Communication in a Remote Work Environment

Description

The vast majority of my leadership experience has actually been remote. This comes with some unique challenges that in-office work doesn't.

- Text-based interaction
- Asynchronous communication
- Less face time
- Time differences

Each of these have their challenges, however a few simple adjustments can have things working just as smoothly as in-office work, if not more.

Text-based Interaction

Text has huge benefits that an in-person conversation, or phone/video call simply can't reproduce.

- It's asynchronous.
  - You don't need to wait to meet with someone to ask them a question.
- It's recorded.
  - The nature of text messages ensures communications are preserved. Forgetting a specific detail doesn't require another conversation because you have material you can reference.
- It's searchable.
  - The majority of chat and email clients allow you to search through your conversations for specific keywords, giving you a fast way to find previously discussed topics.

There are naturally drawbacks to text as well.

- Tone is inferred.
  - In human communication, the words we use are only one part of the equation. Tone will indicate whether we're happy, offended, excited, discouraged, eager, or hesitant, for

example. Text generally misses out on those aspects.

- Complex subjects = lengthy chats.
  - When trying to figure out a complex problem, text can leave a lot to be desired. Fast back and forth brainstorming can be impeded by text. It takes longer to write out a concept than to say it, and that can result in unintentional brevity that often leaves people misunderstanding each other.

To address the tone concern, don't shy away from using emojis. Just like any form of communication, our language has evolved. Like pictograms of ancient text, ours has started using images as forms of communication, and that should be embraced. Consider these two identical pieces of text:

I can't believe you did this! Just unbelievable…

The tone is open to interpretation. Is the author mad? Impressed? Sarcastic?

I can't believe you did this!ð??²ð??• Just unbelievable… ð???

The emojis tell the reader that the author is thrilled about the achievement.

I can't believe you did this!ð?¤¦ Just unbelievable… ð??¡

The author here has shown they are very upset about whatever was done.

I can't believe you did this!ð?¤£ Just unbelievable…

This person thinks that whatever was done was surprising and hilarious.

Where emojis were once considered immature, they are now far more acceptable in the business world as the generations that grew up with them make up a greater percentage of the workforce, and their communicative value has been recognized.

Emojis have the side benefit of making you more approachable to those you work with. It's disarming and casual, and people respond well to that.

Take opportunities to ensure clarity in message and tone in your text, and you'll do fine.

When it comes to complex subjects, there's nothing as effective as an actual call to discuss it. Depending on the scenario, you can jump on a quick call immediately, or schedule a meeting with a group. Be considerate of everyone's time while making sure you have all the information necessary to do your job well.

Asynchronous communication

In a typical office environment, you can often walk over to the person you need to speak to and start a conversation. You ask a question, you get an immediate response. When working online, this

expectation must be managed. Sending a question to a colleague in a chat application might mean waiting for a while for a response.

Depending on the urgency of the question, this may be perfectly acceptable. With an abundance of work to do, it's rare that anyone will be blocked from being productive due to a single question.

A great habit to get in to is clearly specifying the urgency behind a request.

> Can you get me the numbers from last quarter? I need them for a presentation on Friday.

> Do you have some time soon to show me how to set up my development environment? They want me to start my first task tomorrow morning.

> The production server is down, and I need your help fixing it. Can you join this call immediately?

Face Time

In an office, it would be understandable to take for granted the value of face-to-face interactions. It has the benefit of tone and body language. Even just giving a face to a voice makes people more comfortable with the interaction. In an era of Zoom and Slack calls, where video-on is often voluntary, it can be easy for us to choose not to turn on the video.

For me, the justification was often something like "I don't look great today", "nobody needs to see me", "it's arrogant to think I should be on camera", or "there's no *value* in turning on my camera".

There is a single counterargument to all of that that sold me. Turning on the camera means people see you. It's stupidly obvious, but it has powerful implications. Letting your team see you puts you within reach. They can learn your expressions and mannerisms. They see when you smile or laugh. They notice when you're in a meeting, and when you're not.

If a presentation is being done by someone else on my team, I will occasionally turn off my camera, to eliminate at least one distraction. If there is some open discussion afterwards, I'll turn my camera back on.

The main takeaway here should be that, by showing your face, you're now humanized and approachable, and that is ***critical*** if you ever want someone to come to you for help with problems they are facing. Otherwise, your just some disembodied voice.

This will not only help your direct reports feel more comfortable, but it's a very easy way to raise your profile amongst your peers.

Thorough Communication Knows No Time Zone

A globally distributed workforce is where asynchronous communication really shines. It's easy to fall

into the trap of everyone doing their own work without a proper awareness of the work of others on the team, but proper progress documentation in project management software (Jira, Asana, Basecamp, Trello, etc) will help keep people up to date on progress. Announcements shared in team chats or over email are also very helpful.

When it is necessary to schedule a team meeting, like a daily standup for instance, try to find a reasonable time where everyone can attend. Depending on where your team operates, that may mean standup is at the beginning of the day for one person, while at the end of the day for another. For example, as of the time of writing this, one of my teams has their standup at 11AM to account for a teammate on the other side of the country. Some of the team will have already been working for 3 hours by then. It's a simple compromise to ensure everyone has a voice.

As a general practice, whether remote or not, focus on clarity in both content and sentiment, be considerate of others, and err on the side of overcommunication.

Category

1. Leadership Principles

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