Stand Tall

One of the certainties, in this time of change, is that work will never be the same again. The need to shift to home working in order to slow the spread of Covid 19 will have a huge impact on the way we work forever. As leaders managing teams remotely now, it is time to stand tall and make a conscious effort to take good care of your team members, helping them to feel safe and secure in your leadership. Your teams will be looking at you right now, for guidance. This will mean making a conscious effort to lead and manage differently. When we look back at this time, we want to be satisfied with the route we took to get here, and happy in the way we looked after people.

So take time, breathe deeply and focus on yourself first. Give yourself the space to examine your new leadership approach and to set an intention to take good care of your staff. This will help you plan. Your plans will shift and change, but for right now, by being prepared, will get you to the next step, and your team members will feel as secure as they can in your guidance.

At the heart of every outstanding leader is a set of core values which you use as a blueprint to guide your actions. You will all have your own unique values, but if in any doubt, or need a quick fix, you could try the 4 C's, as a way in which to support your staff from the heart. They are: Care; Count; Capable; and Courageous. By following these you are making sure that individuals feel cared for; that they feel that they matter and that their views are important; that they feel capable and can achieve; and that they feel brave. By following these whenever you are in touch with a team member, means that you won't go far wrong. They should give you confidence to take the next step forward.

The next step is to examine the priorities for your team. These may well have shifted as we get used to being at home and working in a different way. What is it that your team needs to do over the next three months? Make a list of short term and long term priorities. Wherever you can, make sure that they link to the vision of your team, or that of the university. It is important to keep them in mind as they will give you and your team members a purpose. Make sure you are clear about your expectations of team members. It also helps maintain some consistency, in a time when so many things have changed. This helps our brains to cope and for your staff to find an anchor in their new working world.

You will need to check to see that each team member has the equipment and software they need. Find out about their home lives - do they have dependents that are at home?, where will they work from? Knowing the context of their lives will help you support them in the way that they need further down the line.

So this leads to communication. Right now, the more communication, the better. It is better to over do it, until a more even keel becomes the norm, and your team begin to float more calmly. I would consider introducing the following with each team member:
1. A daily check in phone call for a few minutes
2. A more in depth weekly conversation

3. Two team meetings a week with a brief, set agenda, lasting 30 minutes. (the agenda could be: a personal check in with individuals, a work check in with individuals; Who needs help with what? And new ideas/learning)
4. Maybe an informal virtual team cup of tea once a week or a quiz, via Zoom.

You will need to set communication expectations, which should be described as non-negotiables. This will be tricky at the start as people get used to a new way, and they may also have existing priorities in their calendar. Put meetings in your team's diaries and soon there will be a flow. Encourage your team members to support each other and communicate outside of the meetings you have established. You could include communication on lessons learned; celebrate small wins, send out positive messages and photographs, and if people can't attend a meeting you can record it, or ask for a volunteer to give feedback to the person that was unable to attend. Your aim is to create opportunities to communicate, and the more that this happens, the more likely it is that your team members will carry this on, supporting one another, and creating a tight community or team once again.

You should have already established work objectives with each member of your team, and have been meeting regularly, holding one to ones, to measure progress towards those objectives. For the time being your team members can follow these objectives, but help them understand that these are likely to change a little as newer tasks, arising as a result of this novel situation, will need to become priorities. Once you have reminded yourself of each person's objectives, then take time to talk to them. Ask them what their objectives are, and also remind them gently of the ones they already had on their list. Support them to establish their own goals and deadlines, but be clear about your expectations of them. This stage is one where you need to take a different leadership approach - one where you step back. It's up to you to make the decision to measure each team member's performance through their outcomes, rather than how early or late they are responding to emails. In fact sending and responding to emails can really lower productivity. Remember this is not about presenteeism but about achieving outcomes that you and your team members have discussed and planned for. So look at the results not how many hours people are spending on email, or where they are working, but focus on delivery of those outcomes. Your initial conversations about context and home life will help you to do this really well. Micro management has never really worked, in any situation, so now is the chance to embrace a new kind of leadership. One which your team members will appreciate and respect, one which builds trust across the team.

Share individual objectives as a team, so everyone knows who is doing what. This will help individuals to achieve their objectives, and will reduce duplication of work. It also helps people to come together and work on joint projects, which is a good way of maintaining motivation, if it should drop. These collaborations will also lead to improved wellbeing, better systems and enhanced ideas, products or services. Don't add tasks unnecessarily as this can be overwhelming for team members. Most importantly, trust your team. They know what they are doing, and if not, the chances are they can work it out. They work hard and if they are communicating as the supportive team you have established, then they will be accountable to one another. This will strengthen your team.

Don't allow this situation to put you and your team off working on a range of tasks. We aren't sure when we will be back at the university, and even when we are, this time working remotely will lead to a new way of working, one which doesn't have a central focus for many of us any more. It is a time for learning and deep reflection, and encouraging our team members to step up and lead themselves.

You will use many different kinds of technology during this time. It is a great opportunity to try something new. Initially try and use tools which don't take long to learn. If you introduce something and it is tedious, then listen to your team members and be prepared to let go and try something else. There will be a lot of innovation within your team, you just have to let it emerge. Reflect on any new tools used as a team, ask your team what they think. Was it useful, or is there something better out there.? So expect a lot of chopping and changing, as that is where creativity lies. Be flexible in your leadership, change what you are doing or how you are doing it, if it feels clunky or not up to the task you had in mind. You want technology that helps rather than hinders.

In conclusion:
Pay attention to the 4 C's and keep asking yourself if you implemented them in every interaction with your team members? Do they feel cared for? Do they feel that they count? Do they feel that they Capable? Do they feel courageous? Check in with yourself. Be present for your team. Be prepared to listen, repeat messages and clarify again and again, and be patient. Be intentional in your leadership behaviours and your team will follow you.

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