LOCKDOWN LEADERSHIP
LEADING AN ORGANIZATION (OR A REVOLUTION) FROM YOUR HOME

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The World Has Changed

Can you lead an organization, a revolution, people when you are locked down in your house?

Yes, you can. But it won't be easy.

Lockdown has been introduced in several places across the world as a drastic measure against the spread of Covid-19.

This has forced many leaders and teams into a position they have never been in before. They have to now work remotely.

Fortunately, there are some easy parts to this. For example, it does not take a massive amount of brainpower to install Microsoft Teams across all devices for your team and to start communicating via this channel immediately.

But, and this is important, remote work does not a remote team make.

To really help our teams to rise to the top and bring the best out in each other we need to adopt new ways of thinking and being.

If you are hoping that this will blow over and things will get back to normal soon then you might be averse to this idea as you see the current situation more as a pitstop than a detour.

But I want to encourage you to assume a longer duration of the current situation. As my friend, John Sanei, said, "Act like we are never going back to normal."

I know that's not what you want to hear.

But embracing the idea that this might be a lot longer play is a necessary first step if you are going to assist your team in committing to this way of working.

I want you to know that I have had the same resistance.

For the past few years, I have had the privilege of working with many teams as I facilitated coaching sessions and off-sites for them. There is nothing that beats the energy that is created in a room when a team of talented and intelligent individuals are feverishly working on bringing new ideas to life.

Although I have often facilitated conversations for teams online, I found myself thinking time and time again that "it's just not the same".

And that's exactly the point.

It's not. But, also, it's not supposed to be.

We cannot build new ways of working on old ways of thinking.

It took me some time, but I am now fully accepting of working with teams online. I enjoy it. I measure it differently. I approach it differently.

I hope that you will make that shift too.

There are two reasons why I decided to write this article:

1 It's my sincere desire to help leaders and teams reach new heights even when locked down.

2 I love the phrase Lockdown Leadership.

So, below you will find a few **high-value ideas** on how to lead a team during times of lockdown where isolation and distance is the norm.

A QUICK SIDE NOTE:
Leading A Virtual Community Of 18,000

For a moment in time, I was the founder and leader of a community called BetterMan. Obviously, this was a community dedicated to the self-development of men. Without going into too much detail we rapidly grew this community to about 18,000 members.

It was a great experience as I frequently got recognized on the street (yes, I liked the small bit of micro-fame) but more importantly I received messages every single day about how the work that we were doing was positively impacting people's lives.

For the rest of this article, I am going to be drawing from my experience as a specialist team coach and keynote speaker. In 2018 I received my Master's degree in Business and Executive Coaching. I tell you that because I want you to know that I do my best to combine the latest research with my own practical experience.

But before we get to that, I want to tell you the number one lesson I learned from my time as a community leader and it is this:

Your visibility and consistency is everything. Your presence, albeit virtual, counts for a hell of a lot.

Be visible. Every single day. Show that you are leading, trying, inspiring, and supporting your people.

Be consistent. With showing up. But also in the way you treat the people on your team.

We'll cover more of this during the course of this book.

For now, let's dive in.

#1 The Bearable Deadline And The Three Directives

What makes this experience so unsettling is that there is no end in sight. If there were, things would be easier.

Seeing the **clock countdown** makes the unbearable bearable. It gives us something to aim at.

In fact, whether it's counting down reps, or counting down time, or seeing the finish line, I have always found that in those last moments I can push harder.

Goals do this for us. They give us something to work towards.

However, the idea of quarterly goals has been disrupted.

It's impossible to have the exact same goals as you did before.

Therefore my suggestion to teams have been to set three directives for the next 21 days.

The 21 days timeframe provides certainty.

The directives provide direction. (These are not explicit goals but rather a high-level theme.)

For example, during this time one of my prime directives is to add as much value to my clients (and non-clients as possible). This is a high-level theme. What this encompasses though are several goals such as writing substantial blog posts like this one, consistency with the **Expansive podcast**, and delivering **private webinars to teams.**

You cannot move forward like nothing has changed.

Now is the time for short, directed sprints.

Try it.

It's guaranteed to provide your team with some new found energy.

#2 The Magic Question

A question is a gift that unlocks new worlds. It opens the door to a new way of understanding.

One team I worked with really showed me the potential that this question has to reshape the entire dynamics of a team.

And that question is: "What do you need from me?"

When team members turn to each other and ask this question, magic happens.

Leaders should be starting this new transition and phase with this exact question posed to their team.

It's a simple question that can create a deceptive amount of depth in a team in a relatively short period of time.

If there is enough trust in the team you will hear people asking for things such as support, to embrace different ways of working, for more understanding, and for more responsibility.

In a team that has no trust, you will hear generic, superficial requests.

#3 Fix the Meeting

The playground of teams are meetings. And as a virtual team, you will be spending a lot of time in virtual meetings. Which are notoriously bad and often frustrating.

Effective meetings are the signature trait of high-performing teams.

And guess what, if your team currently has a poor experience when meeting, then this will be amplified online.

So, it makes sense to get this right.

Obviously the first thing to figure out is which platform you'll be using. Testing it. Making sure it works. This is virtual meetings 101.

Once that is taken care of you need to find ways to allow the meeting to flow.

I have found that the best meetings always have a few agreements that allow for ultimate flow.

Agreement 1: To The Point

Keep in mind that what makes virtual meetings challenging is the same thing that makes working from home challenging.

Association.

Our screens are associated with scrolling, browsing, opening new tabs, multitasking.

So, guess what happens once the meeting starts?

We check our phones. We see new notifications coming in. We glance at our calendar. We sneakily reply to that Whatsapp message that came in.

What we need is focus and conciseness.

Therefore, the first operating principle for meetings is exactly that:

Meetings are short and everyone's full attention is required.

You could even make a ritual of everyone putting their phones out of reach at the same time as a grand physical gesture of locking into the call.

Agreement 2: Involve Them All

Everyone speaks at every meeting.

Ever noticed how speaking cues are much harder when on a call? Sometimes it's because of a tech issue causing a delay but other times it's because your turn to talk is interrupted by one of the 10 other tiny thumbnails on the screen that were also waiting to talk.

To this end, it might be a good idea to have someone chair and facilitate the meeting. It doesn't always have to be the leader.

It's the role of the facilitator to make sure that we get input from everyone in the meeting.

Agreement 3: The Yoda

A little tip I picked up from Keith Ferrazzi (think it was during his Mindvalley talk).

Appoint someone in the meeting who is willing to challenge what is being said. The Yoda need to say what is not being said in the meetings, help resolve disputes, and ensure that candor is being exercised to the highest level.

An additional role of the Yoda, and the reason why included this point, is to keep the conversation on track. It's easy to get side-lined and go down a tangent. The Yoda recognizes when we are going too deep down a rabbit hole and then pulls people back so that the meeting stays focused and on point.

Agreement 4: Check-In & Out

This is a great little tool and, I cannot believe I am saying this, icebreaker.

A quick check-in before we start is about gauging where people are emotionally before engaging with the meeting. You might not see the power of this right away but I encourage you to give it a go.

I have seen first-hand how people check-in by acknowledging that they aren't in a good place and this immediately provides a moment for the team to rally around their colleagues.

The check-out is a similar process. Everyone ends the call by sharing how they are currently feeling and what they are committing to next.

Agreement 5: **We Will Get Better**

Want a great way to improve meetings?

Do a post-mortem.

Ask your team how they think the meeting went and what could have been done to make the meeting more effective.

Listen to the suggestions. Evaluate them as a team.

Make small tweaks.

Add things that work to the agreements list and keep refining the team operating system in the manner.

#4 From The Ground Up

A remote team is a complex system. It requires all of the fundamentals related to IRL (in real life) teams and more.

There is a ton of research around the important factors that need to be in place for teams to perform at their peak.

Patrick Lencioni showed us that teams need trust, accountability, results, commitment, and conflict.

Project Aristotle, Google's massive undertaking to dissect and understand what makes teams great found that teams need dependability, structure and clarity, meaning, impact, and psychological safety.

As with most developmental endeavors, there are many places where we could start.

However, the grocery list approach rarely ever works and mostly just leads to further overwhelm.

What I have seen is that most teams need to start in one of three areas.

Communication. Accountability. Trust.

Communication

Teams massively under-communicate. Then they go virtual and all of a sudden, they either under-communicate even more or they fall straight over the edge and barrage each other with communication across email, video, Whatsapp, Slack and who knows what else.

There are three components that we need to address here.

Cadence, clarity, and channel.

Cadence   Upfront teams need to decide what their communication cadence will be like. A golden rule is to have at least a daily huddle in which every team member gets to check-in. Preferably this is done via video. From here, we need to agree on when check-ins will happen or when we will convene to check on progress.

Clarity   Digital communication lacks tone. No-one can see your facial expression when typing. Additionally, writing can easily be ambiguous. Therefore, it's important to translate tone – yes, you are encouraged to use emoji's. And to ask yourself whether your writing is clear and concise before hitting the send button.

Channel | The quickest way to overwhelm your team is to use a thousand different applications and channels to communicate. Decide on a channel or medium and stick to it. A daily huddle is done on video. Status reports done via text on Microsoft teams. Keep communications central.

Accountability

Ah, good old accountability.

A word we love to throw around but rarely ever explore for its true meaning.

What does accountability look like in your team?

I'd like to present two interpretations of accountability.

I call them mature and immature accountability.

Immature accountability is when people on the team feel like they are being policed. It's reminiscent of our days at school when your work would be checked and if not done, punishment awaited.

Needless to say, this is not how adults want to be treated in the workplace. Yet, this is the default for many organizations.

Mature accountability, on the other hand, expects the team to hash out how they would like to be treated, how we will make sure that work is done, and of course, what the consequences are for not getting it done.

More importantly, mature accountability is not about catching people out but rather supporting them when they fail. The starting point for the interaction is that we trust each other and will bring our best to the team. Therefore, if someone didn't do what they were supposed to do, the first instinct is not to blame or shame but rather, to move forward with curiosity.

Instead of "shame on you" we say "what happened?"

Instead of "fix it" we say "how can we help?"

Trust

The quality that underpins any high-performing team.

There are many ways in which we can build trust but, for now, I'd like to just draw your attention to the fact that there two different types of trust.

Cognitive trust

Trust tied to the ability to get things done. So, very much related to accountability. This kind of trust says that I believe you will do what you say you will do and that you will do your work with the best interests of the team at heart.ii

Affective trust

Trust related to the care and concern we demonstrate for the people around us. In other words, do you have my back? Or will you be talking behind it?

If we boil this down to its core you need to ask yourself:

- Am I living a life of actions and not just words? (Cognitive trust)
- Do I really care about my teammates and do I show it to them? (Affective trust)

#5 The Virtual Suggestion Box

As your team embraces the virtual way of work they are likely to run into many challenges. I have said this several times before but it bears repeating, remote work is complex.

Working from home seems like a great idea in principle. But the reality hits each of us in different ways.

Your team will likely experience a combination of the following:

- Loss of routine
- Overwhelm
- Loss of connection
- Distraction (you try juggling home-schooling & work)
- No clear separation of work and home life
- Lack of motivation

Trust me on this. That list goes on and on and on.

So, to help your teams navigate this, create a virtual suggestion box. It's really just a Google doc (or any other central document) where the team can log the challenges they are facing at home.

The team can also make suggestions for how the team could collectively improve the virtual team experience.

Refer to this document during meetings to address the challenges and revise the suggestions.

#6 Patience

This is a period of learning for everyone. You and your team will not get the whole "virtual team" thing right without overcoming a myriad of challenges.

But imagine getting to the end of this and having a team that functions well remotely as well as IRL. You would have created a flexible team that can operate even under the most strenuous circumstances.

So, give yourself and your team some space to get this right.

#7 Making Hard Decisions

This is a time for hard decisions. If you are not making some, then you are probably not doing anything about the current situation you are finding yourself in.

Hard decisions range from laying off people to pivoting your business to taking a pay cut to selling off assets.

Here are a few guidelines that might aid you in the decision-making process.

ONE: Document

Keep a journal of what is happening and what you are doing. Not only is journaling a useful exercise that enhances the thinking process but it will serve as a reminder of what you are currently going through.

The CEO of Slack, Stewart Butterfield, did exactly that. It reads like a novel. Filled with suspense, action, and fear.

It's useful because it will help you to better understand how you make decisions. Mostly our decision-making is influenced by our biases & invisible motivations.

The documentation process makes them visible.

Which brings me to the second guideline.

TWO: Your Values

Your decision making is always flowing from your values.

This means that even if you aren't overtly aware of what they are, your decision-making exposes them.

We have seen many people who might say they value their people over profit, but their decisions and actions have shown us otherwise.

If you are someone who values profit > people it's fine. But just say so. Don't pretend.

Ben Horowitz in his book The Hard Thing About Hard Things would recommend that you pay attention to people, products, and then profits. In that order.

Discuss values then discuss decisions.

THREE: Making The Absolute Perfect Decision

We place too much emphasis on the value of one decision.

Guess what?

Once you have made a decision, you get to make another. & another. & another.

That does not mean that decisions should be used carelessly but it means that you get to try again.

Make the best decision you can with the information that you have.

Document it.

See how it plays out.

Make another decision.

Repeat.

Remember, the outcome of the decision is not always an indicator of the quality of the decision. This means that you can make the right decision in the moment and still have a poor outcome or visa versa.

For example, you decide to drive home drunk (bad decision), you get home safely (good outcome). But we cannot, based on the outcome, say that you made a good decision. For more on this read Annie Duke's great book called Thinking in Bets.

FOUR: Braintrust

Most of the leaders I have been speaking to tell me the same thing.

"The quality of my thinking and decision-making has been enhanced because of the team that I have around me."

You must make a decision.

You must bear the consequences of that decision.

You must take responsibility for the decision.

But everything that happens up until the moment of choosing can be informed, supported, bolstered by the incredible people that you have on your team. Use them to stretch your thinking to its limits.

#8 Empathy In Overdrive

This is a crazy time for everyone. You think you understand that people are going through but you probably don't.

Neither do I.

I am doing my best to imagine it but to be honest – it's unfathomable.

There are incredibly many levels to this.

The entrepreneur who might lose his business. The entrepreneur who does.

The employee who takes a pay cut. The employee who is cut.

The freelancer with some work. The freelancer with no work.

The family reliant on a breadwinner who has been retrenched.

The sick. The elderly. The weak.

Now is the time to be more compassionate and more understanding.

For what your teammates might be going through but also the world at large.

#9 Fight The Enemy

Having said all of that now is not the time to back off.

Remember what we are going through is not a pitstop. It's a detour.

Commit to a new way of work in full.

Give your people something to fight for. Because they already are.

A good friend and great entrepreneur, **Rich Mulholland,** did exactly that. He laid all of the cards on the deck (an appropriate metaphor as he is an avid board game player) for his team.

He told them that the business and the people it employs are in trouble.

But that there is a way forward.

An enemy to fight.

He then laid out a plan that showed the team what would be required to keep the business going.

Everyone went of the offensive. Rich even advertised that he would be willing to hire more salespeople during this time.

Play the offensive.

#10 Do Not Back Off On Learning And Development

You have every right to think that I have an agenda in saying this. And I do.

I want people to be better.

It just so happens that when a crisis hits, we have a brief moment when our foundations are shaken and we can decide how to rebuild from there. We can learn about ourselves and how we handle adversity.

But the right moment for learning and development is not now.

And I get that.

You are in survival mode and there are a plethora of things that feel more important than self and leadership development.

My suggestion, as soon as possible, is to engage with a thought leader or coach that you respect to run a series of virtual learning events. An amazing opportunity for your team to come together and to continuously commit to growth.

#11 Virtual Team Building

In line with the previous idea, it's important that you engage in team building.

Now, you can find quirky and fun things to do that will build morale and spirit in the team. There are many variations of this. Things like showing people around your house, sharing pictures of things that are not work-related and explaining why they are meaningful to you, or watching a movie together via video conferencing (yeah, that's apparently a thing).

But I prefer that teams do some real work around what is happening for the team.

This means venturing into the hard truths about how individuals are showing up for the team and how as a collective we are showing up as a team.

The software that enables us to work remotely provides a great metaphor for what team building should be… a process of continuous iteration.

Traditional team building sees teams going to "build the team" once or twice a year. Even for IRL teams, this is not good enough.

Team building is not a once-off activity. It's an ongoing process that should be treated with intention.

I will know that I have won this battle when I say the word "team-building" and the first thing that pops into your mind is the deep conversations that we have had in a meeting and not the weekend away spent playing games that rarely ever translate to real-world skill.

So, please whether you are upgrading your virtual team or looking to enhance your IRL team, let's start seeing team building as a series of discussions that allow us to iteratively improve the team instead of waiting for things to break down so we can build them back up over a weekend away.

#12 The Mentally Tough

Mental toughness is an important quality to have in times like these.

It allows you to keep your wit about you.

It does not mean that you cut yourself off from the feelings that are associated with the uncertainty that we are all experiencing. In fact, you can experience it more deeply because you know you will not be consumed by it.

Edcon CEO, Grant Pattison broke down crying whilst in conversation with suppliers. Yet, it's off the back of a decision that required, in my opinion, real mental toughness. On the call, Grant was telling them that they cannot afford to pay the suppliers because they are paying their staff's salaries instead.

Mental toughness allows you to keep going. To keep slogging. And to not give up.

I wrote a small list a while ago about the things that I am seeing mentally tough people doing at the moment. It repeats some of my earlier points but it's still worth the revision:

1 They have accepted that things have changed and that they need to change with change.

2 Their decisions are not a knee jerk reaction to the situation but rather a thoughtful restructuring of their current vision of the future.

3 They are leaning on others. Their team. Their friends. Their family. Sharing your frustration with others creates the capacity for you to keep fighting the good fight.

4 They are proactively looking for ways to help others. This ranges from sharing expertise to sharing good news to self-isolation.

5 They are looking after themselves. A morning routine that shifts your emotional and physical state is more important than ever.

6 They are minimizing their media consumption. By now you know how to keep yourself & others safe. Moving forward stay updated but don't become overwhelmed.

7 They are breathing through it. Mental toughness is not an inherent trait. It's something you learn. And you learn it by breathing through and moving through each challenging moment as it presents itself.

What Will The Future Bring?

I don't know.

But then again, neither does anyone else.

At best we can speculate.

There are some that say that remote work is the future. That more and more organizations will make the switch because of access to a larger talent pool and reduced overheads. That government will mandate it due to concerns around critical issues such as climate change.

Then there are those who believe that the human desire for connection will prevail. And that we will come to love the office and the human experience. Geoff Lewis, founder & managing partner at Bedrock, predicts that five years from now we will find that remote work was mostly a narrative mirage. I love that.

Here's the thing.

It doesn't matter what the future brings.

The reality is, for now, you have the opportunity to refine the way your team operates in a distributed and virtual manner. Go for it! Commit.

Become the best damn virtual team that you can be.

And then, when things go back to "normal" be the best IRL team that you can be.

Because ultimately what that creates is flexibility.

A team that adapts.

That evolves to meet the challenges it faces.

And nothing, nothing, is more dangerous than a team that has mastered that.