

Good practice in relation to distance management

Seven focus points

Business Unusual – Covid-19
March 2020

Table of contents

Prelude – why establish good practice regarding leading from the distance

- 1. Establishing new, but efficient routines**
- 2. Align the mutual expectations**
- 3. Frequent communication – communicate often**
- 4. Find the balance between control and trust in the virtual organisation**
- 5. Use the available technologies right**
- 6. Empower the ability to self-lead**
- 7. Practical guide to good video- or Skype meetings**

Three purposes of creating a good practice regarding leading from the distance

Taking the social-psychological aspect into account

The situation – both around Covid-19 and now working from home – is new for both managers and employees. In a 'normal' crisis situation, one would be able to come together, look each other in the eye and thus support each other. It's not possible in the same manner now. Moreover, not all employees and managers have an optimal starting point for working at home over a long period of time. Some may live alone and will miss the social interaction and community at the office, others live in conditions that make it difficult to concentrate. As a leader there are therefore a number of new factors that need to be considered in relation to both the dialogue and the relationship with the employees – with the aim of making employees thrive and succeed in the best possible way in this unusual situation. Remember that the level of concerns and anxiety might be extraordinary high – due to both the changed working environment and the spread of Covid-19.

Ensuring continued efficiency and quality daily through attentive management

Normally, distance management is a departure from the norm. But in this unusual situation around Covid-19, distance management has become the norm in only a matter of days. We must now minimise interaction at work, which is why working from home becomes the new way of working, which all managers must adapt to and be able to stage as soon as possible. If no good practice in the case of distance management is established, results in loss of efficiency and quality could quickly become a derivative consequence. However, this need not be the case – because the right practice introduced quickly could increase efficiency and quality in certain areas, because a working environment with more concentration, as well as fewer and shorter meetings, could create an increase in efficiency.

Ensure transparency and cohesiveness in your organization

Leading is very much about creating clarity and transparency. The manager must be able to be clear in his or her expectations of the team and the individual employees. In this sense, leading from a distance is not significantly different from managing in the physical organisation, but the need for transparency is significantly increased. When managers and employees are not physically together, a lot of communication is lost. This can lead to misunderstandings, which in turn could lead to errors, frustration and, perhaps even a lack of trust.

1. Establishing new simple but effective routines

In distance management approaching a manager or employee cannot be done as easily – and 'out of sight, out of mind' is a risk, if the manager does not establish simple, regular routines where the employee and manager can "check-in", align and be in a good and attentive dialogue together.

Therefore, the manager should immediately consider new routines to be established to ensure a good and attentive dialogue as well as an adequate flow of information between management and employees. Such as:

- Daily 5-10 minute "check-in" morning meeting on phone, Skype, Facetime, etc. with each employee. The meetings should be booked in the calendar.
- Daily 5-10 minute "status" afternoon meeting on phone, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Facetime, etc. with each employee. The meetings should be booked in the calendar.
- Weekly team meeting via video, Skype, etc., where more employees (if not all) can participate. The meetings should be in the calendar.
- Sending status information or "latest news" as needed via video or email to all employees.
- Employees are encouraged to email, call or Skype together throughout the day – to coordinate tasks, but also in order to stay in touch with each other.
- There are examples of 'having lunch together' and coffee-breaks via Skype – with only the sound turned on so the normal lunch talk can unfold during the break.

Scheduling meetings that no longer need to be physical

- Go through your calendar for meetings that need to be re-scheduled in a new way via Skype, etc.
- Consider the agenda and length of the meeting – will it be possible to conduct the meeting as effectively virtually?
- Reduce the number of participants to the minimum possible - justify this and make sure minutes of the meeting is sent to all
- Can meetings in need of dialogue between many people be held as multiple subsequent meetings with fewer people
- Are there meetings that can be completely cancelled

2. Align mutual expectations

In this unusual situation around Covid-19, distance management has become the norm in only a matter of days. This means that it is necessary to align *how* we work together and communicate in the best possible way in this situation.

- How do we use the new communication routines and why?
- Are adjustments needed?
- What is the individual's situation for working from home?
- Remember that expectations are adjusted according to task, result and process – as well as the individual's situation for working from home

How to clearly align expectations

- Uncover the employee's need for contact, coaching and feedback
- Be aware that each employee's needs can be very different
- Clarify whether there is a need for adjusted roles, responsibilities and powers in relation to the new situation
- Also inform your employees of when you need to be involved, informed or receive feedback. Be careful not to exaggerate so that it instead ends up with micro-management and excessive control
- Once you have aligned your mutual expectations, it is important that you keep up to date whether it is as you agreed or whether something has gone in the wrong direction. Therefore, routines and agreements on continuous dialogue are a good idea (See the establishment of new simple routines)
- Make sure – daily/weekly - to be aligned on focus and priorities
- Ensure a good and open dialogue about setting clear boundaries between private and working life
- For Skype meetings, which are unfamiliar to many, not everyone wants to have the video feature turned on. This must be respected as the employee sits in his or her private home and is not obliged to "let everyone in".

3. Frequent communication – communicate often

Communication is the substance that binds us together and creates a common understanding of what we should do and who should do what. But communication is more than that.

Communication is also very much the energy that, on a human level, binds us together. When we communicate, we exchange a wide range of information about ourselves and each other that are important building blocks in building relationships. At a distance, when we are not in the same physical space, a portion of this important information disappears.

It is therefore important that we both plan to communicate and do it more often than we usually would when working together in a shared work space, where much information about each other is "given". We meet and greet in the elevator or in the canteen, etc.

Plan your communication so you communicate often enough

As something special about distance management, you need to plan both the structured and targeted communication as well as the informal communication. Communication must be able to offset your physical presence.

- Add the new planned structure and routines to your calendar so others can see when you're available
- Block your calendar with informal calls to your employees and others you need to be in dialogue with. The informal calls provides an opportunity for you to discuss some of the elements that are outside the task oriented dialogue
- Block time in the calendar for when you can be available for calls, emails, etc.
- Usually, the *Send to all function* is something we aim to use as little as possible – but in this particular situation it can be used in moderation. A "good morning" or a "thank you for a good effort today" can help create cohesion and reduce the feeling in the individual of being alone. Or, if necessary, let everyone know that for the next hour you are available.
- It's not only your direct reports who need to be communicated to more often. List the people you've met frequently — or who had meetings cancelled, and make sure they are included in your communication. Also list key personnel with whom you have informal communication on a regular basis.

4. Find the balance between control and trust in the virtual organisation

Trust is built through relationships and communication. In the virtual organization, building trusting relationships is a particular challenge. These include: trust is something that needs to be reconfirmed on a regular basis. As a manager, you can't decide that your employees should trust you. You have to work to build, maintain and support trust in a mutual process.

Trust to gain trust – and distribute benefits and attention fairly

- When you need to develop trust in the virtual organisation – trust is something you get when you give it. You yourself shall therefore show the necessary trust to your employees
- Be careful not to excessively control or exercise micro-management (because you can't see what your employees are doing)
- Keep your appointments - be available when you've agreed to (others don't see why you prioritize differently)
- Show fairness and be careful not to discriminate against employees (Surveys show that employees who are close to the manager receive more information and more benefits than the "distributed" employees. Now all are "distributed" - and do not forget the employees who are usually less visible)
- It's about your credibility as a leader and at a distance you need to pay special attention to maintaining your credibility. Walk the talk – and expect the same from your employees.
- Continuously ask for any doubts and insecurities - be open, understanding and listening
- Give the individual employee the opportunity to lead upwards by asking questions, seeking advice, ensuring quality, making joint decisions, etc.

Also:

Consider what role the office Safety Representatives or Staff Representatives can play in this situation.

5. Apply the available tools the right way

We have many different technologies at our disposal and they individually all do something different.

If you primarily use email, there is a risk that a substantial part of the emotional side of the communication will disappear.

If you always use the phone, there is a risk that it will be ineffective if you need to communicate with many people at the same time. Therefore, go through what technology to use:

- With the best result in mind – when do you use: Video conferencing, chat meetings, emails, phone, social media, video recordings, etc.
- Which platforms within the various communication technologies will you prioritize to use?

Do away with the technology habits of 'last week' – this new situation requires new habits

You can use the following four parameters to assess the usability of a specific technology:

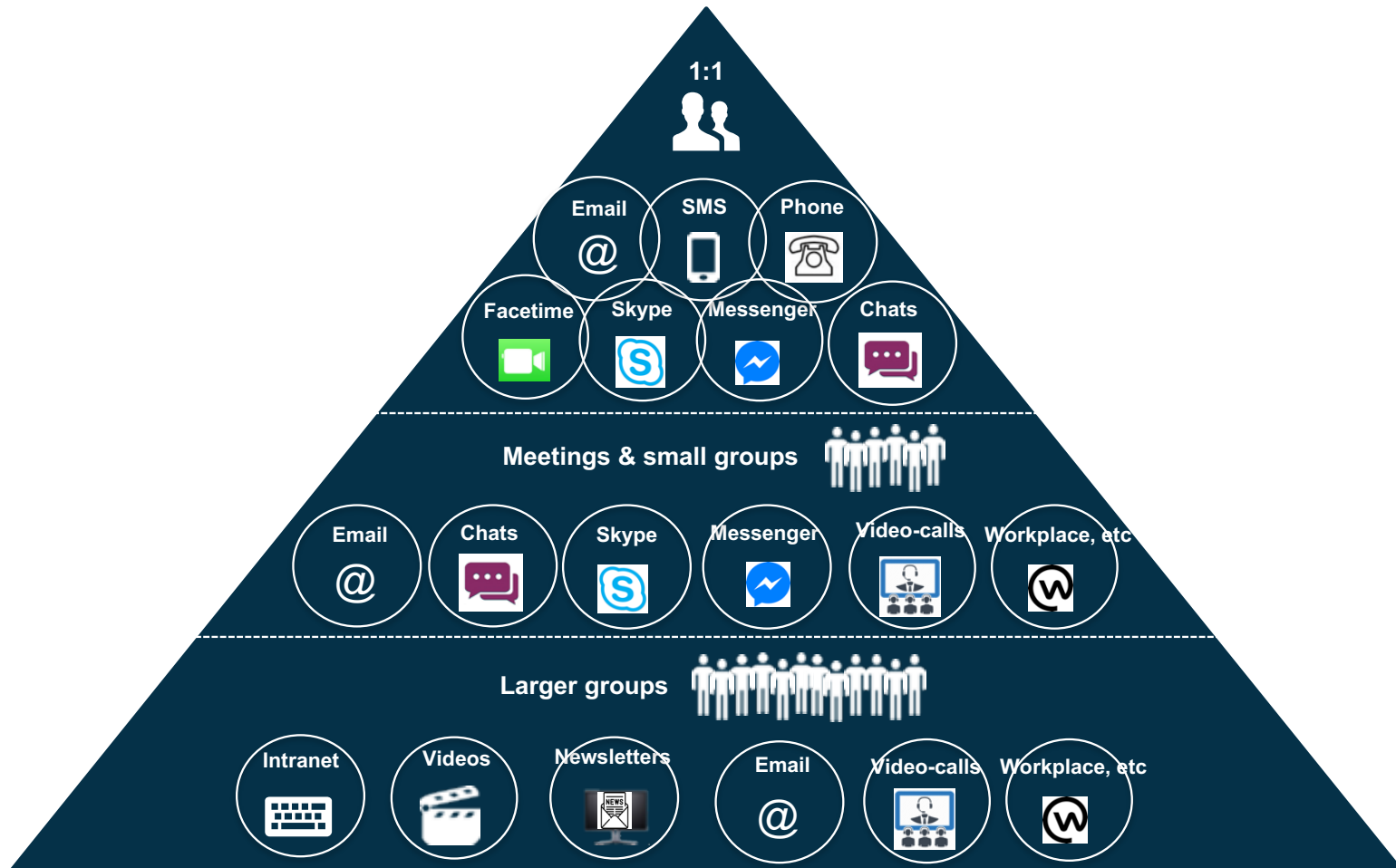
- How complex is the task?
- How urgent is the task?
- How experienced is the employee?
- What is the technology-maturity level of the employee?

Video conferencing, chat meetings, emails, phone?

In general, it can be said that:

- ***The more complex a task is***, the more important it will be to use virtual meeting forms where one can see each other.
- ***The more urgent a task is***, the more important it can be to clarify the efforts and responsibilities required by using the phone.
- ***The more mature or experienced an employee is***, the more you can use emails advantageously.

5. Apply the available tools the right way



6. Strengthen self-management capability

A basic prerequisite for success with your leadership at a distance is that your employees are capable of leading themselves as much as possible.

It is therefore important that you and your employees jointly describe what self-management entails in your company.

- Make goals and desired results sufficiently visible so that the employee has the possibility to orientate themselves in the right direction
- Tune in on what you can do to maintain motivation for the individual employee
- Determine what decisions the employee can make on their own and regularly include your employees in decisions related to their tasks
- The best employees at a distance are those who can both lead themselves but also takes a responsibility to lead and seek influence over your decisions
- Evaluate weekly to ensure that the self-management of each employee works well

7. Step by step guide for video or Skype meetings

- Limit the number of participants in meetings except information meetings where one person speaks to many
- Make sure audio and video are turned on and set so everyone can be seen and heard
- Everyone sits so they can see into the camera - don't sit outside the limit of the camera's view
- Know the equipment's functions so it is used optimally
- Be careful with informal talk before the start of the meeting – the equipment may be turned on
- Start by listing the meeting rules (see below)
- Appoint a meeting manager in each room – the meeting manager makes sure to operate the equipment and ensures the speaker order
- The person in charge of the meeting leads the meeting with the help of the meeting leaders of the other locations
- Good meeting behavior also applies to virtual meetings. You pay attention, is not working or reading emails on the PC, etc.
- Make sure all participants present themselves at the start of the meeting so that everyone knows who is attending
- When reviewing material, the material can advantageously be shown on the screen so that everyone can follow
- For presentations and contributions, it can be beneficial to turn the camera towards the person speaking
- For presentations and contributions, the microphone of those listening is switched off so that no unnecessary noise is heard during the meeting (moving chairs, coffee cups being put, etc.)
- Regarding questions, debate, etc.:
 - *Meeting managers at each location report that, for example, there are two or three questions to be raised*
 - *The person in charge of the meeting gives the floor to the different locations*
 - *Each person starts by stating their name, so everyone knows who's talking.*
 - *For longer contributions, the camera can be successfully set on the person talking*
 - *You never interrupt – wait for your turn and respect that participants at other locations want speaking time*
- The person in charge of the meeting rounds off the meeting – the meeting leaders from each location report that they are now logging off the meeting