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Five rules for leading remote teams

#RemoteAgainstCoronavirus

Introduction

Remote working, enabled by collaboration tools such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts and Zoom, which has been promised for decades, is now becoming a necessity for organisations.

The spread of Coronavirus has seen companies cancelling all travel and asking their employees to work from home. At Hoxby, our organisation of over 1,000 associates has been operating entirely virtually for the past five years and we've put together the following five rules for businesses to better understand leading remote teams.

The importance of cultural and technology change together

Any major technological change inevitably brings with it a cultural revolution. The industrial revolution for instance brought working class people together in great enough numbers to make the distribution of newspapers more affordable. This spread of information led to the start of the trade union movement, political reform and a huge shift in the way society operated. Now, as communication technologies are maturing, we are moving into a new digital epoch at work, and yet culturally our workplaces are still full of industrial era practices.

Whether driven by a pandemic or proactive changes in an organisation, just giving everyone access to tools like Slack and Teams and expecting them to get on with it isn't enough. Rolling out technology like this without thinking about working practices and culture alongside it is akin to giving everyone a car without giving them a map for where you want them to go, a highway code for the rules of the road, or checking their driving test certificates, nor offering driving lessons for anyone who has never used the technology before.

It is organisational leaders' jobs to ensure their organisations have these four things when it comes to remote working.

1. The map – where are you trying to get to/what are you trying to achieve as an organisation, which remote working technology enables?

2. The highway code - what rules do you need to establish to get people behaving in ways that achieve this goal?

3. Driving lessons - how will you communicate this to everyone in the organisation to ensure they all have the skills and knowledge necessary to do so?

4. Driving Test - how do you ensure your people use the technology as you intend?

Because if you don't, plenty can go wrong. Trust us, in the last five years, we think we've seen it all… but we've boiled it down to five key rules.

Learn from these, and you'll be all set to thrive as you set-up your remote working teams.

Five key rules for leading remote teams

RULE ONE: Don't be paranoid

You're not paranoid. It's just no one is online, replying to your messages or doing any work…

Remote working breeds paranoia. Now no one is in the office, how do you know what is being said or done? You might see a colleague's status has been set to inactive all day - that must mean they aren't working? They haven't responded to my message – they must be skiving! I'm not part of that channel – are they making important decisions without me in there?

How as a leader should you handle paranoia?

Set a few mandatory rules around communication. You need everyone on one platform. That's a macro rule. We had to ban emails to get all conversations to happen on Slack. Everyone needs to not just be on it, but active within the confines of their workstyle (more on this later), so having their profile picture loaded for example, and ensuring that their status is up to date. At Hoxby, if you've not completed your 'passport', or have been inactive for a period of time, you will get rolled off our platform.

There are lots of other practical 'micro-rules' which can depend on what works for you and your team, like conventions around keeping conversations threaded, and when it's appropriate to use hashtags, emojis and pins. We are putting together a complete list of our own practical tips and tricks for using Slack which we will share as soon as it's ready.

Use video communication wherever possible and keep it human. One of the key skills required to inspire and lead remote teams is the ability to record and share compelling, inspiring video messages quickly. Alex and Lizzie, the Hoxby co-founders, share videos and updates regularly, and have many pre-recorded video messages for new members which are usually unpolished and authentic rather than produced and edited, providing a more 'human' feel to leading a technology enabled team.

Be explicit about everything you say. In a written environment, your tone of voice and body language are no longer available to you to communicate key messages, so you need to choose your words and punctuation carefully. Every adjective, full stop and exclamation mark matters. There might not be a 'right' style, but getting comfortable using images, emojis and gifs can help give you a broader range of communication tools and being extremely deliberate and explicit with words is critical. At Hoxby for example, all the company values are phrases, such as #lovewhatyoudo and #playyourpart rather than individual words, in order to reduce the likelihood that these can be misinterpreted or taken out of context.

Avoid unnecessary hierarchy in the use of private channels. There are public and private channel settings on most collaboration platforms and being fair and transparent in using these is critical to mitigate any feelings of 'in' and 'out' group tensions. Of course a channel where confidential financial information is being discussed will be restricted to certain individuals, but avoiding any unnecessary hierarchical restrictions will reduce the sense of 'us' and 'them' festering online, just as it did when you had the leadership team sat on one side of the office and everyone else on the other.

Grow sub communities as the size of your team or organisation grows. One of the challenges the success of the Hoxby model has brought is that as the community has grown, so too the volume of messages and activity within our Slack environment. As this happens, it becomes important to create subcommunities where individuals are more active and connected and to reduce the noise of the general, all-community channels. Having accountable leads for sub communities helps provide a point of contact for new members, and proactive community hosting and constant updating and rationalising of channels helps keep everyone involved and ensures that content and key messages reach the right people in a timely fashion.

RULE TWO: Don't expect the workforce to be 'always on'

Ever since companies started handing out mobile phones, and even more so when emails started being downloaded onto smart phones, work has been eating away at leisure time. As Ricardo Semler, CEO of Semco observed, we've learnt very well to reply to our emails on a Sunday night, but we're terrible at going to the movies on a Tuesday afternoon. Now that you are never in the office, and all work can be done remotely, this becomes an even more serious issue that needs addressing.

So how as a leader do you ensure that your team don't adopt this behavioural expectation?

Make #workstyle a core part of your work values. This is another macro rule which has to be set at the top. At Hoxby, every member of the organisation sets their own personal #workstyle, where at the beginning of the week they state the hours they are likely to be available that week and the location they are working from. This then filters down into every aspect of work, from the clients and projects which are selected based on their respect for our values, to new joiners who are selected based on cultural fit, by answering a single question – What does #workstyle mean to you?

Lead by example. Good leadership principles still apply in the digital world. As well as talking the talk you need to walk the walk. At Hoxby, leaders not only share the #respecttheworkstyle hashtag regularly as a constant reminder that this is the normal / expected behaviour, but also lead by example in setting their available time and actively demonstrating this on a day to day basis. This is the responsibility of every member of the community to uphold their own workstyle and respect others.

RULE THREE: Recognise that productivity is an individual thing

There has been lots of commentary on how social media can be addictive because of the dopamine hit we get when we receive a notification or reply to a message, and there is some evidence that when we jump around on different tasks we lose focus and potentially take up to 23 minutes to get that back again. The risk is that when we spend all of our time working on Slack we end up checking messages about work rather than actually doing any and our team's productivity decreases as a result.

As a leader how do you ensure your team remains productive despite the distractions?

Use your community to help individuals explore their most productive workstyle.
Going from an office environment to the potential isolation of a home office can be a daunting task. One of the benefits of doing this as part of a team or community is learning from others and learning about yourself in the process. Perhaps you struggle to focus until you've read all your emails or notifications. Perhaps your best writing time is in the morning, or after the kids have gone to bed in the evening. From the Pomodoro technique to calendars that automatically organise your diary to maximise focus time, there are hundreds of productivity hacks and tools out there – and just as it is in the office, it is up to individuals to find ones that work for them. At Hoxby, this conversation is encouraged amongst all associates, and the community help ensure everyone is up to date with the latest approaches so each can optimise their productivity in the way that best suits them.

Cultivate habit and routine. Routines are built in for you in the office environment. Often you arrive with your colleagues around 9am and leave sometime after 5pm. You start the day with a coffee and start up your computer. Everyone sits (or perhaps you're one of the lucky ones with a standing desk) and works most of the day. Just observing this collective group behaviour acts as a powerful influence and encourages us to do the same thing. When we are at home alone, we don't have that social influence on our behaviour, so something as simple as checking in with a couple of messages of your co-workers or posting a photo to your team members of your workspace, can act as a nudge to get yourself into work mode. Equally, finding a favourite coffee spot, or using a co-working space for certain times or days of the week can be helpful. At Hoxby, regular local community meet ups and 'work togethers' are arranged to help with this too.

Accept that lines between traditional work and leisure are blurring. In the industrial era, time spent at the office was 'work' and there was a clear designation with anytime spent outside being personal. This boundary has now irrefutably blurred. Time spent on the company's 'watercooler' Slack channel sharing pictures of your dog, or commenting in a channel about parenting tips isn't doing work, in the same way that having a cup of coffee with a colleague and discussing your weekend wasn't productive time in the office either. The key is to ensure that this balances out with other time spent actually working – and accepting that when you were in the office, on average you almost certainly had fewer productive hours than the total time you spent there. At Hoxby, this always comes back to #workstyle, and empowering people to make their own decisions about where they draw the line between work and leisure.

Have a robust and clear channel strategy. This allows different types of conversation to take place in different channels, so you can separate work related conversations and limit the need to check in on and comment on anything that is not urgent. Being unafraid to have lots of channels, because this doesn't mean more work, it means greater segmentation of what is noise and what is actually important.

Work isn't always done at a desk. Plenty of research suggests that our best ideas come when we aren't sitting at a desk, or in the office, but instead when we are out for a run or perhaps in the shower. Aaron Sorkin, the Oscar winning screenwriter, allegedly took eight showers a day to help him overcome writer's block. At Hoxby, we give everyone the autonomy and the empowerment to find their own inspiration, to work at the time and place that suits them, and this makes everyone more creative and productive. We also launched a World365 programme to encourage everyone to take personal fitness seriously and contribute to the community goal of running, walking, hiking, swimming, cycling, or dancing the 24, 901 miles, the distance around the world, in 365 days in 2019.

Measure by output, not time spent online. Rather than worrying about how much time your team is spending working, worry about what they are producing. At Hoxby, performance is measured on output rather than presenteeism. No matter when you get your work done, how you deliver it, or how quickly you to do it, all that matters is the quality of the end result. Sometimes this might mean collaborating and communicating with team members on a Slack channel, other times it means periods of focus on producing a client deliverable.

RULE FOUR: Help your team kick old habits

Someone posts a question on a Slack or Teams channel, you've had experience of the issue and you think you can help. What do you do? You might be using a new communication platform, but if you're like most people, you often default to the ways things were always done before in this situation and you suggest a call to discuss. These behaviours aren't easy to change, like at the Bauhaus school, our instincts have to be 'unlearnt' and everyone needs to become comfortable working in an asynchronous way.

How can you help your team unlearn their old habits?

DON'T just jump on a call. Create a shared document or a Slack message with your knowledge where others can build on it. This happened here at Hoxby for a while when we started. The problem is that resorting to a call between team members both reduces the ability for the team to work asynchronously (and hence impacts productivity), and also means that knowledge isn't shared and used by the rest of the organisation. Conversations are repeated ad infinitum and in the long term, knowledge in your team stagnates, rather than developing at the pace of the digital age. Shared documents on the other hand can be constantly kept updated and worked on by multiple people at the same time. It also helps create a single source of knowledge around a topic, and everyone can use the Slack channels to get up to speed quickly on this because they have a visible conversation history.

Make a bridge to the new world by using terminology people recognise. Whilst you ultimately want to create a new culture and working environment, using some familiar words can help orientate your remote team initially. For instance, at Hoxby, we have channels which include #theboardroom #thewatercooler and #themeetingroom on Slack. Their names might represent the old world of work, but it gives new joiners and those not used to a different way an easy way to navigate the new space, as well as places to ask questions and get to know others' remote working habits.

No more long email-style messages, keep everything short and punchy. Another old behaviour is the tendency to write long, email style messages. If you've got more than a paragraph to write, rethink exactly what the message is you need to get across. Our attention spans have reduced, and in the fast-paced world of social media platforms, longer messages get lost. If you really need to share something longer, it's better to put it in a shared document, pin it to a channel and let people refer back to it when they choose.

RULE FIVE: Build personal connections

Another criticism of remote working is that the lack of face to face contact with our team could lead to a lack of personal connection and loss of the community feel that the office brings. Our experience at Hoxby has actually been the polar opposite.

How can you enhance your personal connection with your team?

Foster personal communication. Because of the nature of written communication, you can spend more time crafting a message and there is less immediate pressure to reply than verbal conversation. We've found that this actually encourages and enables more open conversations about a range of topics, and makes having conversations about deeply personal, challenging topics easier. It also has the potential for those who were perhaps more introverted in the face to face office environment to contribute more, and we've found that at times the traditional personality styles of individuals have flipped – perhaps Myers and Briggs need to update their personality tests for the digital era.

Join in diverse conversations. Another major advantage of remote working is the ability to connect with many different people, with a range of backgrounds and experiences on a broad spectrum of topics at the same time. By staying open, and encouraging more people to join in the conversation, you give yourself the potential to learn more than you could ever imagined was possible before, when you had to arrange a physical meeting with whoever was around the office and could fit into the only available meeting room.

Be personable, warm and empathetic in online communications. We've found that when we create an online environment where individuals can share openly everything from their mental health to family issues, it gives you a chance as a leader to get to know your team on a more personal level than you might have done so before. Where the traditional workplace gives most of us a natural inclination to put on a mask and appear 'professional' at all times, remote working can, if participants are open to it, create a much deeper, personal connection between people. This creates better understanding, more empathy, more trust and the empowerment which is needed to work efficiently this way.

So what does the future of work look like?

When leaders are willing to address the cultural issues above, suddenly the potential for an entirely new way of working is revealed. At Hoxby we believe the future of work, which we are living and helping our clients adopt, is radically more productive and fulfilling and this is based around the following core principles.

Flexible, asynchronous working. Where we are all empowered to work flexibly in the location and at the time that suits us best has been proven to increase productivity and employee happiness. Our teams around the world collaborate at times that suit them to produce outcomes faster than any traditional way of working, where everyone sleeps through the night and waits for emails and documents to be read and signed off by their boss.

Inclusive teams without bias. When we no longer have to be present in an office, biases around presenteeism and appearance are removed. No longer does the polished look or the behaviour which focuses on perception rather than impact get rewarded. The result is an organisation that is both more inclusive and meritocratic.

Empowered and trusted teams, measured by outcomes. When performance is measured by outcomes and people are empowered to choose the way they work, new possibilities emerge for how work is led and managed, including holacratic structures and self-managing teams.

Diverse and creative teams. Being able to connect globally with talent enables a huge range of diversity in our working teams. This has been shown to lead to more creative and innovative outcomes as well as creating global reach, even on smaller projects or with in-market pilots.

Personal and human behaviour at work. A remote team using a written environment like Slack and Teams enable you to take your time composing messages and communicating with people. It enables introverts and extroverts alike to thrive, and opens up opportunities for our associates to connect on deeper, more personal levels with all of their fellow workers.

Transparent leadership. Remote working necessitates a new level of transparency and trust in teams. Our virtual leadership revolves around leaders developing their comfort and ability to trust their teams and share information openly with them.

Conclusion - so what do you need to do as a leader?

None of this cultural change can happen without commitment. You're asking now for your team to opt in to communication, rather than it being something that happens around you in the office whether you like it or not. Therefore, adopting remote working practices and collaboration tools like Slack and Teams are something that needs to be actively engaged in – by everyone. This may be for a fixed period of time, with a catalyst such as Coronavirus, or it may be for the long-term.

Like anything, there are challenges with this way of working, but they are vastly outweighed by the benefits. We believe this is what the future of work looks like, that it's here to stay and that the companies that adopt this now will be significantly more productive and more attractive to work for.

If you don't get on board now, and show you are willing to address the cultural changes that new technology demands, then your organisation will get left behind.

The Coronavirus might just be the push you need to start experiencing this for yourself, and your organisation.

If there is any further information that you would find useful in moving to a remote team as quickly as possible in order to address the Coronavirus epidemic, please do either contact us directly at enquiries@hoxby.com or use the hashtag #remoteagainstcoronavirus - we are keen to do whatever we can to provide the right tools and stop the spread of Coronavirus.

If you found this document useful, please do forward it on to any other contacts you have who you feel may find it useful.

Spread the word. Stop the spread.
#RemoteAgainstCoronavirus