

Beyond Leadership: Accountability, Trust and Insecurity

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Introduction

In the last several articles we have been addressing what we call Beyond Leadership and trying to focus on how the workforce and the work environment have been changing and how traditional leadership is struggling with this tectonic shift. As we have discussed in the prior articles, leaders must change to meet this new challenge. We now want to focus on the issues we see with leaders struggling with: accountability, trust, and insecurities. Let's start looking at remote work forces and how so many leaders now forcing employees back into the office.

COVID forced businesses to move to a remote workforce in order to function as the pandemic raged. After COVID was somewhat under control the remote work continued for many companies. Most will say that companies continued to function acceptably with a primarily remote workforce. Many jobs were just about as effective remotely as they were in an office setting. For so many companies remote work established a new normal. If I'm working from home and getting my job done – as proven by organizational metrics – why are you forcing me back into the office? Do you suddenly not trust me? What are you worried about? What more will be achieved by my sitting at a desk where you can physically see me?

Some employees thrived in a remote environment. Some thrive in an office setting with more social interactions with fellow employees. We suggest that it is the rare employee who can thrive in both environments. We are seeing a trend now of companies telling employees that they can continue to work remotely but must be back in the office two or three days a week. What is motivating that trend? Is the back to the office mandate reasonable or misguided? What about the large number of workers who are rejecting the back to the office mandates and leaving for

other companies where they can work remotely? Of course, our discussion is done with the understanding that each company is unique to a degree. For example, it is difficult to operate a power plant or build a submarine with remote workers, but can the engineering, design or the cost accounting be done remotely? This series of articles will discuss legitimate issues of costly vacant office space and the value of social interactions when people are together in the office. However, we think this is just a symptom of the larger issue of leadership worrying – right or wrong – about accountability and having signs of lack of trust of employees, particularly those they cannot see.

Once again, the leaders face significant challenges and the “old school” leadership methods and techniques may no longer be adequate for this changing world. No industry can afford to have large numbers of employees leave because they want to work remotely. There is too much knowledge, skill and company history walking out the door.

Perspective

We can consider remote work from a few different perspectives – that of the worker, that of managers and that of business or corporate leaders. Then we also want to examine the type of work, corporate structure and diverse locations, potentially different organizational issues, cultural issues and implementation of coordinated initiatives. To further complicate the issue, there is not a consistent definition of what remote work really means. These are essentially structural and process issues, but what about interpersonal relationships and synergistic outcomes of social engagement and interaction? When people are thrust into an environment, there is social interaction. Much of leadership involves leveraging these interactions into positive and constructive outcomes that focus on company goals and objectives.

Not to sound trite, traditional norms of social interaction are non-existent when people are apart; and/or, these norms tend to be non-existent, in today's 'interconnected' world.

The variables associated with the pros, cons and consequences of remote work are many. We will attempt to touch on them in the context of the changing role of leadership and the context of Beyond Leadership.

Scenarios

“Work” was a place to go – the company gave one a place to work, and depending on the type of work one would sit and do their work, or if it was some sort of process related work like an assembly line a person was hired to perform a task at a specific location of a specified amount of time, and repeat that day in and day out. When we talk about context, perhaps the best way to characterize context is to look at different scenarios, or a bit of an historic perspective. One of the first examples might be the 3M (Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company).

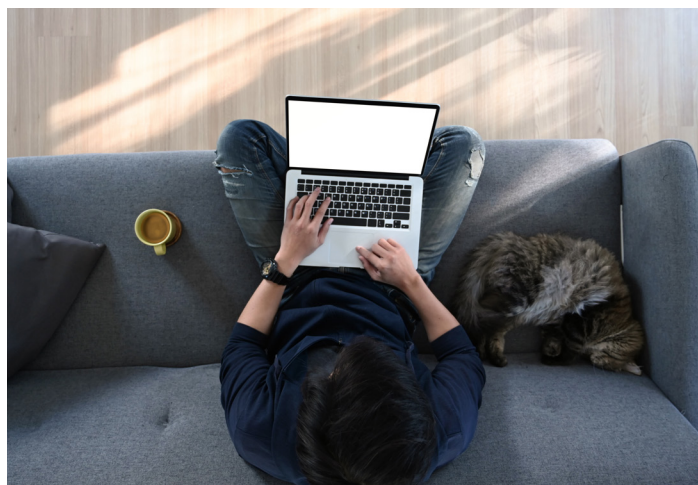
From my earliest days of engineering education, 3M was always a respected and innovative company. The one thing I recall from my early exposure to 3M was that if someone walked by an office and saw someone reclined back in their desk chair, feet on their desk and eyes closed, this was not unusual or considered negative. In reality it was encouraged because 3M wanted their people to be creative and innovative. 3M advertises that: “For more than 70 years, 3M’s unique 15% Culture has encouraged employees to set aside a portion of their work time to proactively cultivate and pursue innovative ideas that excite them.” Our consulting experience reveals this may not be the case in many companies. When we speak of accountability and trust, 3M is a distinct leader.

My first employer after my active duty Navy commitment was at a small consulting company. The owner was a very forward thinking individual in that he made it very clear upon hiring me that he expected 40 hours of direct time every week, and I was responsible for providing that. After that I was on my own. I could make my own hours, and I could manage my work with co-workers and was responsible for my assignments. Much of our work involved traveling to client locations, both near and far. If extensive travel was required, he compensated that with compensatory time off. In reality he set the bar and his employees knew he trusted them so they felt committed to fulfill their obligation. Now there was an ultimate accountability too. Much our work was ‘project’ related. It worked this way. When hired, one worked on a project. That project had a budget that the ‘company-president/owner’ and the project manager agreed upon. Within that budget there were direct labor, overhead, operational line items and finally profit. The project manager was responsible for all. The profit part was interesting. If the profit was a particular dollar number, the ‘company’ received 50% and the project team 50%. If all went according to plan – labor, overhead and operational costs hit their mark, then the split was 50-50. But if the project costs exceeded the budget, the ‘company’ still got the original 50% and the project team the remainder. Interesting concept and motivator since the project’s 50% could be administered (via a methodology) to individual project team members. This scheme did several things:

it became a driver for good performance both project work, and management as well as client relationship. It also became a motivator for a project manager to explore additional projects he might control, and it also motivated new employees to market and look for new clients and new projects. In the big picture in the late 1970s this was a unique and innovative business model, and it actually worked quite well. But, the overall scheme cultivated a unique work, management, leadership and accountability model, ultimately based on trust with associated accountability.

Why is this example important? Is it because it shifted leadership down in the organization and fostered behaviors that benefited everyone? And while remote work was in the form of onsite time with clients at their locations, we managed to communicate and work together effectively; perhaps because of the overlaying structure. How many of our readers have ever experienced such a work environment? Why was this approach an anomaly rather than a “best practice”?

A more conventional mechanism is Command and Control. Before going further here, we want to make it clear that we recognize the business differences such that there is no one best approach. To describe the C&C mechanism I use the phrase – everything must be ‘run up the flagpole’ in order to get anything approved. Height of the flagpole varies, but in a C&C company, managers/leaders jeopardize trust and usually shifting or avoiding accountability is a survival technique. To not make this sound all that bad, there are situations where C&C is necessary. Command and Control is a predominate business structure. It has its value but appears to be way out of step with today’s workforce expectations and demands.



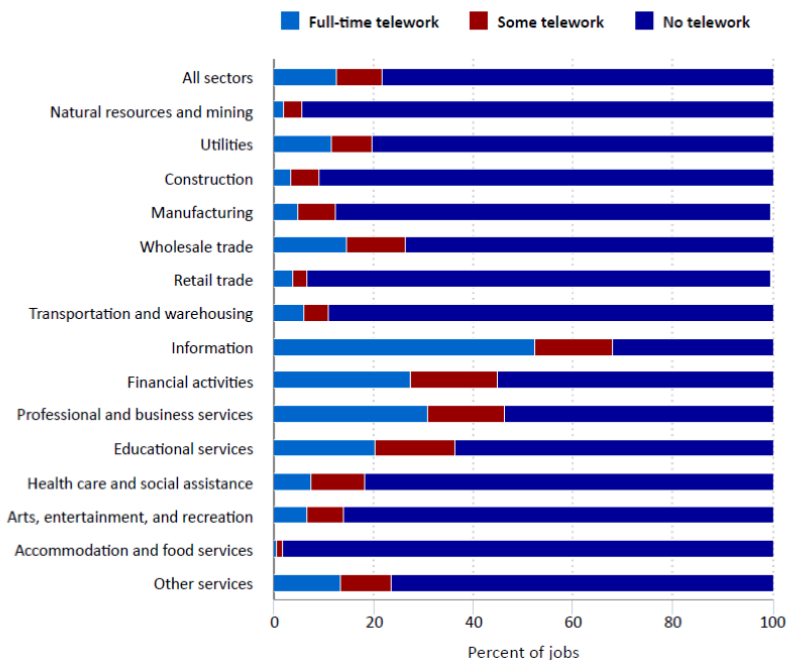
Back to Remote Work

Remote work is a unique animal in and of itself. Technology is the primary enabler of this working concept. Again, please note we realize that businesses/industries that are able to function with a remote working staff are somewhat unique. COVID demonstrated that the population of potential remote workers is actually quite significant.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics found that around 27% of the U.S. workforce was working remotely at least part time as of August and September 2022, while a handful of academic

surveys have suggested that the number is closer to 50%.”
 (mitsloan.mit.edu; How many Americans are really working remotely?) See
 Chart 1.

Chart 1. Telework patterns by industry



Questions Regarding Remote Work for Leaders to Consider

- How can I determine if my business entity (whatever industry or size) can adapt to remote working arrangements?
- How do I cultivate a culture of working together while not in the same location?
- How do I foster a level of commitment to their job while working in a non-office environment?
- What structural changes should I be thinking about?
- What training is necessary for transitioning employees from an office environment to remote working?
- How do I structure virtual interactions such that they are productive?
- Is it possible to empower employees to determine when and where to organize a group session to foster interactivity?
- What do I do with the expensive real estate that would house a full-time back to work staff?
- Can I afford to lose a number of productive employees if they reject coming back to the office?

There are probably a multitude of similar questions that must be addressed. This is not an easy problem to answer. As we have noted in the previous articles in this series, today’s workforce is different – good or bad – that is a given. They communicate through their fingertips on their smartphones. Face to face communication is not as important to this generation. It is not unimportant but it is not nearly as vital as with past generations of workers. We have probably all observed two or three people sitting in near proximity but communication through their phones. For us dinosaurs this is mind boggling but it is reality.

Experiences and Observations

From educational to actual business situations, we have experience and will be noting some observations, in future articles. To set the stage, the below list, albeit it, the sample size is not as large as we might hope, we intend to highlight our observations regarding the good, the bad and the challenging issues with each. Our experience and observations began in the relatively early days of COVID when cities like New York were emptying out in March of 2020 until just recently. They include:

- #1 – a specialty jewelry company
- #2 – a grade school virtual classroom
- #3 – a military graduate level class
- #4 – a high technology company (startup)
- #5 – a large international construction company

We welcome your experience(s) in the same context of good, bad and challenging outcomes; and we will address them plus experiences you send us, in a future article.

Summary

There is no easy answer to the complex question of remote work. It is contextual in that it depends on the function, the industry, the willingness of senior management to adapt, etc. COVID brought this to a peak when remote work was the only way for some companies to continue to function. For many it was a relatively minor adaptation and for others it was earth shattering. But it had to be done to survive. And most survived. Probably the biggest struggle was with companies that rely on Command-and-Control leadership models. If I can’t see them, they are not working! Is this misguided in most cases – yes? We absolutely recognize there are industries and functions where remote work is not possible and we certainly will acknowledge those situations appropriately. To wit; it’s tough to have your car serviced by remote workers (albeit ‘house calls’ by service techs might be considered), or your HVAC system repaired, or to eat at a restaurant with a remote staff (fast food companies seem to be leading with kiosks for ordering). In the context of working remotely, there is so much work that does not require face to face relationships – to be discussed in future articles.

We urge those in leadership positions to look at the questions we posed above and honestly evaluate what work can be done remotely and the value of requiring remote workers to return to the office with regularity. What is going to be gained and what can be lost by requiring remote workers to return to the office more than just occasionally? Like it or not, we are in a new world with a new workforce. The old rules and methodologies need reassessing, challenging conventional notions of accountability and trust throughout, and requiring skills beyond conventional leadership.



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