



Leading for High Performance in Disruption

A toolkit for leaders in the context of COVID-19.

March 2020

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High Performance in Disruption?

Calm and authentic, building trust

Those of us that perform leadership roles know that leadership is more of an art than a science. It is personal, deeply personal, and it is also interpersonal. We are all prone to falling into comfortable patterns in our day to day lives, and our leadership roles are no different. It is not until something disrupts the equilibrium that we tend to call into question how effectively we are exercising the leadership responsibilities we have in our organisations.

Sometimes disruption takes the form of some unexpected feedback, or stepping into a new role with different stakeholders, people or responsibilities. Right now, that disruption has arrived in the form of a health and economic situation that has all the features of a complex crisis on a global scale. The future is unclear, there are many moving parts, solutions to the problem are contested, everyone has a view and society is behaving in alarmingly unpredictable and irrational ways.

Contained in this toolkit are some thoughts, drawn from some relevant thinking on these topics but also from observations, reflections and learnings from years of collective experience.

This disruption will change the way we work, individually and as teams. There are opportunities for us all, as leaders, to embrace new and future ways of working right now.

It is our hope that this toolkit supports you as a leader to navigate the people and productivity challenges inherent in this time of great disruption.

Indeed, this challenging period is what some have planned for but hope never comes and for some others, this is the time to evolve and be better.

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Associate Director,
Transformation - People & Change

Where to focus as a leader?

It seems there are four key areas of focus for leaders in volatile times:

- **Focus 1** – Our **PEOPLE** and their wellbeing AND performance and productivity.
- **Focus 2** – Our **CLIENTS**, our business continuity and securing a sustainable future for both.
- **Focus 3** – The shifting **CONTEXT** and anticipating and adapting.
- **Focus 4** – **OURSELVES** and our capacity and resilience to lead.

Key actions against each of these four areas are outlined below.



Our People

- Conveying regularly and authentically that staff welfare is at the forefront of our mind.
- Putting in place the conditions to replicate informal social interaction and sustain high performance and productivity in a virtual working arrangement.
- Using technology to convey messages through multiple channels – be available if not visible.
- Trust will be a challenge, particularly if being present is an indicator of performance. Be very clear about deliverables and expectations and assume people will do the right thing.



Our Clients

- Your clients may or may not be well established for virtual working. Be proactive to share, support and consider new virtual approaches.
- Pick up the phone to have the conversation about how to manage through the short and long term.
- Show leadership by modelling alternate approaches (e.g. for meetings and service delivery). We are all in disruption together and learning new patterns is something we are all coming to terms with.
- Establish client contact protocols and monitor for common understanding across your organisation



The Context

- Establish mechanisms to find the source of truth for the situation as it evolves. It can be useful to have a central coordination and fact checking function.
- As a leader, keep yourself up to date with developments and pass on information about the changing context.
- Meet more regularly with your leadership team and help each other share intelligence and forecast next moves to the extent possible.



Ourselves

- In volatile times it is even more important than usual to ensure you are taking good care of yourself. Balance your time. Having time to think and reflect is critical.
- Make sure you do not lose sight of the need to go outside, exercise, get some fresh air and be normal.
- If you are working remotely, try to set a routine for yourself and manage your intake of snacks!
- Check in with people who energise you so that you continue to maintain those important social connections.

What to consider when leading in disruption

This evolving context demands that we reframe and enact flexible work arrangements. Implementing large-scale remote work arrangements requires leaders to consider a range of key factors including how to keep their leadership visible, how to maintain motivation and productivity, and how to communicate, and keep people connected. And importantly, how to support wellbeing.

Below are some key factors leaders need to consider to make flexible practices work.

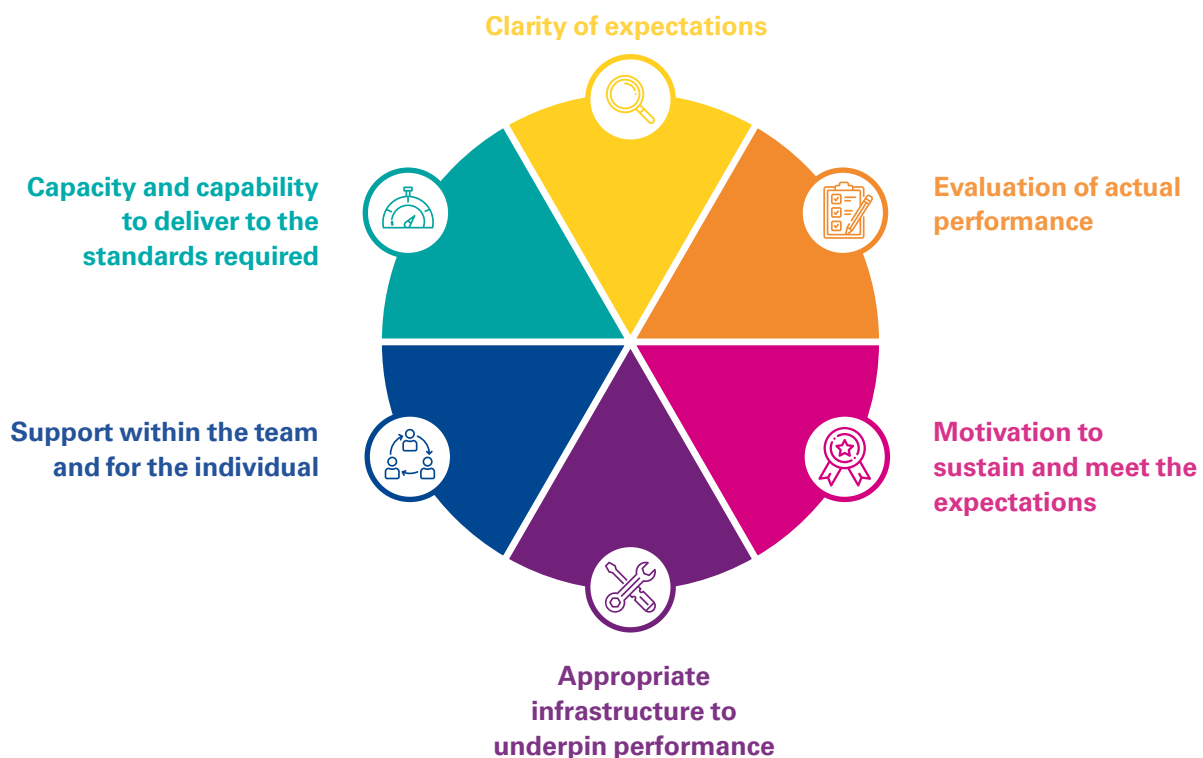
- 1 Sustaining performance in a virtual environment**
How to conceptualise all the factors that help and hinder performance in a virtual workplace.
- 2 Who are the leaders we need to be, now?**
This unfolding situation means we have to quickly adapt our mindset and skills to lead effectively.
- 3 Maintaining productivity**
Motivation can be impacted by such swift change to working arrangements. Keeping people productive is essential.
- 4 Supporting wellbeing and social cohesion despite physical distance**
People gain great benefits from interacting with one another. How do we replicate the working environment, support social cohesion and good mental health?
- 5 Technology tools for staying connected**
Get up to speed rapidly on the tools available to support remote teams.
- 6 How we can help**
We want you to adapt and thrive in this chaotic context. Here is how we can help.

Sustaining performance in a virtual environment

In dynamic, evolving contexts that are constantly shifting, it can be difficult to determine where to channel effort to maintain engagement and performance. Adding virtual working to this mix can feel daunting.

The framework below provides a structure for diagnosing factors that need to be considered to maximise performance in virtual settings. The framework, Performance Dimensions, identifies six interrelated factors that are crucial for leaders, teams and individuals to sustain a high level of performance in virtual environments and especially during times of disruption and uncertainty.

The six Performance Dimensions are:



The questions on the following pages are provided to help you consider where you might channel effort to maximise the effectiveness of virtual working arrangements in your organisation and teams, depending on your organisations specific content.

Sustaining performance in a virtual environment



Resetting expectations for clarity and alignment

- Are leaders keeping teams and staff updated on the evolving context, changes and impacts as they occur?
- Have leaders defined the parameters and expectations around remote working?
- Are people clear about what they need to deliver and the way they need to work under remote working arrangements? Have protocols and expectations been established?
- Have you defined the outcomes and deliverables and established milestones to assist those working alone to establish a rhythm and a clear accountability for what they are delivering when?



Evaluating and reviewing performance with limited visibility

- Are leaders, teams and staff checking in to see if the remote working arrangements are effective?
- Are leaders and teams sharing information about work underway and how people are progressing tasks and activities?
- Are there mechanisms to gather information and feedback informally and formally about remote working arrangements?
- Have you established a regular conversation with every individual to discuss and provide feedback on performance against expectations? Not just exchanging emails on specific tasks or outputs.
- Are there mechanisms to regularly discuss how the flexible arrangements are working and the impact they are having – for a client, for the individual, for the team?



Maintaining and sustaining motivation for goals and outcomes

- How is motivation being impacted as people move to engage in new ways of working?
- Have you implemented strategies to maintain the motivation and engagement of individuals and teams working remotely? For example – to replicate social connection, to acknowledge the challenges, to provide people with motivational goals and incentives to strive for, to replicate extrinsic motivators in the new environment?
- Do people have sufficient balance between direction and autonomy within the context of remote working? How are you monitoring that?
- Are leaders and managers' actions providing people with positive role models in terms of working through during disruption? Are leaders and managers' actions (not just words) providing staff with cues and guidance about how to work in uncertainty and ambiguity.

Sustaining performance in a virtual environment



Leveraging the right infrastructure for virtual arrangements

- Do leaders, teams and staff have access to systems, platforms and technology to support remote working? For example – laptops, Skype, Zoom, FaceTime, Microsoft Teams
- Are there effective channels for information sharing – both formal and informal? For example – WhatsApp groups
- Are there more regular stand-ups (virtual and social-distance appropriate) to keep people up to date and share emerging information?
- Is there an even distribution of workload and clear channels to delegate work?
- Have leaders checked in with individuals about the viability of working remotely and issues they need to navigate? For example – care arrangements



Establishing new avenues for support

- Are there mechanisms in place to maintain contact with those whom are working remotely?
- Do team leaders check-in with staff about their wellbeing and how they are coping with the ambiguity and uncertainty? And providing appropriate referrals to EAP providers or other support services?
- Have leaders developed strategies to replicate 'water cooler' conversations for remote individuals? For example – pick up the phone even when there isn't a pressing issue to discuss, just to check in
- Do people have support from other team members to complete the work required of them? How is that being orchestrated so that people do not fall through the cracks?



Aligning capability and capacity

- Do staff have the skills and capabilities to deliver outcomes via virtual arrangements?
- Do staff and leaders have the skills to utilise the technological options to create engagement in virtual settings?
- Do leaders have the skills, confidence and capabilities required to lead and embed this new way of working?
- How are leaders monitoring people's levels of stress and mental wellbeing during the disruption? What are the channels available to people to discuss their concerns or personal circumstances?
- Have leaders established new channels to continue critical learning and development to ensure key skills and productivity are sustained?

Who are the leaders we need to be – now?

Never before have organisations been forced to arm themselves and their people to embrace new ways of working with new levels of trust. Disruption of this speed and magnitude is a leadership challenge most of us have never contemplated, and is further complicated by the introduction of physical distancing, working from home and virtual teams. In order to be effective in this new context, leaders need to recognise and rapidly adopt new capabilities, different mindsets and develop the ability to manage capacity.

Leadership needs to be different, and it must be underpinned by deep trust. Within this coronavirus pandemic environment, we must reframe how we think about what it means to lead and reflect for ourselves on the question, who are the leaders we need to be, now?

There will be times during crisis when directive leadership is the right choice. However, in the current situation organisations are facing, to lead is to use influence to bring about change and adaptation so that organisations and the people within them can thrive.

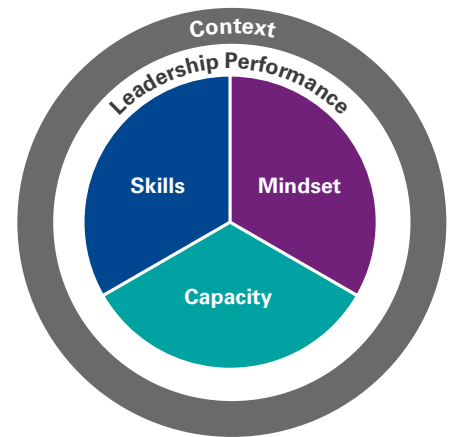
This argument is underpinned by three key ideas:

- 1** In an uncertain and fast changing world, leaders must help people navigate the ambiguity and fear inherent in crisis situations, rather than provide solutions based on expertise or positional power.
- 2** Leaders must look ahead and as changes in the environment continue to emerge, they must help their people embrace innovation and new ways of working. This includes trusting people to do the 'right thing'.
- 3** Leaders must create conditions that enable their people and organisations to continually adapt.

In order to be effective, leaders need new capabilities to execute strategy and motivate their teams to continue to deliver organisational outcomes in ambiguity. Importantly, leaders need to trust their people and provide their teams with the opportunity to demonstrate that productivity and outcomes can still be achieved, even when they are not co-located. Leadership will require the ability to rapidly adapt as things change, to cultivate and demonstrate comfort with ambiguity, conflict and paradox, and to engage frequently, meaningfully and regularly.

Who are the leaders we need to be – now?

To be effective during this unprecedented disruption, leaders need different mindsets, new and different skills, and also the ability to manage their own capacity, and that of their people.



Mindset

We know the mindset of leaders has a fundamental impact on their ability to lead, especially in crisis.

Self-awareness, connection with personal values and approaching problems with curiosity and a willingness to learn, are central elements of an effective leadership mindset.

The reality of many work environments moving forward, is one in which leaders and their team members will not be co-located. For many organisations, this is not a cultural norm and will feel deeply uncomfortable.

Instilling confidence, a sense of trust and a belief that people will continue to work to do the 'right thing' will be critical to achieving outcomes and driving high performance.

Skills

Leaders will need new skills for diagnosing problems they have never previously experienced and recognising opportunities they have never considered.

They will need new skills to strategise amid a crisis and constantly changing environments. They will need to respond according to the complexity of the issue, and execute business strategy while encouraging learning and adaptation.

They will need to navigate interpersonal conflicts, connect people with meaning and purpose, and support them through dilemmas and paradox.

Capacity

In a 24/7 world in crisis, with multiple and competing demands, leaders need to be mindful of their personal capacity.

Developing new skills and shifting mindsets aren't possible without the personal capacity - the time, energy and attention needed to lead effectively.

Building capacity requires specific attention to issues of productivity, psychology, physiology and recovery.

This will become increasingly important as leaders and teams begin to react to the lack of connectedness and decreased social interaction, in addition to the challenges that will arise as the new ways of working slowly become the new normal. Leaders must be aware of their own health and well-being, and capacity to lead.

Maintaining productivity

Rethinking the mechanics of work

Maintaining productivity is a central concern for organisations experiencing disruption. What do we expect people to achieve? How will we complete what needs to be done? How do we maintain motivation and focus with limited face-to-face contact? How can people be productive when they have kids at home? How do we need to evolve and adapt to get things done in the current climate?

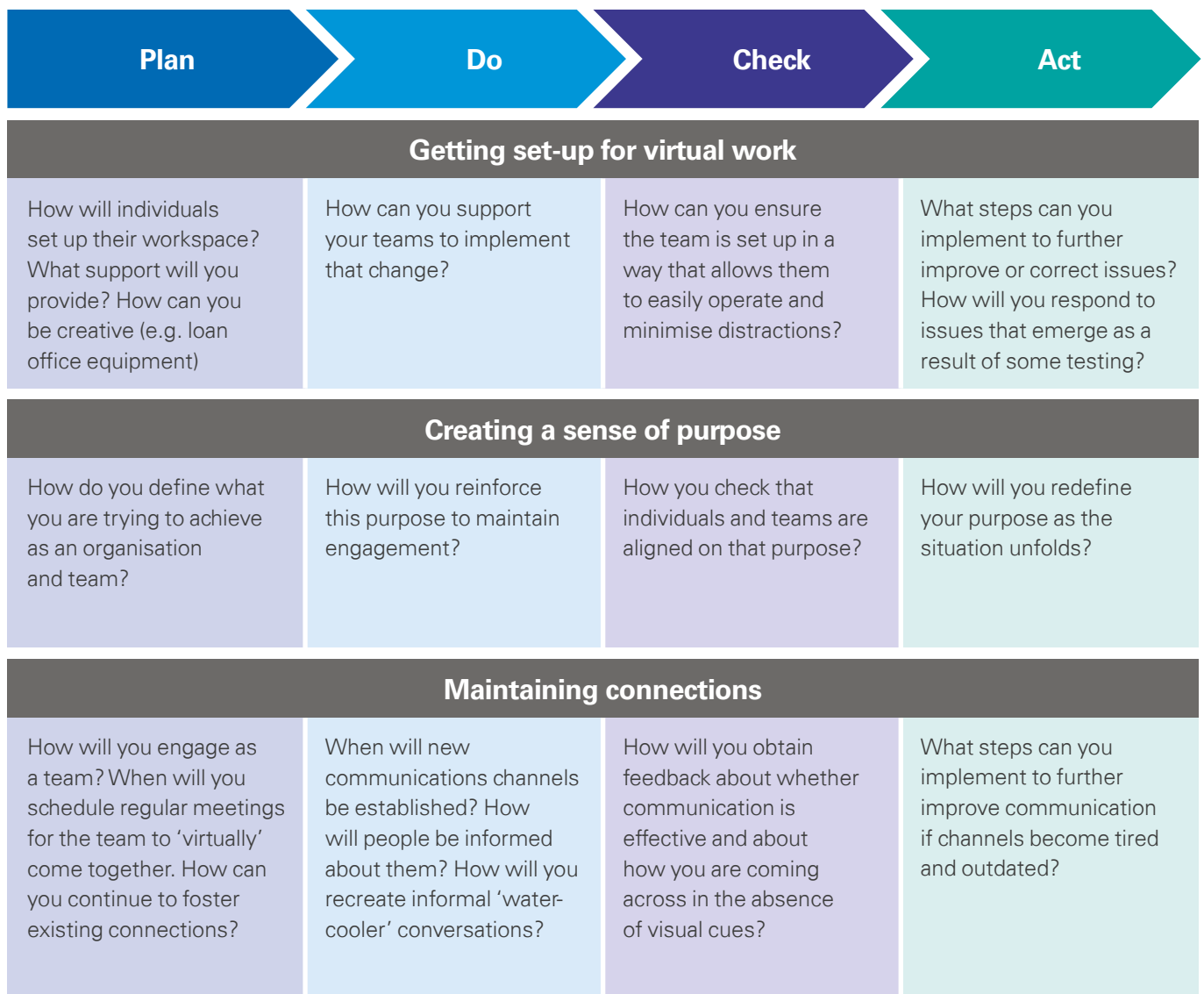
In disruption, maintaining motivation and productivity is on everyone's mind. Remote working does not necessarily result in more focused time, especially when your diary is full of virtual meetings. Add children to the mix, due to school closures, and it can feel impossible to get things done. While it can feel overwhelming for leaders individually, and also for leaders attempting to sustain the high-performance of a team, there are areas in which you can channel effort and consideration in order to give your organisation the best chance of maintaining productivity.

The Plan, Do, Check, Act framework allows you to reconsider various elements of your business, operations and approach to work.



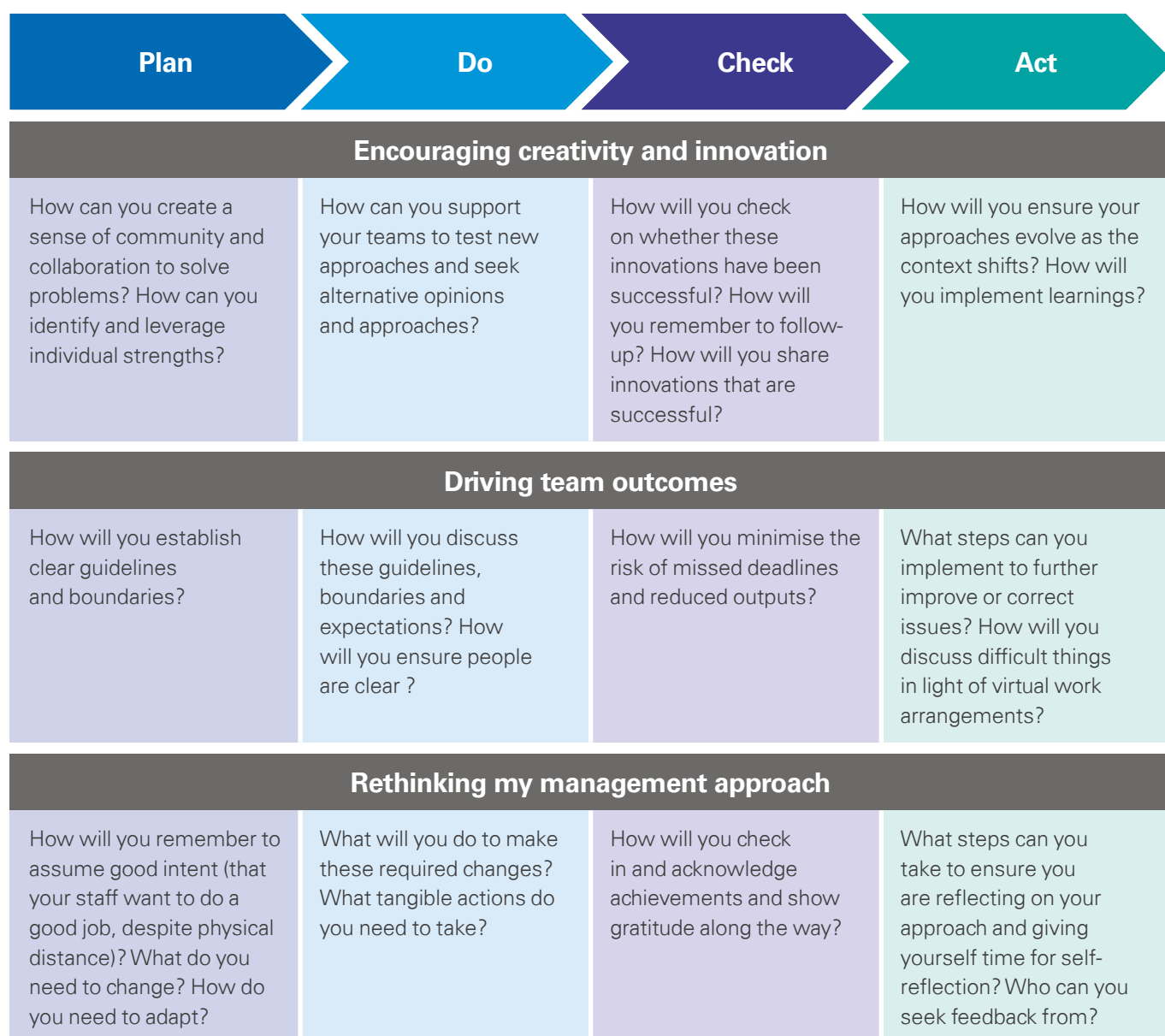
Maintaining productivity

The following pages apply the Plan, Do, Check, Act model to rethink the mechanics of work to sustain productivity. The actions to take would be relevant to your specific context.



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Resilience in isolation

Physical distance, remote work and mental health

The coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic situation poses a major threat to our physical and mental health and, more broadly, our social fabric. Leaders play a key role in ensuring changes we need to make in the ways we work, especially the big increase in remote working, is managed in a way that promotes good mental health for all.

In these unsettling times, it is common to feel overwhelmed and experience fear, anxiety, frustration and confusion. These are normal reactions to a not-normal time which impact you, as a leader, as much as it impacts your staff.

There is good evidence about what works, where the threats are, and what we can do as leaders to maintain our own wellbeing and support our staff, colleagues and clients.

Professor Ian Hickie, co-director of the Brain and Mind Centre, University of Sydney, identifies two key factors that drive good mental health while experiencing prolonged uncertainty and physical distance.



Personal autonomy

Being able to be in control of our life and working arrangements means individuals know the risks and threats, and are empowered to take action to minimise the risks for themselves, their colleagues and loved ones.



Social Connection

With strong human connection, we thrive. In situations where we feel threatened, we usually seek and stay close physically to those we know and trust. Maintaining social connection, despite physical distance, is a key driver of wellbeing outcomes for you and your staff.

There are many proactive actions we can take to avoid feeling helpless, especially when the threat is changing constantly. So, as leaders, what can we do to respond appropriately?

Resilience in isolation

Physical distance, remote work and mental health

Maintain social connection despite physical distance

The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in increased physical distance, not social distance. What we actually need to be doing is maintaining social cohesion despite physical distance. With a dramatic decline in face-to-face contact, we need to implement strategies to increase social connection among peers, colleagues and teams. Find ways to talk more often, share more often, and create the 'water-cooler' conversations that would normally occur in the workplace. Start calls with five minutes of non-work-related chatter. Open up by sharing something personal, and ask open questions to enable others to follow. Set up WhatsApp chats where team members can exchange important and entertaining information. Humour can lighten the mood.

Encourage agency

Telling people what to do is not enough. This has been reinforced following government directives not to hoard. People need information so they have agency and can act, individually and collectively. Rather than telling people what to do, enable them to take productive social and personal actions by giving them the tools and information to respond appropriately for their unique work and personal situation. Enable them to answer the question 'what do I need to do?' for themselves, as stringent directives will not work for all people in all situations. Provide people useful information that encourages agency and allows them to drive their own decision making.

Don't delay decisions, act quickly, act locally

We all like proactive action when we feel threatened. Do what you need to do as leaders, make decisions early, don't delay, but rather, act in real-time. Enable your local leadership to communicate early and implement local support. This will build trust and provide reassurance to your staff that you are acting swiftly and not lagging behind.

Acknowledge the uncertainty

The uncertain timeframe for the coronavirus pandemic intensifies feelings of unease, because we simply do not know if and when things will start to feel normal. Telling people not to worry or to 'calm down' and 'not panic' usually has the opposite effect. However, do communicate that things are changing and will continue to evolve.

Resilience in isolation

Physical distance, remote work and mental health

The wellbeing of our colleagues, staff and teams has a direct impact on engagement, performance and productivity. Normalise discussions about wellbeing to encourage people to share and support each other. For example, you could set up an online link and ask everyone to answer the question 'how are you feeling'. Generate a word cloud and discuss the emerging themes via an online call.

Make remote working, work

In these situations, it is critical that you take care of your body and mind.

Some strategies that you can try, and encourage across your team, include:

- Sticking to your normal routine as much as possible.
- Staying connected to friends, family and colleagues – asking yourself each day 'who are two people in the team I can send a text message to, who might be feeling isolated?'
- Establishing daily 15 minute stand-up calls to provide the latest information and share concerns and achievements.
- Set up WhatsApp groups to provide more informal avenues for connection.
- Doing things to make you feel good and grounded.
- Maintaining exercise if you can – your number of daily steps are likely to decline working remotely. Turn on your sitting alarm on your smart watch or set a timer to make sure you move around every 45 minutes.
- Take a break from the news. Instead, share good news across the team, stay friendly and help others.

Finally, maintaining social connection during of physical isolation is what really matters. Find ways to enable your teams and staff to speak more, share more, and connect more, with those they trust and work well with, in the absence of daily face-to-face contact.

Tools for staying connected

There are a number of tools available to support virtual working.

The examples below are tools used by KPMG, and may not address your specific requirements. Any decision you make should be subject to your own specific functional and IT security requirements. KPMG does not endorse or promote any of the below products.

Collaboration Tools

Microsoft 365



Teams

Collaboration tool for teamwork, communications and files in topic specific channels.



Planner

Create plans, assemble and assign tasks, share files, communicate and collaborate with other users, and receive progress updates.



One Note

Capture and organise meeting notes and share.



Yammer (internal)

Connect and collaborate quickly with groups based on interests and work areas.

Facilitation Tools

Microsoft 365



Whiteboard

Virtual dashboard to collaborate with others at the same time.



Stream

Corporate video sharing service.



Bookings

An easy to set up and customisable scheduling and booking app.

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Productivity Tools

Microsoft 365



Planner

Create plans, assemble and assign tasks, share files, communicate and collaborate with other users, and receive progress updates.



myAnalytics

Personal dashboard to understand how you collaborate with colleagues and spend your time at work.



Forms

Internal survey tool, providing built in analytics to evaluate responses.



Project Online

MS project plans online.



To Do

Manage, prioritise, and complete the most important activities to achieve each day.

There are other non-Microsoft tools available to support productivity.

Contact us

We are happy to share our insights. Contact us at any time to discuss the transitions you are experiencing in the way you work.

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