

10 practical tips for... Managing people more effectively, while managing remotely



Remote & hybrid working will challenge your management skills. Make it easier for yourself - and your team

Tim Kemp

Choose to hold loosely



Think about a handful of dry sand.

Imagine that all those grains of sand represent the people and issues and dilemmas and systems and procedures and decisions and relationships and tasks over which you, as a manager, have control.

Now imagine what happens if you squeeze your grip, in an effort to hold on and keep tighter control.

You will notice that the sand begins to slip through your fingers. The tighter you squeeze, the more sand you will lose. This simple metaphor suggests that the way to hold the most amount of dry sand is not to squeeze and tighten

your grip, but rather to cup your hand and hold the sand loosely.

The notion of **'holding loosely'** is an important one in management. And it is not a new idea. Being ready to let others take appropriate responsibility, while offering them the support they need to be successful, is what great managers have done and what good management writers have been saying for years.

And working **remotely** only increases the importance of getting this right.

Relax, breathe, manage well

In our increasingly 'Hybrid' world, it is going to be deceptively easy to think that we are 'holding loosely' when, in fact, we are not holding at all. In a face-to-face, always in the office world our focus needs to be on how to do 'loosely', while still maintaining some effective control. In a 'work from anywhere' world, it is the word 'holding' that needs to be the focus of our attention. How do we do successfully do these things?

- ? Offer support to our team and colleagues
- ? Provide a safe space
- ? Establish standards
- ? Set goals

when our grasp is as tenuous as the broadband signal that links us together.

MBWA V. MBZA

Way back in the 1980's, businesses rushed to demonstrate their commitment to **'Management by Wandering Around'** (MBWA). This approach came out of the ground-breaking research by Peters and Waterman which led to "In Search of Excellence".



Management by wandering around, was seen as a more effective way of demonstrating interest, gathering feedback, showing support and driving performance improvement than the traditionally structured weekly meeting that relied upon progress reports and people's willingness to attend. In the 2020s we will need to invent **Management By Zooming Around**. Zooming about (other platforms are available) will become the differentiator of good management practice.

Managers will need to grasp the technology and use it proactively, informally and creatively to listen, demonstrate interest and curiosity, practice empathy and invite feedback. Whether it is Zoom, Slack, WhatsApp or text, we will need to use a variety of channels to replicate the kinds of informal 'presence' that people working remotely will be missing.

So, what does it mean to be a manager in an environment where our 'activity' is going to matter so much more than our position? Where **the value we add** will increasingly be measured by the extent to which we provide our staff with the support, resources, information and connections they need to get their work done? And while this has been the direction of travel for several decades now, the move towards hybrid working has turned a trend into a necessity.

So, my 10 tips for managing people more effectively in a hybrid world focus on both elements of the idea of 'holding loosely'.



Tip 1: 'Don't steal decisions from your staff'

'Subsidiarity' is the word used by the European Union to mean that, "A higher order body should not take away responsibilities which properly belong to a lower order body". This may sound very sensible, but it is, in fact, a very radical idea. It is more than mere empowerment. It suggests that power actually **belongs** to the point in the organization where the power is needed. It is not a gift from above. **Good management** is about recognizing that the very best place for power (responsibility, decision-making, etc.) to reside is precisely where it can be used most effectively. So, in a management context, if a qualified person has a job to do, let them take the decisions they need to take in order to do the job well. All that is required of managers is to set clear goals and provide the support and resources the staff member needs to get the job done.

All managers are tempted to steal their subordinate's decisions. It makes us feel like we are in control. But if we really want to create more innovative, responsive and dynamic organizations we have to accept that holding tightly (to decisions, to responsibility, to power) will not work. We will become an obstacle in the way of real organizational effectiveness. How many of us are really ready to believe that the further from

the top you get, the closer you should be getting to the source of power and responsibility at any particular moment?



The CEO of Motorola once said, that when one of our Customer Service people is with a Customer, he or she has the power of the Chief Executive when it comes to delighting that customer. So ask yourself:

- ? What decisions am I stealing from my staff?
- ? How can I resource and support them in making their own decisions?
- ? In a remote environment, can I limit my tendency to micro-manage by identifying just ONE performance indicator upon which to assess performance?



My second tip is linked to the first: 'Find the Murdered Mozart'

Antoine de St. Exupery once wrote that we needed to watch out for the 'murdered Mozart' in each of us – the creative, playful, focused and passionate person that has probably been systematically repressed since we started primary school. This is the bit of us that gets enthusiastic about a particular piece of work or activity...the part in each of us that is happy playing with an idea, or gets lost in a problem. I'm sure you have seen it in yourself.

The important thing about the 'murdered Mozart' in each of us is not just resurrecting it, but having *others* acknowledge and value its existence. As managers we tend not to be very good at spotting talent, especially when it is not directly related to the task at hand. And this is doubly difficult when the potential Mozart appears **a tiny, postage stamp image** on a zoom screen once every couple of days. We will need to become much better at recognizing and valuing talent. So, over the next few weeks, make a conscious effort to become a 'Mozart spotter'. Don't just ask people 'what' they have achieved...spend some time (and even more time, if the people are working at home) exploring 'how' they have achieved. Get to know the challenges, the work arounds, the effort, the innovations, the creativity and the determination, as well as the output.





Try This

'Find out what excites each person you work with. How often do you see them concentrating? How often are they actively and intently focused on a problem or piece of work? In all likelihood these are the moments when they will be working on something that is engaging their talent. This is a good time to offer encouragement...to show that you have 'spotted' and respect their enthusiasm.

One of the key challenges of working remotely is the risk that those away from the office become 'invisible'. As a manager you will need to ensure that you re-double your efforts to connect and make time for informal check-ins.



Tip 3: Learn how to give effective feedback

As a manager one of your main tasks is to ensure that you create the right environment for people to accept delegation and perform at their best on a regular and consistent basis. In order for this to happen, staff need to have a clear sense of what is expected from them in the first place. This is especially true **when people are working remotely**.

Arguably, feedback is one of the most important and often underrated skills in a manager's toolkit. Being able to elicit or offer feedback in a manner that is both heard and understood is fundamentally important.

Beyond clarity, it is critical that feedback is linked to behavior not the person themselves. For example, "*I'd like to talk about your comments yesterday...*" Rather than "*You are being insensitive ...*". If the aim is really to explore their contribution, then you don't need them becoming defensive and angry.

And be specific. Give examples of the behavior that is inappropriate along with clear suggestions for improvement.



Try This

- ? Do people know what success looks and feels like?
- ? Are they clear about what is expected from them?
- ? Are people used to hearing positive and encouraging things from you?
- ? Do you give both positive and challenging feedback on a timely basis?

↔ Tip 4: Ask for feedback in return...and tell people when they do it well



Don't be afraid to ask for feedback. If it is not being offered, it probably means that the other person is not used to giving it...or is worried about your reaction. **Be specific** about what you would like others to comment on (and how you would like them to tell you).

And when you do receive positive or constructive feedback, let the person know you appreciate it.



Try This

A small family-run company in London uses the following technique for eliciting feedback. All staff members are invited, every month, to make comments anonymously about things that they feel need discussing. These are written on post cards and placed inside a box in the meeting room. At every monthly meeting the box is opened and the chair of the meeting chooses one card at random.

The issue is then 'raised' and discussed. People find this an effective way of introducing topics that they might find hard or embarrassing to raise themselves. This process can work well in an online environment, where collaboration software (like Miro or Mural) can be used to provide a whiteboard where concerns, suggestions and feedback are posted for everyone to see and respond to.



Tip 5: Try to 'understand first'

Steven Covey in his excellent book, '7 Habits of Highly Effective People' refers to a father complaining about his son. 'I can't understand him...He just won't listen to me at all!' This is a good example of an issue that is very relevant to managers. **We often leap to conclusions** (make assumptions, plan responses, take decisions, etc.) before we have really, clearly understood what is really happening. Like the father in the quote, we often reach judgements without any real attempt at understanding what is going on for the person we are managing.

There are two benefits to this approach. The first is that you might actually learn to see the world from someone else's perspective, which will help you make much better decisions and offer much better advice. And secondly, it will help the other person feel properly valued. Henry David Thoreau once said that the greatest compliment he had ever been paid was to have been 'listened to thoroughly'.



A very effective HR Manager in a large Pharmaceutical company always begins a difficult conversation with 5 minutes of listening. Her aim is to be able to completely summarize what the other person is saying *and feeling* – to that person’s satisfaction – before making any suggestions or comments of her own.



Tip 6: ‘Reward’ the people who challenge you

In a knowledge-based economy, brains will always win over muscle. We all know that. But, just how much of a company’s intellectual capital is really used? (If your organization is typical, research suggests it will usually range from 5 to 15 percent)! In order to thrive in a fast-moving and **innovation-driven environment**, we need to utilize the whole person – head and heart, muscle and imagination. Instead of encouraging openness, we construct barriers, impose formalities and build complexity in such a way that people feel that conformity is their only option. If we really want healthy dialogue...if we really want people to use their minds and imaginations...then we have to encourage more constructive challenge. We need people to ask ‘why?’ We need people to test convention and propose alternatives. We need to make it acceptable to be contrary.

All of which means that we need to model behavior that values people and ideas above decisions and formalities. We need to be gracious, curious and just a little more humble.



Invite challenge. One Senior VP of a UK manufacturing company simply changed his question at the end of a team meeting. Instead of saying ‘Does every one agree?’ He now says, ‘What have I overlooked?’ His aim is to generate a constructive examination rather than unthinking agreement.



Tip 7: Double your 'failure rate'

We do not learn (innovate, develop new products, etc.) if our aim is to achieve 'zero mistakes'. The more we demand accuracy and consistency in every aspect of work, the less likely we are to stumble upon, or wonder about, alternatives. Obviously, we don't want pilots and power station workers to take lots unnecessary risks, but it is worth remembering that they would not have become successful pilots and engineers if they hadn't trained (and made mistakes) on simulators and in laboratories.



Where is the encouragement to take the occasional (managed) risk? Whereabouts in our organizations is the space to explore? To wonder? To be curious? To experiment with different ways of doing things?

And how well **do we support risk-taking**? Have we made clear the real (as opposed to imagined) consequences of making mistakes? Do people fully understand how a mistake that they might make will be handled? Do you (and they) appreciate the difference between really serious mistakes (ones that jeopardize your company's reputation or balance sheet) versus ones that should be seen as opportunities to learn.



Try This

A retired Admiral once explained his philosophy of leadership on board the various ships he commanded. He said "The critical thing was to ensure that his crew understood the difference between 'above' and 'below the waterline' mistakes". Below the waterline mistakes were those mistakes that had mission-critical consequences. In other words, they put the rest of the crew or mission in jeopardy. The consequences of this behavior were very clearly spelled out, and no-one was in any doubt as to what would happen to them if they committed such a serious mistake.

'Above the waterline mistakes' however were the vast majority of errors that make up the life of any organization, and form the basis of new learning and improved performance. These 'learning opportunities' carried with them no blame or recrimination (unless you didn't bother to learn from them), and people were actively encouraged to be open about them (so that they and others could learn quickly). The real demotivator in any organization is to treat above the water-line mistakes as if they were serious, and punish people accordingly. The result is the creation of a culture where mistakes are hidden, blame is endemic and learning becomes focused on 'not getting caught'.

So, how do you ensure that people understood the difference between above and below the waterline mistakes...and how they would be treated in each case.



Tip 8: Choose fairness over consensus

In most cases, it is not 'what you do' it is the intention behind it that creates serious problems for managers. If people see that your intentions and behaviours are driven by a desire to be 'fair', then usually they will accept even decisions that they disagree with. The real problems come when people disagree with your decisions AND perceive them to be unfair. This is the source of anger, frustration, a sense of betrayal and huge amounts of stored resentment. And it doesn't disappear quickly. In fact, if the unfairness is not dealt with, then it will hang around and inform assumptions about all future decisions that are made.

Have a [look at this](#) excerpt from Frans de Waal's excellent talk on Ted.com if you are unconvinced about the impact of unfairness. Even monkeys get angry over injustice.



Try This

Make sure you spend time explaining the reasons behind any decision you make. In fact, spend more time clarifying the *process* behind your decision than you do trying to get people to agree with you. It is more important that they respect the process than they agree with the actual decision itself.



Tip 9: Run experiments in the margins

Arie de Geus, in his excellent book, 'The Living Company', writes about the importance of ensuring that an organization has the spare resource it needs to be able to 'run experiments' alongside its core business. These might take the form of working parties that are mandated to explore the future impact of new technologies, or scenario planning groups tasked with identifying future competitive threats, or simply a few people who meet regularly to think about different ways of doing business.

The point is that unless we **give people the space, the time and the resources to think about the future**, we

will ignore it. Until, of course, the future surprises us by arriving too early. This is especially critical in a hybrid environment, where people who are working remotely are less likely to feel involved in the more informal, playful elements of the work. Make sure that any working groups, hackathons and experiments don't ignore the contribution of people working from home.



Tip 10: Write your own tips

This is 2021. We are experiencing a generation-defining experiment in new ways of working, thanks to a pandemic that has killed (currently) over 4 and a half million people, made fortunes for some and destroyed the livelihoods of others. No one has ever had to deal with this before. Hybrid working will emerge as a new option for many organizations, by choice or by default. Talented people will seek out companies that offer them greater choice in the way they manage their working lives. And, of course, there will be plenty of writers and consultants with lots of models, theories and examples of 'best practice'. But the reality is you will do best by creating your own way through the challenges and opportunities that a hybrid environment brings with it.

None of the great managers or leaders followed a book. And none of the books are completely relevant to the challenges you face today anyway. It is your path... Share your successes and create the signposts and guidelines so that others may learn from you.



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As a Canadian in Europe who has worked with many cultures, he knows how critical it is to help people find the solutions which will work for them, in their situation and in their organization. Tim works globally, helping leaders, managers and teams, find their flow.

Can we help?

If you would like to discuss issues relating to hybrid & remote we will be delighted to talk with you. Our expert trainers design & deliver people development to leaders, managers and teams, to help them perform well in hybrid and remote environments. Why not get in touch to talk about your specific needs?



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