

# Deriving Long-Term Strategic Advantage from MANDATED TELECOMMUTING

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The most successful leaders will prove able to fully embrace the new normal, reorient management practices, and drive efficiency through more purposeful meetings.

As CEO of a mid-size, private equity-backed company, Steven is anxious about the future of his business. Since stepping into the role five years ago, he has watched the company grow from a few dozen people to more than 200, taking enormous pride in its success. Now, the swift onset of a global economic contraction is forcing him to revisit the organization's priorities and strategy. While he orchestrates an enterprise-wide pivot, he's optimistic about his ability to succeed. Still, he worries whether the changes he's implementing will be enough to keep his business viable and his people employed, especially in a vastly different and uncertain climate.

Steven's fears are common in today's unprecedented times. Rapid changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic gave leaders little time to make strategic decisions in preparation for the anticipated recession, while forced telecommuting added significant challenges and pressures. Executives were forced to reboot established policies and practices even as they fought to keep businesses afloat.

Fortunately for Steven and others, there are opportunities for companies to emerge from this crisis stronger and more agile, especially among those that can quickly adapt to the realities of remote work. The most successful leaders in this new era will prove able to fully embrace the new normal, strategically reorient their management practices, and drive efficiency through more purposeful meetings, while ensuring that any fears about the future of work don't hinder potential and progress.

## EMBRACE THE NEW NORMAL

Even as leaders anticipate the business environment "returning to normal," they need to accept that the new world will likely look very different from the one before. Significantly, remote work will be much more accepted, even preferred, as organizations and leaders begin to acclimate. Many will jump at the chance to lower office-related overhead expenses, expand talent pools beyond limited geographic areas, and offer employees a highly coveted, zero-cost perk.

Adjusting to this new reality is less about making telecommuting work during self-quarantine, and more about determining how it will best function even after the pandemic is behind us. This will require that leaders understand the development of telecommuting-focused policies and practices as more than just temporary measures. Such thinking will help them adapt in ways beyond learning how to conduct videoconferences, as just one example. They'll benefit from considering the much larger picture, including how to engage employees, ensure productivity, build and sustain culture, and maintain focus, all while people continue to work from home.

## REORIENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

The abrupt end of a management era that relied heavily on face-to-face meetings, office "pop ins" and conference room brainstorming will undoubtedly pose a challenge for many

leaders. That said, various organizations and industries have already pioneered remote work models, formalizing best practices for those new to large-scale telecommuting. These include:

**Ensure accountability.** With teams working from home, leaders will need to create and utilize new avenues to determine how initiatives are advancing and whether their people are in sync, need support, envision future challenges, and so forth. One way to manage this is for leaders to conduct regular, one-on-one calls with those they supervise to ensure they have a direct window into their work and understand how various potentially hidden challenges—professional and personal—might be impacting their ability to concentrate.

**Focus on information sharing.** Companies that used to rely on impromptu physical encounters to get their people up to speed on priorities, challenges, changes, and the like now need to bridge physical distances. They can accomplish this via the strategic use of internal communications, focusing on more than just tactical matters; they should also account for enterprise-wide outlook, strategy, mission, and vision. While pushing information out is vital, ensuring a two-way exchange is equally essential to position leadership to pivot as priorities change and empower employees to help solve problems. When in doubt, companies should seek to overcommunicate versus risking that information gets lost.

**Assess and streamline technology.** The world shifted to telecommuting so rapidly that companies had no time to determine which programs best suited their needs. Moving forward, leaders need to formally review available tools for videoconferencing, digital project management, and collaboration, and direct their people to the ones they've deemed best. It's crucial they clarify chosen platforms, explaining the rationale and instructing employees how they can best use them (providing tutorials as needed). Otherwise, individuals will be resistant to change. They'll also need to commit to using such platforms themselves, modeling the behavior they hope to instill in others.

**Sustain culture.** A dispersed workforce requires organizations to rethink how to build and sustain culture, as they'll no longer have the ability to display mission and values in highly trafficked spaces, to name a common practice. Instead they'll need to take a much more orchestrated, deliberate approach. For example, leaders can weave their values into regular communications and celebrate them through formal recognition and occasional shout-outs. They can also deepen bonds and bolster trust by encouraging personal connections between team members, modeling constructive methods for addressing conflict, and creating forums for two-way, transparent feedback. Crucially, they should seek to re-ground everyone in the mission and vision of the organization, explicitly reinforcing how these two elements drive enterprise-wide decision making and strategy.

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## DRIVE PURPOSEFUL MEETINGS

Among leaders able to embrace change and find silver linings, the sudden transition to large-scale telecommuting unearths several potential efficiencies. Beyond saving on brick-and-mortar, today's evolution creates avenues for significant productivity enhancements by prompting leaders to rethink how they organize meetings.

Across companies and industries, many leaders have acknowledged, though usually privately, that a widespread overreliance on meetings has taxed employees and limited productivity. As companies adapt to remote work, they have an opportunity to rethink when meetings are truly necessary and who needs to participate, potentially freeing many individuals to focus on their specific deliverables.

The best way for leaders to scrutinize their use of meetings is to set a standard in which every scheduled meeting has a specific purpose. These might include making strategic decisions or generating ideas. Meetings that simply allow for participants to share updates might not be necessary at all, since such information can often be relayed easily via email.

Mandating that meetings have explicit purposes will help leaders better determine who needs to attend, as inviting the wrong mix of people can make it difficult to achieve set goals. This process will inevitably lead to smaller, more focused meetings, provided companies have done the work of clarifying roles so that potential participants fully understand what they bring to each discussion.

## CONFRONT FEARS

Many leaders adapting to remote work will benefit from looking inward to confront nagging fears about the accelerated timing of today's new normal. From loss of connection to loss of control, the long-term dispersion of teams will present challenges for many executives who might have resisted telecommuting in years past—primarily, though perhaps unknowingly, because of fear.

Understanding that left unchecked, fears can severely limit an individual's capabilities and an organization's trajectory, it's wise for leaders to be mindful of them, acknowledging their presence and triggers, as much as possible. Executive coaching can play an important role in helping leaders recognize and work through long-held fears for the strategic benefit of the companies they serve.

One fear that is particularly likely to arise from COVID-related workplace changes relates directly to worth and purpose. Specifically, as teams begin experiencing success in seamlessly advancing key initiatives, even while afar, some leaders—accustomed to being physically present for such victories—will suffer from feelings of being adrift. Many will even experience anxiety that the future of work has shown their bench of talent to be so strong that their presence, virtual or otherwise, is no longer needed.

Leaders able to recognize and confront this particular fear have an enormous opportunity. They can better empower and elevate their people, seeing how they perform when no one is looking over their shoulder—a process that will reveal a new wave of superstars. Further, they can begin focusing themselves on the much bigger picture, thinking strategically instead of tactically, freeing up their time and brainpower to best ensure their organization's long-term success. [AQ](#)

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