

Leadership Traits of a Remote Worker

By Kevin Van Vliet, April 2021

A simple internet search on productivity and working remotely is quite intriguing. Try it. The results are a complete mix of everything from “long-term remote work is leading to a global drop in productivity” to “90% of employers say working remotely hasn’t hurt productivity” to a simple statement such as “remote workers are more productive.” The pandemic has clearly had a large impact on our lives as we grapple with varying levels of lockdown. The shift to remote work, for many of us, happened almost instantaneously. Some companies made the transition easily, others struggled. Some just carried on as usual because their businesses and business models had already embraced remote work parameters.

The vast array of opinions on what works and doesn’t flood our inboxes, all trying to find the secret formula for success in a radically shifted world. Taking a step back and looking at where we were in March 2020 as compared to now is eye opening, to say the least. Is there some sort of ideal that companies can adhere to? Probably not. Each company and each individual will have a unique set of circumstances to navigate as we all seek to maintain and perhaps even grow productivity and seek a new norm. Through my observations thus far, there are several topics that are worth exploring more.

Leadership Principles

Of course, there is the work itself. Being at home can be very tough for those that don’t have the self-discipline. There are simply too many distractions at arm’s length. I think there are (at least) 3 leadership principles that are required for all of us to work effectively from home:

1. Ownership

- Own your work from beginning to end,
- Continue to build trust among your peers,
- Execution matters, and
- Keep recognition and a sense of belonging at the forefront

Doing these things helps you and others feel a sense of accomplishment. It shows that you care about your work and take pride in it. It places value on yourself and others, knowing that what you are doing translates into real results. Arrive on time to meetings and show respect for others’ time. Be prepared for meetings and be willing to contribute. If there isn’t value in attending, then find a way to excuse yourself from future meetings. Focus less on updates and more on what is coming next, including potential roadblocks to achieving goals.

2. Innovation

- Use products that help you to work at peak capacity
- Rethink your processes and understand why you are doing what you are
- Seek innovative solutions

Using products and setting up work environments that allow you to perform at your best is key to achieving success. If this means having four monitors to help you separate the various aspects of your work, do it. Don’t just go through the motions; understand why you are doing it and ask if you

don't know. It is far too easy to make assumptions and go off on tangents when your peers are not as readily available. It is amazing what physical presence does for the mind. Without it, we tend to think that people are away, even when their little green indicator on the screen shows the opposite. We are presented with enormous opportunities to infuse innovation into our work. To think of an easy example, how much are you running to the printer these days?

3. Transparency

- Make data and information accessible so people can use it
- Documentation is key to align with the company and contribute seamlessly
- Tell the whole truth, be vulnerable and believe in teamwork

Don't save everything to your personal desktop. This doesn't help the team build success together. It only serves to isolate and potentially cause serious frustration if you've gone down a path that is less desirable. Continue to seek out advice and support from others; understand that many hands make light work. Turn on your camera in meetings and participate fully. So much communication happens when we can actually see each other – sometimes without a word being said! Be available, get your work done, communicate so much more than you think you need to.

Your Work Environment

How many of us have been relegated to the icy environs of the basement with cold concrete floors? We've set up some resemblance of a desk at our kitchen table, coffee table, or kids playroom table. We've taken over our living rooms, dining rooms and kitchens and now call these places "work." For those with younger children we get to entertain, be a parent and work all at the same time. As the kids know you are always there, they come to you for absolutely everything. Some people may become experts at being engaged, focused and productive with toddlers as co-workers, and some people may not.

I am fortunate to be able to have a space in our home that I can call my own for parts of the day. It is bright, I can sit at a desk and chair that are at a correct ergonomic height, or to sit on the couch depending on what I'm working on, who I'm meeting with or what type of tone I want to convey. My kids are old enough to know that I need this space to work and we have established some decent guidelines around working from home. Having a separate space also allows us to separate ourselves from work when the time comes, giving our family the opportunity to focus our efforts elsewhere, helping to ensure that work does not consume all our hours.

Someone told me a funny story the other day. Their family wakes up in the morning as usual and eats breakfast. Mom gets ready for work, bag in hand, waves bye to the others and heads out the front door. She then walks around the block to leave enough time for the rest of the family to head upstairs. After a few minutes, Mom very quietly goes back in the house and into her office to start her workday. I thought it was both cute and a stroke of genius. Can you relate?

You

How well you take care of yourself has a large part to play in your ability to contribute successfully at work, and at home. With gyms and fitness centres closed or restricted, people simply stop exercising, and this has had a part to play in their mental state during their workday, especially for those who were

more physically active prior to the shutdown. Easy access to the refrigerator all the while getting groceries delivered to your front door on a moment's notice has certainly had an impact as well. The opportunities to get together with friends in many different ways, whether it is going for a bike or meeting up at the cinema or simply enjoying a nice meal together, have diminished significantly. We will try for a period of time to exercise in our basements or sign up with a ready to make meal service or schedule an online meet up with friends to satisfy the needs, but it isn't the same.

All of this reminds me how important social interaction is, even for an introvert. We must continue to seek ways to connect with others, to exercise, and to eat healthy. It can have a profound impact. From my own experience, it has been extremely easy to hit the snooze button several times before finally getting up and getting on the bike trainer in the morning. Even if it is only a small amount of time, biking helps me to feel energized and ready to jump at the workday. It allows me to spend a few minutes planning what I hope to accomplish. This has led to a more concerted effort to eat healthy. Instead of grabbing the next sugary item on my counter that will momentarily satisfy a craving, I plan my meals in advance and ensure that a balanced diet is kept. If the junk food isn't in the house, all the better. And I find I do reach out to others more often, simply as a check-in or to have a good laugh to break up the meetings or silence throughout the day.

There are many things we can do for ourselves that help lift our mental state and can prepare us to take on whatever is next. Maintaining a good sleep schedule, scheduling time to play with our kids or taking a few minutes to go for a walk with our partner are all surprisingly simple things we can do to keep ourselves lifted up.

Taking care of yourself helps you to remain engaged and focused. Setting up your work environment properly allows you to restore some structure in your day and a place that you can call work. Following some key leadership principles helps to ground your actions each day and give you and the teams you work with, a sense of purpose. Keep these things in mind as you look to the months ahead and start to set some goals. You will be amazed at what can be accomplished, even while working remotely.