

Introduction

Results from our facilitated video conference networking sessions

AGM Transitions and the Bestem network partnered for a series of video calls with over 20 CEOs and other senior executives in the UK, Italy, France, Holland, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway and Dubai. This document is one of three that comes out of that process. The resulting documents are handbooks which articulate

- The macro challenges faced by leaders
- The context that applies by sector and geography
- A series of practical tips for leaders

The handbooks deal with the agenda for leaders in

- Working remotely
- Sharing experience
- Driving transformation.

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Setting the scene

There is good reason to believe that transformational change is coming

- The whole world is affected this time around, not just specific sectors or regions
- The solutions for the macro-economy (countries, governments, MLAs) and the microeconomy (companies, markets) are mutually dependent and inextricably interlinked
- Change is long overdue in a whole range of socio-economic areas which have been behaving dysfunctionally for some time
- Overarching these areas of change are themes of profound social importance, including: climate change, social equality and responsible corporate citizenship
- Technology has never been readier to play a key enabling role in all of the above
- Leaders are hungrier than ever before for new paradigms, effective tools and practical tips for transformational leadership



Internal ways of working have changed

Participants reported that different roles were coming to the fore, that in some cases productivity was increasing and that it was harder to get a feeling for the mood of an organisation. Building mutual trust and employee welfare in the workplace are becoming hot topics.

FINDINGS

Operations vs Planning: Current working style is biased to maintaining operations. Taking time for planning and creativity is easily ignored.

Employee Welfare: This is a stressful time the ability of colleagues to function at their peak will be influenced by factors such as physical workspaces, child care arrangements and others living in the same building.

Informal Comms: While productivity may increase in some areas informal communications – coffees and water cooler chats may disappear. Make time for colleagues to get together for no reason other than informal chats.

Meeting culture: companies are finding some types of meeting disappear and those that take place are more “to the point”. People tend to be better prepared.

Rumours: Watch out for the spread of rumours and misinformation (see topic on information asymmetry).

CONSIDER

Internal Trust: Clear concise information delivery is coupled with transparent, widely shared updates. Some companies are recording leadership 5mins to be played across the organisation each week, others are holding virtual town-halls.

Checking in: Team leaders and middle management can check in on their teams on a one to one basis. Admin staff can be tasked with calling to check in on people as their roles may be less demanding currently.

Virtual Coffees and Beers: Designate times where colleagues can touch base with no agenda. Not a “meeting” but a social gathering. Do it regularly possibly even daily.



Doing business with others is harder than before

Remote presence technology requires special attention when dealing with other people and organisations outside your company. Our discussions highlighted the difference between operational calls and business development interaction and occasions when the person you are talking with is someone you already know well.

FINDINGS

Business Development: There are no opportunities to “bump” into people in corridors. Customer are busy looking internally and service providers feel out of the loop. Large strategic decisions resting with top management and not being delegated (leading to faster decisive action). Small decisions – those made by committee – are not functioning.

Negotiation: Hard to “read” the other party to understand the nuance of body language. Harder to uncover unspoken wants and needs.

Networking: Becomes harder as new introductions and relationships are difficult to generate.

Politics: Reducing within customer and supplier organisations with people becoming focussed on short-sharp messages with clear purpose.

Fund Raising: Organisations looking for funds find it harder to engage with prospective financiers.

CONSIDER

External Trust: Building and maintaining trust can be done by promoting transparency, regular open communications to suppliers and customers.

New Connections: When making new connections sponsorship from a trusted mutual acquaintance can help. Using initial video calls can help build relationships.

Checking in: Checking in with customers when there is no overt purpose. Whether that’s a virtual beer or some other way. Just asking how things are going can add insight.

Handling Tension: These are stressful times for everyone. Don’t read too much into the tone of a conversation. Call back on a different day and confirm understanding and what actions should be taken.



Innovation is happening very quickly

We found that many companies talked about finding new ways to use technology, to automate processes and to reconfigure their operations. Different offices and units were finding new ways to work and internal leaders were finding ways to share, learn and copy.

FINDINGS

Long term solutions: Make do-and-mend is the motto to work around short term issues, creative temporary solutions to temporary problems is OK. Some areas are likely to forever change the way work is done - companies were keen to create lasting competitive advantages here.

Structured vs unstructured: Some companies were letting their divisions find their own solutions while others were placing structure around the areas in which innovation was happening.

Share learnings: Some companies were actively promoting the sharing of solutions between divisions and were engaging with other companies to share experiences.

Look outside your sector for ideas: Innovation is happening rapidly. Keep a watching eye. Those with school age children are witnessing new learning/group-coordination processes evolving rapidly in the education sector.

CONSIDER

Encourage sharing: As divisions solve problems create ways to quickly share solution “high lights” with leaders and facilitate cross-division teams to enable copying of best practices.

Ask for solutions: There are in people your company who will have potential solutions but don’t know that others have problems. Share the issues and facilitate solution finding.

Scan for ideas: Keep a look out and network outside your organisation and industry. New ideas are being created which could help you too.

Scoring and sorting: There will be many more ideas and experiments possible than time to implement. Operations will probably implement the ones they “NEED TODAY”, consider collecting ideas and score them to prioritise where to allocate resources in order to build long-term competitive advantage.

New ways are being found to use technology

The current business environment is switching to making much more use of remote working and other IT technologies. While accelerating the adoption of systems that were put in place before, wide scale innovation and increases in capacity have the potential to throw up surprises.

FINDINGS

Capacity & scale: Companies are finding that scalability of IT systems (and behind the scenes fulfilment) don't always keep up with pace. This can be internal systems but also those of suppliers.

Automation of processes: Companies are finding that process automation means that they can reduce head-count or remove workers from areas where social contact was previously required.

Video conferencing: Microsoft teams is emerging as a fully featured system that some companies have deployed and learned to use, other technologies such as Zoom, Splunk are easier to deploy and learn – but have less rich functionality and pose future security issues.

Voice or video: Video is an intense experience and potentially creates situations of discomfort, audio only calls enable people to move around and perform other tasks while talking.

CONSIDER

Fulfilment capacity: Understand that on-line channels may attract more demand than you can fulfil, make plans for managing demand and creating scalability in the IT platforms.

When to use video: It will be easy to now default to always using video. This may become the equivalent of the meeting-culture in offices. Sometimes it's better to just pick up the phone.

What can be automated: Are there quick ways to automate processes (using robotic process automation for instance) which will provide extra capacity at lower cost?

Information security: The rapid switch to on-line services (such as zoom and google-drive) creates security issues that are already being exploited by hostile states. While expediting needed solutions may be required, make sure that IT risks are managed as soon as possible.



Productivity measures are being redefined

Participants mentioned that they had seen boosts in productivity during the current crisis. This is not evenly distributed – with some roles becoming impossible and others being well suited to new ways of working. Some of the productivity is down to changed attitudes and darned hard work, other elements are more nuanced.

FINDINGS

Structural vs. hard work: Some gains in output are attributable to people working harder and longer. Other elements are from structural changes in the way that work is performed.

Output oriented: Both companies and customers are judging performance on measurable outcomes, not on the way that the work is performed.

Some work is burst oriented: Some studies are measuring key-board/screen time and concluding productivity is up because time spent is up. But some work is best performed in bursts, this can co-exist better with child-care responsibilities and other such interlaced activity.

Sometimes need peace and quiet: Some work, including taking calls from customers and detailed planning – requires a quiet environment, not all home-working can provide this.

CONSIDER

Defining productivity: Make sure that you are really measuring outcomes that matter – not inputs that may not matter as much.

Be flexible in approach: Prescribing defined ways to work may inhibit creativity and innovation. Specify the outcomes and share learnings (See notes on innovation).

Allocate roles depending on environment: Understand the working situation of staff and allocate job-content based on the physical availability and family circumstances of employees. Make more use of teams and work-cells to enable role-allocation.

Building remote trust: While it is possible to measure screen and keyboard time and monitor the “productivity” of employees using technology – be aware that this may not correlate with valuable output and may undermine bonds of trust and mutual support.



Information asymmetry leads to unpredictability

When communications move away from face-to-face interactions, and especially in times of stress and uncertainty bad information can start to flow. This is seen in other settings where private channels of information can distort findings.

FINDINGS

Increased distrust of HQ: Remote offices can feel left out of the loop (even if they aren't), believing that HQ has a plan that they are not sharing, leading to nervousness and wrong assumptions.

No longer in the open-plan: Managers used to working in open-plan would be able to intercept information and set record straight quickly. Staff would observe interactions and discern business as usual vs. planning for change. These informal cues are no longer available.

Beware malicious operators: While everyone is in it together right now, there is potential for division to fomented and for false information to spread without being detected – this may be company specific or at a wider level.

CONSIDER

Open communication: Share real information (even when you don't have the answers). Remind people of what was said and demonstrate that you are sticking to the plan – or why you are changing it.

Check in more frequently: To replace the open plan environment, check in one-on-one with people regularly. This will be difficult because your workload has increased, but make time for it as it is now part of the job.

Set up “whistle blowing” systems: In the same way that whistle blowing is encouraged for cases of harassment or other bad management, make it clear to people that they need to be vigilant about the potential for misinformation to be spread and ask them to flag any concerns to help the company survive.



Structural changes will last beyond this moment

Some productivity boosts are being delivered by structural changes (distinct from working harder). These changes are likely to last beyond the current situation. It is possible to take the current temporary operating changes and turn these into longer lasting opportunities.

FINDINGS

Automation of processes: Lack of people has led to realisation that many front- and back-office functions can be automated.

Automation of operations: Many industries, such as oil and gas, are relying on remote monitoring and control and finding that this works well.

Moving away from physical: Companies, especially those dealing in information services – like oil and gas trading – find they do not need to co-locate.

Talent is top of agenda: Whether that's retaining current talent, looking forward to access to talent made redundant or using remote technology to unlock talent previously unused.

Broken trust: Distributors and retailers may have to earn back the goodwill with their supply chain partners abandoned during the apparently binary world of the epidemic.

CONSIDER

Removing manual intervention: Both in administration processes and physical operations, previous business cases based on cost may need to be revisited if social distancing and remote-working become lasting trends.

Office space requirement: If people can work from home more often removing cost of office space may be possible.

Commuting: People are more productive with less commuting. This may result in changes to London-weightings and the economics of season-ticket subsidy.

Engaging talent: Providing flexible working as normal may lead to higher retention rates and the ability to engage talent that must locate remotely due to other commitments.

Investing in welfare: Continue to provide direct reputational enhancing activities in supply countries, differentiate your brand from the generic “the West”.



The way we behave “in the office” needs to evolve

The adoption of remote working practices has resulted in changes to the way individuals and groups interact within the company. The concept of an “office” is changing and groupings based on physical location may be obsolete. Some of the behaviours related to proximity will need to adapt.

FINDINGS

Casual interactions missing: Water cooler / coffee breaks are now missing. This results in less shared situational awareness and serendipitous moments.

Decreased body language: Subtle non-verbal communications cues can be missing, leading to less mutual understanding or modified communication approaches.

Balancing the formal with the informal: There is a balance to be struck between the need for formal communication, informal insights into personal lives (dogs, children etc.) and lack of opportunity for workplace emotional intelligence.

Lacking junior sponsorship: In the traditional office environment senior staff would support juniors they saw struggling, unofficial mentoring relationships developed, this is now harder to achieve.

CONSIDER

New ways to socialise: The virtual water cooler, the virtual coffee machine, the virtual drinks session have all made an appearance in recent weeks with some cultures commenting that it is important to creating a safe space for banter.

Active listening: Body language is a big deal where the business culture is tactile. It has particular relevance in the negotiating and business development arenas where the lack of human cues is challenging. “It is tough negotiating with a fuzzy image when you cannot even see anything more than the top of a head.”

Acknowledging context: When something needs to be formal make sure you are in the right setting. Don’t forget to think about how you are communicating, not just what.

Junior support networks: Despite the perception that younger people are more tech savvy, there is also a perception that they suffer from the lack of immediate commentary and guidance in the workplace.



Maintaining corporate culture requires more thought

Leading a group of people through significant periods of time requires different skills than transactional encounters or team management. Building a sense of shared purpose, goals and long-term trust among members of a company will require modification of traditional methods.

FINDINGS

On-boarding new talent: Not only are there technical issues regarding deploying and configuring equipment there are cultural hurdles to introducing new team members into the established hierarchy.

Conveying shared values: Our behaviour is influenced by those we are physically close to. As the physical and logical groupings of people change it may become harder to unify value-based behaviour.

Solitary work can increase stress: Stress is not only caused by social isolation but the inability to self-bench-mark against others, fuelling anxiety, self-doubt and 18 hour-work days among those prone to this.

Sense of being out-of-the loop: In the same physical environment it is easier to sense when things are “normal”. Remote offices can feel that HQ are keeping them in the dark. The same applies to remote-working, only more so.

CONSIDER

Structured on-boarding: Leaders should consider the information needs of employees coming into the organisation in a structured way, communicate changes clearly to the organisation.

Reinforce core values: Leaders need new ways to convey company beliefs. The distinctive aspects of organisations will evolve during the phase of virtual working. Tolerance of difference and for diverse ways of appearing in the workplace are likely to be required.

Monitor for burn-out: Keeping an eye out for the warning signs of increased anxiety and over-work. Ensure that your team achieves balance to avoid catastrophic failures.

Anticipate rumours and devolve decisions: Predict what alternative explanations could crop up, monitor for them and pre-empt. The role of corporate HQs may also have to change to allow decision-making to take place at the local level.



I believe that to prosper in the post COVID-19 world we will all have to innovate. Driven by digitalisation, emerging technologies, climate change, health crises and political upheaval the world is quickly changing. Competitors threaten your territory, customers demand more and your workforce expect better. Companies must coordinate an accelerated response. Business as usual will not be enough and innovative approaches to products, markets and organisation are required.

Leaders know they must have an agenda, and they do. The daily barrage of challenges, however, leaves no time to personally oversee action. Delegation leads to lack of visible progress, to lots of talk and to many started initiatives - but little measurable outcome. Successful innovations are one-off events which are not repeated.

I have created an acceleration system that, when implemented, creates a environment fertile for managing innovation. I teach your team to execute a series of defined steps and each time they are executed a culture forms and the organisation remains focussed on the your agenda as it gets quicker and better at commercialising innovation. This process means you can access regular progress data and track outcomes.



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I founded the Bestem Network in 2014, having had over 30 years experience commercialising innovations. I have lived and worked in European, Soviet, Asian and Arabic cultures. I am an electronics engineer with an MBA from London Business School. I have worked for Schlumberger, Deloitte and BG Group and been independent for more than 10 years.

Unlike an expensive army of management consultants, I teach and coach your team to deliver an innovation system that you will run. I start by establishing your agenda then assess current ways of working. I take an engineer's approach to designing interventions to install the system with minimal reorganisation.

To discuss this or any other matter, please do not hesitate to call or email.



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Working with senior executives, we plan and implement career strategies and we build lasting business solutions in role.

What makes us so **distinctive**?

- We build long-term relationships with our clients as their transition requirements evolve
- We are truly international in our reach and mindset
- We mobilise a wide range of international, sectoral and functional networks for our clients.

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