

Leadership Lessons from the Pandemic

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Every once in a while, I try to step back and think about some of the things I see going on in the world. This ability to develop self-awareness and reflection is one of the lessons I learned from my work with leaders participating in the unique [Inspirational Leadership at Kylemore](#) programme. These are key leadership skills that will serve any leader well in this current highly disruptive environment.

One item that has really captured my attention is the major shift that has occurred during the current pandemic regarding remote work. But it is probably not the observation you think. Yes, more and more companies have figured out that their employees can actually work very well remotely and don't need to be "in the office" every day. However, what I have noticed is one of the key downsides or unintended consequences of this shift of the workplace from the office to home.

I first noticed it this fall when we had the chance to spend several weeks with my son and daughter-in-law and new granddaughter. (We had all been very careful in quarantining and they needed help with child care – which was not available because of COVID.) My son and daughter-in-law were both working remotely. It became very obvious to all of us (the two of them and my wife and myself) that they were working crazy hours. They'd start the day at 8am with Zoom meetings and these would continue almost non-stop all day. They took quick breaks to grab something to eat or drink and then get right back to another Zoom call. Over dinner, they'd take a short break to get our granddaughter ready for bed and join us for dinner. Then they would both head to their respective offices (actually bedrooms doubling as offices) and work for several more hours in the evening – sometimes even until well after midnight.

It became clear from my interactions with participants in my online seminars and courses, that this behavior was not limited to my son and daughter-in-law. In fact, it seemed like everyone who was working remotely was in the same situation. I have learned from my many conversations with my friends and colleagues in Ireland that the lock-in-place requirements there have brought this into sharp focus.

In Terry Collins' USA Today article *Work from home or always working? Remote workdays during COVID-19 are longer thanks to technology*, he says "The convenience of having that technology at home is creating a never-ending workday for some employees who struggle to decide when it's time to turn off the switch." He goes on to quote a researcher who worked on a new study from Gartner who said "current workdays are between two and three hours longer, fueling a phenomenon amid COVID-19 called 'always-on fatigue.'" What had subtly occurred was a complete blurring of the lines between work and home.

This point was significantly amplified recently when the CEO of Citicorp, Jane Fraser sent a memo to her 210,000 employees and said, "The blurring of lines between home and work and the relentlessness of the pandemic workday have taken a toll on our well-being. It's simply not sustainable." Fraser went on to say "When our work regularly spills over into nights, very early mornings, and weekends, it can prevent us from recharging fully, and that isn't good for you nor, ultimately, for Citi."

While I agree that leaders need to be more aware of the implications of longer and longer work days and the blurring of the distinction between work and home, there is another impact that I have yet to see anyone mention or discuss. There is a significant downside to the current schedule of back to back to back virtual meetings. On the front end, no one has the time to adequately prepare. On the back end, no one has time to capture what happened during the virtual meetings, or more importantly, to actually get the work done that was

discussed during the call. I fear that we have placed more emphasis on talking about what needs to be done than on actually doing the work required to “get it done.”

We used to be able to tell co-workers or clients that we’d discuss an issue when we next were on site or together. Today, we set up a Zoom call – another Zoom call!! This JIT meeting syndrome is robbing us all of the time we need to focus on our work. In addition, because we are not commuting or travelling to see customers or suppliers, we have lost this very valuable research and “soak time” that used to be a natural part of the rhythm of our work day. It is crucial that we find the time to “think about work” and not just “talk about the work”.

So what do leaders need to do about this now? This is leadership lesson #1 for me. How do we allow our employees to take back their home life (what we used to call work-life balance) or make time during the day to both think and do? Well, Jane Fraser at Citicorp took a major first step when she announced to her employees that Citi was incorporating “no Zoom Fridays”. Now, this meant they wouldn’t hold virtual meetings internally. Zoom calls with clients and customers were still to be held on Fridays. However, this is a bold recognition of the impact remote work has had on people and a good step to address it.

This still begs the question on what else can leaders do about this situation. As a leader who cares about their people and needs to ensure that good, high quality results are achieved, you need to do some or all of the following:

1. Acknowledge this situation exists (it exists for you and, therefore, exists for your employees)
2. Lead by example and change how you schedule meetings
3. Give your employees permission to turn off their cameras or schedule fewer meetings
4. Go back to using the phone for a quick call
5. Stop scheduling back-to-back meetings
6. Implement a “policy” that allows meetings to be 50 minutes long, instead of 60.
7. Allow your people to block off significant time during the week to focus on getting the work done
8. Follow the lead of Jane Fraser and implement “no Zoom times”
9. Stop scheduling Zoom calls outside of traditional work hours
10. Take time off and stay away from work for a day or two – and encourage your staff to do the same

This is not an exhaustive list, but all of these are easy for leaders to implement. The best leaders care for their employees and make sure they can succeed. Don’t let the new environment blind you to the negative impacts that are occurring because of the dramatic shift to remote work.

Awareness and reflection are the first steps. You can’t say now that you don’t know this is going on. The next step is to do something to help your people deal more effectively with the new challenges of remote work. If you can do something to help them, they will be grateful and more effective. The risk is in doing nothing!

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