serves not only as a spotlight and to control the narrative, but it can also serve another purpose. It can serve to add a layer of transparency, helping to authenticate the message, and ultimately strengthen trust in leadership. It also has the added benefit, as some research identifies, of encouraging a greater sense of security and commitment to the organization.

Create opportunities for professional growth

In 2012, a poll conducted with over 11000 employees in 24 countries indicated that people believed remote work to be professionally isolating, as 50% found it could harm their chances of promotion. This is perhaps partly explained by face time with the boss; some evidence supports the notion that remote work is associated with lower opportunities with promotion. These issues are perhaps enhanced by a growing presence of a millennial workforce (born in years between 1979 and 1994). Some evidence supports the idea that millennials expect close relationships and frequent feedback from their superiors. A remote millennial workforce is likely to be particularly concerned with professional growth.

Training opportunities are an opportunity for building honest intergroup relationships, perhaps especially so under remote work conditions, when people might least expect it. Remote training tools are widely available, and educational institutions that have historically focused on in-person learning experiences have made adaptations to accommodate remote learning. Educators widely have expanded their footprint with online learning opportunities for a remote workforce.

Organizations and HR executives have long realized the importance of training opportunities, and these organizations may already have remote training opportunities in place. What is often missing is how leaders can capitalize on this to increase an honest intergroup relationship with their workforces. To ensure that it contributes to building an honest relationship, leaders will benefit by doing three things. First, make the remote workforce aware of training opportunities if they are not already. Second, leaders benefit when they communicate their support for their employees to do training. Third, if remote training was not previously available, but the leader worked at making it so, communicate what he or she has done to make remote training available. Those who communicate remote training opportunities directly to employees are giving greater weight to its importance.

Allow leaders to express vulnerability

Remote communication removes a lot of the identity expression that naturally occurs in co-located communication. Leaders can help to personalize their communication by acknowledging personal disclosures of feelings about significant events, weaknesses that do not undermine their role as leader, or the acknowledgment of accidental events. For example, over the last year or so reports indicate that leaders in the United States are crying more these days. Democratic and Republican Governors have cried or acknowledged doing so in public, both in response to recent deaths of others. Although crying has historically been associated with weakness among U.S. leaders, it appears to create a different tone when it is crying on behalf of others than when crying about a personal outcome, such as losing an election.

Too, accidental appearances or sounds by pets can also humanize a leader. On at least four instances, weather forecasters reporting on air from home had their pets appear in their broadcasts, much to the audience’s delight. In two of them, the pets became regular fixtures. Also, it helps for leaders to allow themselves to make mistakes. It’s ok to leave the microphone muted when you first speak; it happens to so many people. At this point, it could be thought of as a moment of entertainment—”Count how many times the boss leaves their mic muted!”—a way your employees can connect with each other. Such personalization is more likely to happen when audiences have access to multiple nonverbal channels.

Personalization is important, as it likely humanizes leaders, although such personalization must not conflict with their group identity as leaders. Lacking expertise people might come to assume the leader might have (such as understanding finance as CEO of a financial institution) would be one such instance of undermining leadership effectiveness.

Conclusion

Overall, then, a leader’s influence can be enhanced, even through remote communication, by identifying behaviors and strategies that help to traverse the “us versus them” divide. For employees to increase their reliance on leaders, build an honest intergroup relationship, one that communicates an authentic image of leadership. With every recommendation, there is reason to believe, whether from theory or research, that the workforce’s greater access to nonverbal cues of the leader, can help to strengthen their inferences of intergroup trust, assuming those nonverbal conform to the message. For example, leaders who remain focused on ways that signal importance versus appear distracted will add to the authenticity of the leader’s image.
There is also a distinctive feature that many video conferencing tools provide that can add to the signaling of authenticity. People receive video feedback; they can see themselves as they converse with others, something that people typically cannot do when conversing in-person. Research has documented that—at least in Western cultures—when people see themselves, they begin to focus more on their internal standards and goals, and motivate efforts to live up to those standards. In the context leading remote workforces, then, the video feedback that leaders receive with video conferencing could be helpful in keeping leaders on message. It also helps to remind leaders of what their audience is observing, and allow them to curate their non-verbal channels to be more consistent with message.¹

**Become a Champion of “Us”**

The sense of connecting to others, of becoming an “us”, is in this case a commentary on culture. Shifting to remote work can be a pretty isolating experience while simultaneously weakening the primary method by which an organization’s culture is passed on, namely by learning from observing others at work. Not only that, but people are fundamentally social creatures, with a deep-rooted need to belong, feel accepted and connected to and affiliated with others. The sense of isolation that can result from remote work can undermine workforce morale. In 2012, a multi-national poll found that while 50% felt remote work to be professionally isolating, it was worse when it came to socially isolating: 62% of respondents indicated it was so. This is perhaps not surprising; it is commonly accepted in psychological science that people have a need to belong. People are social animals, and remote work creates a natural barrier to creating that connection among employees. This is perhaps especially so for newcomers, interns, foreign nationals, and others entering an unfamiliar landscape.

The remote environment is an impoverished one, and necessitates leaders to act as a cultural champion, not only by defining what culture means to the organization, but also by making it real to employees, to help them feel connected to it. In my own research, and those of others, we find that when people feel like they fit in, they begin to spontaneously adopt the group’s characteristics and norms, that is, they spontaneously socialize. Leaders should give some serious thought as to what characteristics and norms they wish their employees to adopt. What the below recommendations focus on, given the isolating nature of remote work, is what leaders can do to create a sense that employees belong, which facilitates the socialization process. These are summarized in Table 3. In essence, these recommendations help remote leaders to become that champion of “us.”

At first blush, this may seem to contradict the first two recommendations, which are built on this idea that it is necessary to differentiate leader from the remote workforce. However, what research has time and again documented—including some of my own—is that intergroup differences such as those between leaders and the workforce are better maintained and managed by also having a shared superordinate identity to which both belong. Such nested or “dual” identities help to provide a framework for building morale and socialization.

**Create opportunities for a shared identity**

The good news is that some of what creates a social connection entails employees’ collective impression of the organization, what they define as a group identity, that sense of “us”. Creating that sense of belongingness in part occurs by acknowledging the group to which employees belong and label it for what it is. Labeling a group of people, whether at the level of organization or at a unit within, creates a group boundary that defines the employees’ group membership (what the literature calls an “ingroup”), creating an opportunity to also define shared experiences the group has.

This is not simply a personal anecdote; psychological science has found that a shared label, even a nonsensical or laboratory-created one, can facilitate a connection with others. Often, however, people use meaningful labels as a basis for a common connection. It also helps to refer, on an occasional basis, to “we” or “us.” The more people focus on “us”, the more they think of similarities they share with others. It has even been argued that the experience of online work—as more anonymous and identity-impoverished—makes people more receptive to the group identities leaders put forth.

Such labelling can be complemented by social contact among remote employees, which is also important to building that collective bond, that sense of “us”. Creating that social contact, however, can be more challenging in an online environment. Some of this could occur from group get-togethers, and while on occasion, team meetings may serve as a means to social connection, but there is also benefit from shared experiences—those unrelated to work—can be an excellent way to create bonding even in these times of remote work. Remote office parties, cocktail hours and afternoon tea are just a few examples. Symbolic records of events can also serve as a way to create a connection. Take, for instance, the gallery view in Zoom. It can be a nice image to see the group together, engaged. See Fig. 2 for an example.

The sense of social connection that can result from these shared experiences may be more likely to occur when people connect using multiple channels of communication. Mothers and daughters who talk on the phone versus texting produce higher levels of a common bonding hormone. In-person support has been shown to be more re-assuring. The more support we can signal to each other, by using multiple channels of information, the more connected people can feel. Social connection has a powerful effect on morale and the combination of technology and a promotion of a group identity can facilitate those experiences with a remote workforce.

**Encourage an inclusive workforce**

Over the last decade, organizations have placed a large emphasis on creating diverse workplaces by increasingly

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¹ Please note, however, that video feedback is not always beneficial. Increased states of self-awareness can also remind people that they are not living up to their standards; if they feel they cannot do so, it can leave them feeling worse. One contact, a practicing psychologist, noted that clients will often turn off the video feedback during remote talk therapy, so they do not have to see themselves even though their therapist can still see them.
focusing on creating inclusion. People sometimes conflate shared membership and social experience with inclusion, but these are different. Whereas shared membership and experiences can create a sense of belonging and connection to the organization, inclusion refers to broadening that sense of belonging, so that it isn’t limited to certain segments of the population, usually those that have been historically advantaged. In this regard, inclusion allows the leader’s efforts as cultural champion to reach a wider audience. Inclusion is vital to motivating the workforce.

It is tempting to think that remote work is a great equalizer and itself can create some inclusion. To some degree, this is true, at least for some segments of the population. Remote work empowers employees with some disabilities to work free from physical constraints at the workplace. It has the potential to provide those living in remote communities to join organizations they otherwise might not have been able to access, or for those in urban settings to work for companies in more suburban or rural locations while staying close to their more local communities.

However, it is also helpful that the leader attend to differences that might reduce feelings of inclusion. In meetings, men speak more than women and interrupt women more than they do men. Although this research has focused on in-person groups, recent reports suggest that it is also likely to manifest in remote teamwork. Setting expectations of equal talk time, or calling out interruptions when they occur, can help to create a sense of workplace inclusion and as evidence indicates, make for better team performance.

Remote work can also be more familiar to some than to others, creating differences in performance. Generational differences and differences in the organizational hierarchy are related to people’s familiarity with remote technology and experience with remote work; millennials and higher-level managers and executives are typically more familiar with both than older generations or those lower in the hierarchy. Access to the tools of remote work — mobile devices, tablets, laptops, Internet access, video cameras, etc. — are also likely to differ by class. Creating access, training in remote technology, and creating access to advice can help to create more inclusive atmospheres. Too, it is worth recognizing that these can be over-generalizations; rather, the evidence indicates trends that can inform where training can be helpful, rather than criteria for who should receive training.

Allow for employee self-expression
For the deepest sense of shared identity, a sense of “us”, it helps to establish not only opportunities for a shared identity, to do in an inclusive atmosphere, but to also do so in a context where employees also have a chance to personally express themselves.

| Table 3 | Some Strategies for Becoming a Remote Cultural Champion |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Create Opportunities for Shared Identity** | **Encourage an Inclusive Workforce** | **Allow for Employee Self-Expression** |
| • Label the team | • Set expectations for equal talk time | • Encourage disclosure and listen to what is shared |
| • Reinforce the label with a focus on “we” | • Call out interruptions as they occur | Be open to and reinforce the use of emojis or other stylistic expressions |
| • Create shared experiences | • Create access to the tools of remote work | Share some of your own personal disclosures and stylistic expressions to signal it is ok to do so |
| • Create memories of shared experiences | • Create opportunities for training in and accessing advice about remote work | |

*Note. Many of these recommendations are most helpful in team meetings to build a shared understanding of the team’s or workforce’s culture.*
This is also perhaps especially important given the impoverished online environment, which anonymizes and reduces expressiveness. As a result, it helps the leader actively encourage expressiveness. For example, when meeting with employees, it may help to encourage disclosure, to ask them about their lives and listen to what they have to say. Consider the earlier case I raised about a lawyer, who after repeatedly receiving no response from a co-worker, found out that the coworker, who had been hired 3 months before the start of the crisis, not only had to contend with a new workplace, but now a newly remote one, as well as challenges at home. In my contact’s recounting, at this moment, you could hear the frustration vanish. Such check-ins can help leaders better understand their employees, and give that employee voice.

If employees appear reticent to open up, it can help to share a little about how the leader’s own adjustment is going in order to get them to share in return. Such personal disclosures can license people to share their personal thoughts, feelings, and concerns.

Finally, there are ways people have identified to be expressive in remote work. Emojis, or other kinds of built-in expressions in the conferencing technology, tell a visual story and can be used to create a more impactful expression of emotion rather than one that would otherwise resort to text-based expressions of “I’m happy”. Personalized emojis, such as Apple’s Animoji or Bitmoji, take it one step further, embedding self-defined likenesses of the sender into those images. It may be odd to engage in such communication with strangers, but within a team, and among teammates, it can create a sense of shared connection.

CONCLUSION: A TIME FOR STRATEGY

Although this pandemic was unplanned, remote work environments have given leaders the opportunity to think about more effective ways to lead their workforces. That noted, the power of group identity — a concept that can be inferred and communicated, and be used easily with a remote workforce — provides a means by which voluntary compliance can be enhanced. Recognizing the importance of engaging different group identities — a “them”, an intergroup (us v. them) dynamic, and an “us” — all with the same workforce, points the flexibility managers gain by attending to employees’ perceptions.

Although engaging the three identities can be done independently of each other, it can be beneficial to ensure managers have met employees meet their immediate personal needs, such as those gained from autonomy and inter-group honesty. In an internal analysis of its 150000+ workforce, Microsoft found that helping employees working remotely with work-life balance and the prioritization of work-related needs gained greater employee engagement. Such employee receptiveness could then be used to capitalize on shared experiences.

Beyond that, it is now time to strategize. There is also reason to believe, at least in some industries and organizations, there may be a more permanent shift to a remote workforce. The Gallup organization conducted an online survey in late March to early April 2020 of randomly selected American adults. Of those working from home, almost 60% preferred to continue working remotely “as much as possible” after restrictions are lifted, with about 40% indicating that they preferred a return to work. A year later, in April 2021, it is clear organizations are responding to this encouragement with companies such as Microsoft, Twitter and Square encouraging greater remote work or a hybrid-type approach, mixing remote and co-located work.

While these companies serve as examples, a thoughtful analysis concludes that some industries are more likely to turn to remote work, such as professional, scientific, and management-related sectors, and industries that focus on information, finance, insurance, and services. Too, in our age of ubiquitous computing, some companies have become purely remote (take Qualio for instance; the company has been described as one that operates remotely, with employees across the world). Some work may not be nearly as accommodating to remote work, but contingencies can be put into place, were a need to go remote be required in the future. Given this massive social experiment, it behooves leaders to look at the data and consider what might work best going forward. All of these directions point to the importance of leading remotely, to group identity as a means to doing so, and technology an aid to facilitating it.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no known conflict of interest to disclose.
Much of the work reported here was heavily influenced by the below sources:

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