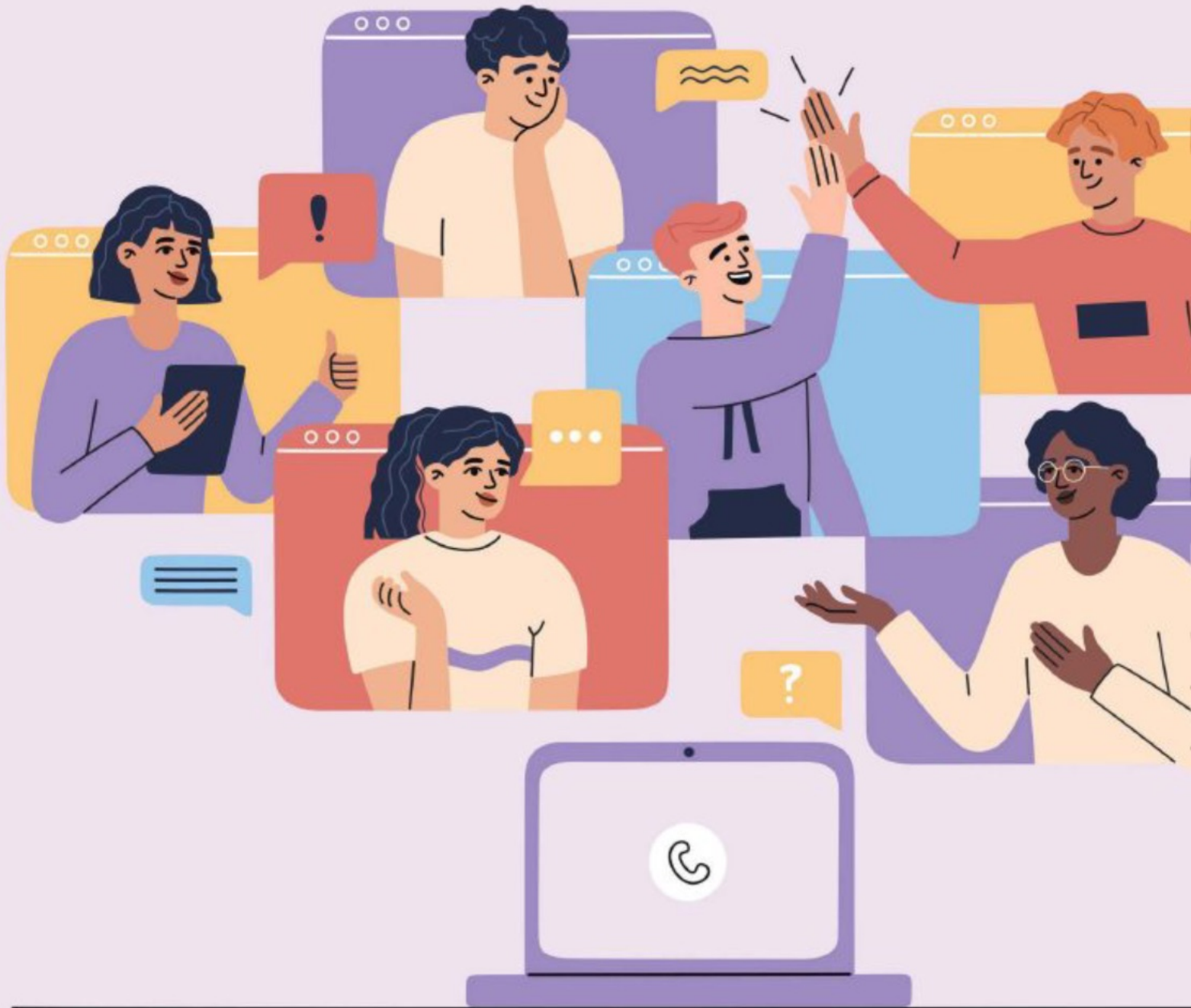


# MODERN LEADERS



# FOR MODERN TIMES

Workers are not coming back to offices in the same way as pre-pandemic. A new book argues good leaders need to be able to inspire and encourage their virtual workforce, wherever they are

Extract KIRSTIN FERGUSON

**J**ust as heroic leaders are a relic of the past, so too are traditional workplaces where we can expect to see the people we lead, or are led by, every day. There is much talk about the loss of human contact many leaders now feel in a remote working environment. A survey of almost 11,000 employees across 16 countries found that 78 per cent of leaders are concerned about the ability of remote employees to build solid interpersonal relationships with colleagues, and 72 per cent are concerned with a potential deterioration in organisational culture.

The quality of leadership impacted human connection and a sense of belonging well before the pandemic saw many of us work from home. Anyone who has worked in a toxic workplace culture knows simply being in the same location as the people you work with is no guarantee of a sense of belonging. Human connection happens when leaders make deliberate and thoughtful choices about how to lead with their head and hearts, whatever the context.

Whether the people you lead live in the same home or are people you may never meet in person, the same mindset and approach to modern leadership applies.

Much of the debate about remote work erroneously reduces the discussion to a binary decision – work at home or work in an office. This approach simplifies a complex issue to a transaction of thinking about where you physically sit to complete your work.

Clearly, not all roles can be performed at home; teachers, nurses, bus drivers, butchers and so many other essential roles need to still be done in a workplace. However, increasingly a large proportion of the professional, white-collar workforce can complete their roles at home and the pandemic demonstrated they could do so effectively.

Having a workforce you do not physically see is not a new idea. For decades multinational companies have worked across borders, time zones and cultures with company leaders rarely physically seeing all those they lead. Some leaders seem to wistfully remember the good old days, when everyone arrived at the office on time in the morning, shared laughs and

impromptu moments over morning coffee and attended the same meetings at the same time. And there were plenty of positive times in those days. Bonding with colleagues happened easily, opportunities to be mentored and learn from more experienced colleagues abounded.

But those days were not everyone's experience. It was never the case that serendipitous interactions necessarily happened for whom, and when, they may have been most needed. For those working in dysfunctional workplace cultures, having to go into the office every day caused challenges for physical and mental wellbeing. If you were unfortunate enough to be led by a narcissistic boss, having to deal with that person every day was confronting. If you were disabled or had caring responsibilities, the juggle of a daily commute

*The critical component in remote work is flexibility and this requires modern leaders*

was a challenge that would soon wear you down. And if you were not earning a salary sufficient to be able to afford a home near to your office, forget it.

Just like everyone's experience of working in an office and from home is different, the debate about working remotely is not one that has a uniform answer. What might work in one company may not suit another. The way one individual might be most productive and effective may be vastly different from their colleague performing the same role elsewhere. A solution that might work within one team in a company, might not be conducive to the performance or outcomes of another team. The critical component in any consideration of remote work is flexibility and this requires modern leaders who lead with their head and heart to solve the issue.

If we are not able to embrace flexibility –

both in mindset and in practice – we run the risk of being a traditional leader of the past. Leading with the head and heart is not about the physical location of the people you lead but about how you embrace flexibility in your thinking about how the work you need completed, is done. Modern leaders put people at the centre of that decision-making, understanding that without an engaged, motivated and purpose-led workforce, any business goals are likely to fail.

## **THERE IS NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH**

Hybrid working is sure to lead to unhappy leaders and employees if traditional ways of leading remain. The relevance of how many days someone works in an office or at home, or anywhere else they might choose to work, is also rapidly losing importance. Edicts from companies like Tesla, which demanded employees return to the office for a minimum of 40 hours per week or lose their job, is likely to see employees for whom flexibility is critically important, move on.

Technology company Atlassian reported that after Tesla founder Elon Musk demanded employees return to the office in an email with the subject heading "Remote work is no longer acceptable", Atlassian saw a 500 per cent increase in employment inquiries via its careers website. Scott Farquhar, co-founder of Atlassian, believes "anyone that says we still need to be in an office to get stuff done is living in a 1950s version of reality".

Atlassian is going all-in on working from home. In 2021 the company announced a "team anywhere" policy for their 5700 employees around the world. This means if you work for Atlassian you can work from any location in a country where Atlassian has a corporate entity, where the individual has the legal right to work, and where the time zone they are in is broadly aligned with that of their team members.

Chief executive and co-founder of Slack, Stewart Butterfield, has also gone all-in on virtual work and argues asking people to return to the office is "a doomed approach". Butterfield believes "work is no longer a place you go. It is something you do". The location of workers has become, at Slack, inconsequential.

Slack has a permanent remote work policy, which they say is helping to attract top talent and stay competitive. One of the benefits Butterfield has found is that the world "had prematurely narrowed our view of what works at work". He says, "there's a lot of opportunities to rethink and re-imagine".

While Atlassian and Slack may be championing remote work for their employees, it does not mean this approach will necessarily work everywhere. Different companies will adapt their approach to what will work in their >



industry or context. There is no right or wrong answer but, for modern leaders, there needs to be a curiosity about what is possible and a focus on putting the people you lead at the centre of your decision-making on the issue.

**WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO CONNECT THROUGH TECHNOLOGY**

Nothing shouts traditional leader more than someone who doesn't know how to use a virtual meeting platform or who can't light their office or room so the people they are engaging with can see them clearly. Taking steps to learn and understand how to lead with technology means putting as much importance on the logistics of meeting online as you may have once put into buying a new suit for a meeting. Ensuring you are a "tech-savvy humanist" is one small way to demonstrate respect for those you meet with online. This means we need to understand how the technology we use impacts people's lives and can enhance and enable their sense of purpose and engagement in all they do.

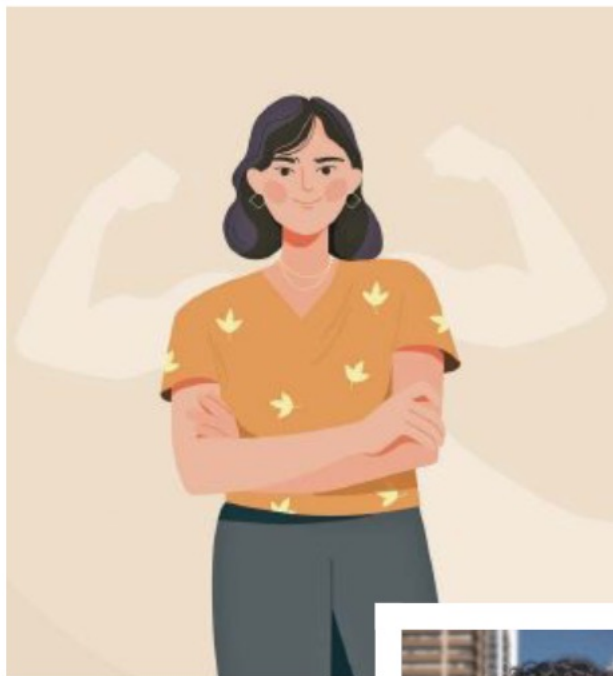
It astonishes me how many leaders still don't think about the experience for someone on the other end of the virtual meeting. If the person you lead is only ever seeing you with a view up your nostril, or with a screen showing you blurred or out of focus, it is going to impact your ability to connect. If you are unsure, ask a nearby teenager to help – having grown up online, they are experts at finding your best light. Ultimately, while it may seem unimportant to you, these are important signals you send as a modern leader in terms of thinking about those you plan to build a relationship with, learn from or lead. Just as we might have once made sure we looked professional before walking into a physical meeting, so too modern leaders need to care about appearing professional through their skilful use of technology. This extends to being active on any chat or collaboration platforms being used by those you lead. If people connect and collaborate in your workplace through Microsoft Teams, Slack, Trello boards or Google docs – whatever is used – you need to understand how to use them as well. This is the culture of the organisation you lead, and your presence is essential.

**WE NEED TO CREATE NEW NORMS OF INTERACTION**

The technology company Atlassian has clear expectations for online meeting etiquette. The basic rule is if one person is attending the meeting virtually, everyone attends the meeting virtually. This helps prevent those online (when others are together in an office) feeling excluded. It also prevents the sub-optimal experience when we don't feel we are part of the same meeting in the same way. However, only 27 per cent of organisations have established hybrid meeting etiquette principles.

Modern leaders know they need to quit trying to outsmart time zones. They embrace working asynchronously and autonomously. This can be uncomfortable for leaders who have spent decades using synchronous meetings and emails as the primary working tools.

Modern leaders understand these traditional ways of meeting and tools we have always used have a place, but they are no longer the default for remote workplaces. More important is finding ways to ensure everyone is on the same page rather than talking at the same time. This means developing a regular documented



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feedback loop instead of locking in times to talk every day or week.

**WE FIND WAYS TO CREATE WATER COOLER MOMENTS**

Research shows that what people miss most about hybrid working are those "water cooler" moments such as walking by a colleague's desk to say hello, chatting about the latest must-watch television program over lunch or dropping by a mentor's office to ask for advice.

These small moments assist in building a sense of belonging and trust in those we work with. Water cooler moments are often when we can show vulnerability and be open with colleagues about how we may be feeling about an issue. The more we have these moments, the easier it is to speak up on other issues in the future.

Chief executive and co-founder of Slack, Stewart Butterfield, agrees these small moments are one of the biggest hurdles, particularly in developing relationships within the business but outside of the people you deal with most regularly.

Some organisations have established quick, 10-minute all-hands meetings where time is spent in randomly allocated breakout rooms to



Author Kirstin Ferguson says leaders need to be capable in their use of technology so they can connect well with employees, and create new norms of interaction.

chat about anything at all. In some cases, these have become virtual coffee catch-ups across time zones. Ask those you lead what will work best for them.

**WE NEED TO COMMUNICATE IN THE MOMENT**

It is no longer possible to remember to tell someone something when you next pass them on the way to the lunch room; we need to communicate in the moment. Communicating as a leader of a remote team takes both head and heart – the perspective to know what is needed and the empathy and self-awareness to understand the best way to do it. For some, a message on Slack or some other technology platform will work. For others, a phone call or finding time to talk online, without the distraction of a long to-do list, may be needed.

Having a flexible mindset as a modern leader in thinking about how other people best work requires you to be flexible in the ways you communicate. This may mean for newer or more junior employees, checking in more frequently to see how they are travelling. Ask those you lead how often they like you to be in touch – too frequently can be just as disconcerting as never at all. Putting people at the centre of how they choose to work means also putting individuals at the centre of deciding how they will each best be led by you.

**WE NEED TO ROLE MODEL BEING ONLINE DOESN'T MEAN "ALWAYS ON"**

Modern leaders understand always being online signals that there is an expectation other people should be online as well. Microsoft has identified through their research what has been called the "third peak" which has seen Microsoft Team chats outside the typical workday increase, especially between 6pm to 8pm. The average Microsoft Teams user now sends 42 per cent more chats per person after hours.

Having a flexible mindset about how we work means, as modern leaders, we need to appreciate that not everyone will be working at the same time we are. And that needs to

be OK. You might like to consider putting a note at the bottom of your email signature reminding people you don't expect an immediate response. For some people, especially those with caring responsibilities, working after dinner once the kids are in bed might be a perfect time for the day's tasks to be reviewed and completed. However, for others, piles of emails received from people working at night might feel stressful as they log on for the first time the following day.

The key for modern leaders is to set cultural ground rules and expectations with those you lead. ■

This is an edited extract of **Head and Heart: The Art of Modern Leadership** by **Kirstin Ferguson**, out now, **Viking, \$35.**

