



Practical leadership guidelines for remote teamwork, decisions and culture

Sharing the lessons which have shaped Entelect's thinking and approach towards operating remote teams, promoting fluid communication, staying productive, and keeping team culture alive.

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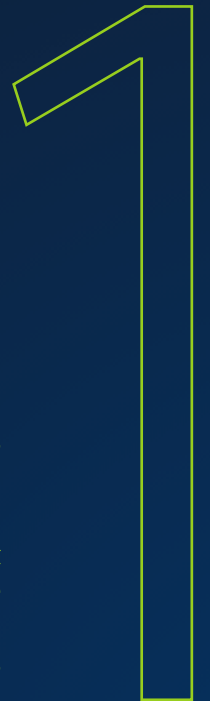
Remote conversations

Working from home (WFH) comes with its own challenges, and is another skill that we all should endeavour to learn and master. This chapter shares some experience and insights into how we keep our teams talking and engaging as efficiently as possible in a remote world.

How to run productive remote meetings
and eliminate the time overhead

How to prevent encroachment
of your team's work-day into personal time

Why you need to focus on supporting non-technical roles



How to run productive remote meetings and eliminate the time overhead

Embracing the best-practices and setting the right example for remote meeting culture will ensure that all meetings are productive.

Make sure you are WFH-ready

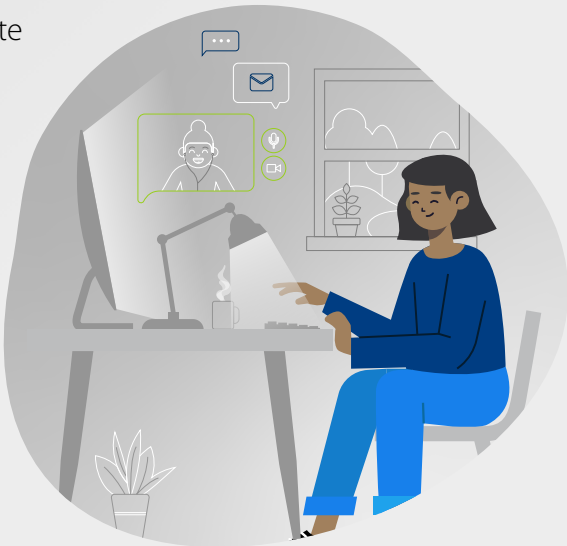
In order to work from home, you first need to be prepared for work from home. Ensure you have the following prepped at your remote workstation:

- Decent battery life and backup power
- VPN access to your email, servers, tools and systems
- A stable internet connection (and mobile backup for emergencies)
- A functional audio-visual setup
- Headphones/earphones
- A comfortable workspace which is quiet enough for remote calls

Establish a remote operating procedure

We recommend that every team takes the time to define their remote operating procedure, which outlines the following:

- When teams meet and what they meet for
- Notifications and availability standards
- How to get help and from who
- How to hold each other accountable
- Who takes ownership of traditional team rituals and tasks



Choose the right communication medium

The hallway-conversations we're used to can't become diarised meetings. We've learned to prevent calendars being filled with excessive meetings by selecting the most appropriate communication tool for the purpose.

Video calls	Voice chat rooms	Phone calls	Instant messaging	Email
Scheduled meetings	Daily stand-ups	Urgent matters requiring escalation or instant feedback	Work coordination	Formal communication
Conversations which require screen sharing or collaboration	Ad hoc team discussions		Asynchronous team chats	Communication for reference
	'Hallway' conversations and quick questions		Fun and off-topic chatter	

When there is something urgent, use whichever communication mechanism you know the person or team prefers.

Remote meeting etiquette

We recognise team meetings are beneficial to keep everyone aligned but it's easy to stray off topic. To help you keep your meetings productive and professional, here are some guidelines for virtual meeting etiquette:

Preparation

- Reduce any unnecessary meetings before optimising how to run crucial ones. If you can make any non-critical executive decision yourself, then do so
- Make sure your home equipment is set up before the meeting
- If bandwidth allows, keep cameras on during the meeting to aid with body language
- Have a prepared agenda for the few key decisions that need to be made

Ground rules

- Have one nominated person chair and control the meeting
- Start on time. Avoid starting early to help those who are in back-to-back meetings
- Give everybody a turn to speak. Remote meetings make it easier for participants to be side-lined
- Have an agreed upon way of taking turns speaking if there are many people on the call, such as "raising hand" feature on Zoom
- Everybody should remain muted other than the person speaking

Administration

- Consider having a minute-taker present, and circulate action points afterwards
- Don't allow too many side-quests. Stay focussed on the purpose of the meeting
- Figure out when to make a decision and move on, or when to allow debate
- Try to avoid large consensus decision-making meetings



How to prevent encroachment of your team's work-day into personal time

WFH can blur the lines between work and home life, and so we need to establish a responsible daily routine to help the people in our teams continue to be productive in a sustainable way:

Set working hours

Decide on a clear start and end to your workday (and try to align this with the rest of your team)

Down time is important. Take time off, even if you're not going away

Take breaks

Plan how many breaks you need and when you will take them

Align breaks for sections of the team and schedule no meetings for then, e.g. have lunch between 12pm and 1pm

Manage a to-do list

Start each day by planning your feasible must-do tasks and get them done!

If you foresee that you won't meet a deadline, keep your team informed

Set boundaries

Put boundaries in place regarding when and how you deal with personal matters during the work day

Set practical rules for team comms after hours and over weekends



Why you need to focus on supporting non-technical roles

The developers, technologists and tinkerers in our teams are usually content with working in isolation. On the other hand, the analysts, scrum masters, product owners, subject-matter specialists and others in our teams who may be in less technical roles have a disproportionately **harder time being as effective as they're used to.**

Those who are comfortable in the remote work style should make the effort to **proactively support and engage** with the rest of the team who are in unfamiliar territory.

This means as IT teams, **we need to be extra available and responsive.** We need to be sharing frequent status updates, using the status indicator in our tools diligently, and **responding quickly to queries with positive language.**

Useful tools

We've put together a selection of tools and ideas we've successfully used across our various teams at Entelect. If you're looking for ideas to help solve specific frustrations, experiment with these and adopt what works.

Team alignment

Other useful tools:

- Real-time communication —
- Collaborating —
- Company meetings —
- Social and culture —
- Training —



Team alignment

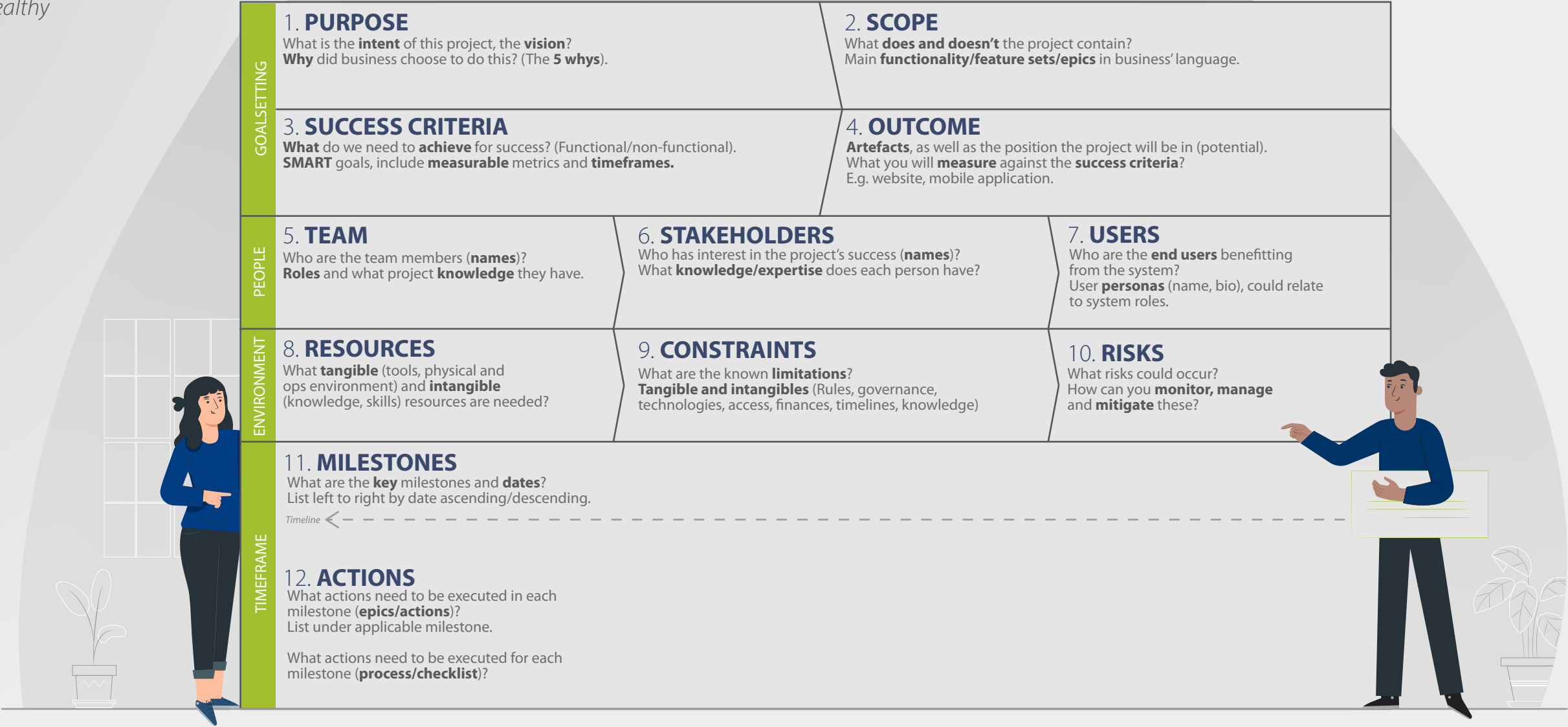
A Project Canvas is a great way to reconnect a team to their purpose, business drivers, actions and ideas. It can be done remotely with great success, and promotes a healthy conversation about priorities.

You can download our template [here](#).



Let us help you

Get in touch if you'd like some guidance in creating a Project Canvas for your team.



Other useful tools

Finding the best technology and tools for working remotely can make all the difference. No matter where you work, communication is key. These are the tools we've been using to collaborate, communicate and keep our culture strong.

★ *We've marked the tools we believe are the best in each category, and which Entelect has had the most success with.*

Real-time communication

There are a variety of tools available for the daily synchronous to-and-fro communication. We have been using the below across the different modes of communication.



Video calling

Select the tool that fits your business based on existing access, costs and use cases.

- ★  [Zoom](#)
-  [Microsoft Teams](#)
-  [Skype for Business](#)
-  [Google Hangouts](#)




Voice chat

Use this as a replacement for the feeling of an open plan office.

- ★  [Discord](#)
-  [TeamSpeak](#)

Instant messaging





Use these for more relaxed conversations or when you need short, instant replies.

- ★  [Slack](#)
-  [WhatsApp](#)
-  [Telegram](#)






Collaborating

Integration is key, and team members working remotely need the right online collaboration tools that bring together features such as instant messaging, video calls, screen sharing, and time tracking to help them get the job done.

Project collaboration and management

- ★  [Microsoft Teams](#)
- ★  [Microsoft OneNote](#)
-  [Trello](#)
-  [Google G Suite](#) (Google Docs, Sheets and Slides)

Whiteboarding






- ★  [Miro](#)
-  Apple Pencil + screen sharing
-  [Excalidraw](#)
-  [Awwapp](#)
-  [Invision](#)

Company meetings

- ★  [Zoom Webinar](#)
- ★  [Slido](#)
-  [GoTo Meeting](#)







Issue tracking and pull-requests

Individuals in engineering teams use source code repositories throughout their day. Beyond managing code, repository platforms also offer features for voting on code commits, issues and ideas. This can accelerate decisions and allow for consensus to be formed remotely.

-  [Azure DevOps](#)
-  [Jira](#)
-  [Bitbucket](#)
-  [Github](#)
-  [Gitlab](#)









Social and culture

Keeping the culture alive throughout the business and teams is crucial for employees' morale. These tools are a bit more informal, and should be used for socialising and team building.

- ★  [Workplace](#)
-  [Playing Cards](#)
-  [Jack Box Party Pack](#)
-  [Houseparty](#)
-  [Donut](#)
-  [Skribbl.io](#)

Training

Many of the major online learning institutes are having sales on their courses during these social distancing periods. Our teams at Entelect have been using their downtime to upskill using the below platforms.

- ★  [Pluralsight](#)
- ★  [Udemy](#)
-  [Udacity](#)
-  [Coursera](#)
-  [Khan Academy](#)
-  [LinkedIn Learning: Lynda](#)
-  [edX](#)
-  [Stanford Online](#)



Leadership decision-making during a crisis

Leadership roles and responsibilities have drastically changed and will most likely continue to do so. This chapter focuses on making decisions, remaining transparent, and facing challenges while having spontaneous conversations.

Decisions made quickly

Buy-in via transparency

Adapt towards opportunity

Spontaneous conversation



A Decision-Making Manifesto

While there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more.

Decisions made quickly / over decisions made with precision

The swiftness of your decision-making will make a difference in the results, as will the quality of them.

Limit consensus seeking to get best results. Trust your gut, and when you need to correct, do so quickly.

Buy-in via transparency / over buy-in via consultation

Wherever possible, short-circuit discussions to only relevant people, those affected or those who should be consulted.

Right now, the best way to get buy-in from people you've excluded in decision-making in order to act quickly is to be more transparent than ever about how the decision was made and why.

Adapt towards opportunity / over only mitigating risk

Every crisis represents both challenge and opportunity. Mitigate the challenges, but capitalise on the opportunities too.

If you're not finding opportunity in the crisis, you're not doing your job.

Spontaneous conversation / over scheduled calls and meetings

It needs to be okay to be interrupted. Stop treating video calls as "big meetings" and associating it with a formal event.

Sometimes, all it takes is a 30 second, 5 minute or 15 minute discussion to solve a business problem.



Decisions made quickly / over decisions made with precision

Use the triangulation principle of getting input from the 2-3 most credible people, and taking the middle point of the agreement, as fast as possible. Roll these decisions out to the rest of the teams.

Waiting to decide is a decision itself and you should try to avoid unnecessary decision-making delays.

Own problems. Don't waste time on trying to figure out who is 'technically responsible' for issues. Everyone in leadership should pick up and take ownership of whatever they can help with. Encourage this behaviour in your senior team.

Buy-in via transparency / over buy-in via consultation

Employees will need assurance that leadership is being proactive and transparent.

The best way to get buy-in from people excluded from decision-making processes is to give frequent updates to your teams on decisions that are made.

Explain to those who are not involved *why and how* decisions are being made and agreements are reached.

Adapt towards opportunity / over only mitigating risk

You suddenly have to make high-impact decisions that will have both short- and long-term consequences. Go with your gut.

Environments will change rapidly and so will the impact on your organisation. Set frequent checkpoints to review your plans and measures appropriately.

Understand your standard rulebook may need to change, even dramatically, to achieve the best results for your organisation. Challenge the entrenched mindset, strategy and tactics.

Spontaneous conversation / over scheduled calls and meetings

Promote a flexible schedule and become interactive

- Leadership gets into the habit of scheduling their days, weeks in a particular way. Scheduling needs to be more flexible to allow on-the-spot conversations.
- Use the freed up time from having less meetings to reserve calendar time for these spontaneous conversations.
- Be responsive and available by checking your channels regularly. Executives need to role model this behaviour.
- Schedules that previously relied on "corridor" or "desk time" for quick decisions now have to be replaced by calls or IM conversations for spontaneous input.

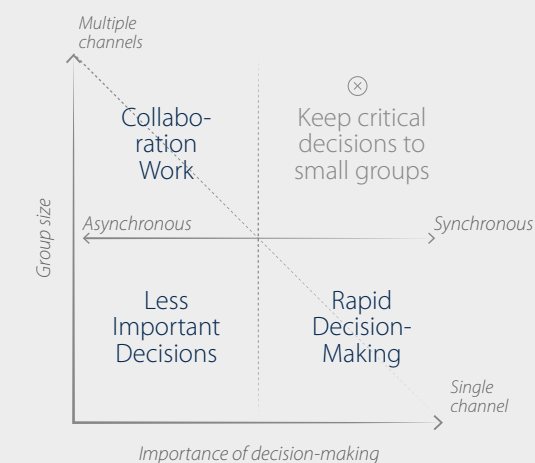
Individual decision-making is now more important than ever

- Right now, the fastest way to save time in meetings is to make decisions yourself.
- Don't shy away from your responsibility to make a judgement call by hiding behind consensus.
- Delegate authority and encourage independent thinking within a provided framework.

A decision-making scale

As importance of decision-making increases, fewer people, a single channel and more synchronous communication is required to make quicker decisions.

Synchronous communication channels lend themselves better to spontaneous conversation.



Staying productive

When projects and capex are reigned in during a crisis, how do you keep your people productive and adding value amidst uncertainty? How do you keep teams motivated, inspired and growing while ensuring you continue to create value.

Accelerate and over-deliver

Encourage cross-skilling

Innovate and create opportunities

Learn and upskill



Capitalise on spare capacity and time

Numbered in order of importance and value, a combination of these tactics can be used to build a strategy to ensure you can adapt and build value despite a slow-down in project work and budget

01 Accelerate and over-deliver

Accelerate initiatives by adding spare capacity to projects that are under way. You could finish projects early, but ride out the crisis enough that there is little or no efficiency lost by running projects over capacity for several months. This takes proportionally extra care and energy from leadership on these projects, but is also the most effective use of capacity if done correctly.

Over-deliver - use extra hands to add an added layer of quality to your projects. This can be achieved through polish, features or performance. A long-term investment that will be recognised by your customers and pay dividends in the future.

A **roadmap** could also be partially accelerated in this way, if spare capacity was able to pull planned future projects out of sequence and start working on them earlier.

04 Learn and upskill

Maximise on otherwise lost time by allowing teams to **grow themselves in preparation for future projects**. There are many options available for short-term and high impact skills development courses.

This doesn't work well for protracted time periods, but can be an effective addition to a **combined strategy**.

As highlighted in [Chapter 2](#), many major online learning institutes are having sales on their courses during these social distancing periods.



02 Innovate and create opportunities

Now is a great time to innovate, change and **make your environment more resilient**, more modern and more stable. Fix the glaring technical issues that have been deprioritised to your "if we have time" backlog.

Consider offering your team's expertise to other business units to **build relationship capital**, and help other areas of the business which may be under more pressure to deliver.

You should be encouraging teams to **focus on experiments** that couldn't get priority, test different methodologies, team setups, practices and culture innovation, or small product ideas which need to be taken to a minimum viable product stage to test the market.

Create business opportunities by using the sunk cost of capacity to try **secure longer term relationships**, or close sales opportunities by taking the short-term impact (which would be borne anyway) to build relationships.

03 Encourage cross-skilling

When under market pressure, the businesses that are able to adapt are usually the ones that survive and succeed. Most **people's talents reach outside of their current role**, and most businesses will have a shifting demand picture which could benefit from a versatile workforce.

You might be surprised at the willingness of individuals and teams to support the business by **rapidly learning** and stepping into different roles for the organisation.

Redirect your **most versatile resources** to areas with the most demand.

Recognise them and **reward them**. This is life-saving behaviour for the company.

For many people, this is an exciting **opportunity to learn new skills** and spend some time diversifying experience, and doesn't take much convincing.



Keeping culture alive

COVID-19 lockdowns have forced a sudden global change in working environments and team arrangements. The knock-on economic pressure means that our people are feeling alone and uncertain

In this chapter we're sharing perspectives on the tactics leaders in every organisational area can employ to prevent negativity from spreading, tackle key concerns head-on, and maintain a hopeful and invested community.

Supporting organisational culture through a pandemic



Supporting organisational culture through a pandemic

01 Workforce worry about livelihoods

Whether or not there is a real threat of **salary cuts and retrenchments**, it is a topic of concern across every business in every sector. Remember, this has been a reality for many employees' family members.

02 Diminishing sense of mission and purpose

Being physically distant from a company community, while under a list of other pressures, means it is easy to **lose sight of your collective purpose** as a team or company.

03 Emotional and mental wellbeing

Isolation is the scourge of remote work. Humans are naturally social creatures, and **lack of human connection** can affect employees' emotional and mental states.

04 Limited to capacity to deliver

Financial caution often means a headcount freeze, which can kill projects people are invested in, and put pressure on the remaining workforce to **do more with less**.

Policy



How to ensure corporate rules don't suffocate culture in red tape

Now is not the time to impose rigid policies on your people. Offering some flex in corporate policy will foster loyalty and reciprocal productivity.

Establish a consistent message

Ensure you and your team stick to it consistently when addressing staff about jobs and remuneration.

Consider the broader community impact. Accommodate or support your corporate social responsibility, suppliers and sponsorships by flexing policy to balance business continuity with empathy.

Create a clear mission

Create a central mission to rally people around. This could be saving the business, doing good in the world, or standing by your community and customers.

Show your people that you believe in their capabilities, and that together the cause is worthwhile and realistic.

Simplify the behaviours you need from your people to achieve the mission.

Be flexible

HR processes around time-off or flexi-hours should not be rigid or strict.

People have merged work and home life together right now, and you should respect and work around that where there is negligible business impact.

Reprioritise projects

You need to establish a clear and transparent priority of projects to guide resource allocation in the most coherent way. Focus on those which directly influence the mission or those which directly sustain the business.

Cut or park any arduous processes that stifle productivity because "it's the way you've always done it". This can create a immediate injection of morale.

Leadership



What leaders can do proactively to foster positive culture

Your behaviour sets the tone and example for everybody. It is worth the energy spent on open and transparent communication.

Frequent, honest and transparent updates

If you are considering pay cuts or retrenchments, communicate this as early as possible. Be honest - even if all the specifics aren't yet known.

Frequent updates about the status of the business on a consistent timescale will create confidence.

Only share information that you are authorised to share.

Campaign for the cause

Weekly leadership talks on practical topics which everyone can learn from. These offer an easy opportunity to engage with your people, share personal feelings, and invite debate.

Collaborate on a [project canvas exercise](#) to re-frame the mission.

Give people an opportunity to contribute. Group innovation sessions or facilitated design sprints could allow you to cheaply solve small problems.

Be available

Demonstrate that it's okay for employees to express how they feel.

Add a 2-hour slot every week where anyone can come and have a virtual coffee with you - individually or in a group.

Do random check-ins with staff, such as a quick and informal email or WhatsApp. Aim to do a few a day. Roster these to make them sacred!

Get more involved

Rolling up your sleeves and getting into the trenches with your team will show that you're serious about making it through the period together.

Put your seniority to work, speeding things up when people can't do their best work due to dependencies or missing people.

Care



How to demonstrate a deeper empathy and care for the people who are affected

Personal leadership efforts towards understanding, compassion and consideration are critical for collective morale.

Empathise with unique situations

Offer support. Make time for, and encourage communication between yourself and individuals in your wider team. Make it known that they can approach you to discuss their problems and fears. Make sure the personal touch comes through.

Consider running company-wide virtual 'Ask-Me-Anything' sessions which invite open questions. Do not doom-monger or sugar coat.

Personalise the mission

Personal transparency from leadership is powerful. Share how and why the mission came about and your personal ambitions within it.

Share more than ever in town-halls: non-financial information like number of new sales, team activity, initiatives and successes in the mission.

Know your employees

If you're not as in touch with your people as you'd like, now is the time to change that. The fact that people continue doing their jobs doesn't mean that they are not struggling.

Identify and prioritise your people who are struggling with the impact of working at home. (e.g. single parents, couples with young kids, single-income households).

Recognise the heroes

Hours will be longer and burnout is a real threat as teams adapt to limited capacity or new priorities. Recognise and appreciate those who lead the charge.

There is pride in resilience too. Openly celebrate individual and team wins towards your mission.



Returning to the office

Planning a transition back to the office goes beyond productivity and safety. The office you left is not going to be the office you return to, and it's critical to manage employee culture and morale during this period.

This final chapter explores different considerations to rebuild culture after a morale-sapping lockdown.

Food for thought: Culture in transition



Food for thought: Culture in transition

We've arrived at the beginning of the end. Together we have endured many weeks of lockdown which has put industries in crisis and forced leadership into action. Like you, we've also needed to practice decisive leadership, innovate across all channels of company communication, and re-organise ourselves to make the absolute most of our unpredictable circumstances.

We're now looking towards a future which allows our people to cautiously return to previously bustling workplaces. While a lot has been said about how to manage this next transition with consideration for security, health and productivity, there is a missing perspective: people and culture.

This final chapter in our series shares our thoughts, concerns and ideas for how best to promote and sustain a healthy company morale as we all try to get back to normal.

From all of us in the leadership team at Entelect, thank you for joining us on this adventure so far. We wish you well in your own chapters lying ahead.

Good luck!

Scheduling

Rostering and rotating teams to return to the office in the most sensible way.

How do we create an in-office roster that balances health and productivity with morale?

We can't have everybody returning to our offices at the same time, and will need a phased strategy.

- Should we consider cycling parts of a team on a roster, so that in the event that one team member is carrying the virus, it wouldn't spread to the entire team?
- Do we need to schedule staff according to necessity for business continuity?
- Should we prioritise those who are unable to work or are unproductive at home?

A phased return-to-work strategy is essential for staff's mental wellbeing

We need to try accommodate those who want to return to the office first.

Many feel the need to be among company, and are demotivated because they can't contribute as much from home due to roles or circumstances.

On the other hand, if groups feel more comfortable working from home and have been productive over the last few months, they shouldn't be forced to go back to the office just yet.

Individual Needs

Every person's experiences during lockdown will be varied and unique.

It's critical for us to [know our employees](#) and be aware of their circumstances

We need to respect individual choices and understand that not everyone is comfortable staying home or returning to the office.

We should also consider staff who still need to stay at home due to external factors (e.g. parents while schools are closed, health concerns for relatives, etc)

We should continue having [spontaneous conversations](#) with all employees to demonstrate care

This includes carrying on with the WFH impromptu comms strategy as we transition back to the office. This will help mitigate anxiety and uncertainty.

We shouldn't rush into resuming teambuilding or work events

We need to put measures and alternative options in place for people who don't feel comfortable attending. These employees should not feel left out.

Leadership

Leadership teams need to be transparent and empathetic to gain employee buy-in.

Whatever our decisions are during the transition, we should remember to remain [transparent about the strategy](#)

We don't need to perfect the roster or phasing strategy upfront. We should decide, move forward, and be ready to [adapt on the fly](#) as the situation develops.

We should focus on being proactive and available

Some representation from the leadership team should be present at the office, although following the same rostered principle.

Our workforces should be comfortable voicing their challenges and concerns. This will help us identify issues early during the transition.

The transition should be utilised as an opportunity to reevaluate our employee engagement and culture.

Expectations

Manage expectations for different scenarios that may arise in the months to come.

We should expect possible spikes in leave once people have more freedom of movement

We need to allow some tolerance here as there may be multiple overlapping requests from the same teams.

We should accommodate these requests and not force policy. People will need a break after these strenuous few months.

Is there a potential for a return to lockdown if case numbers surge?

If or when this does happen, we need to have contingency plans in place.

Hopes will be high, but people's morale will be at risk if they have to retreat back to their WFH environments.

Onboarding

How to onboard new team members during this transition period.

We need to be organised and create additional checkpoints where necessary

Setting up a Trello board or similar where new joiners can find all relevant tasks, such as contracts, laptop collection, and access to repositories will help our teams adapt.

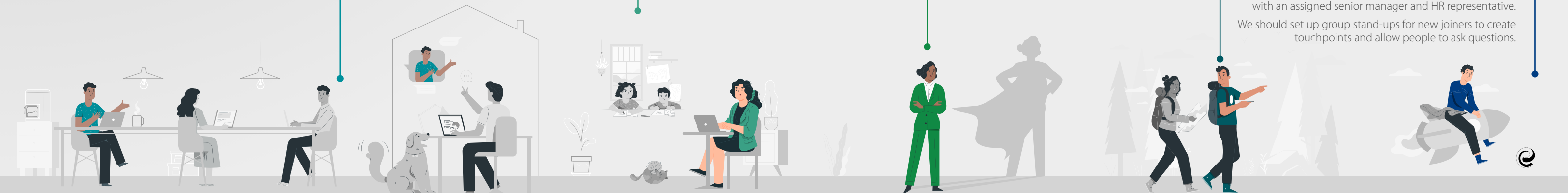
Our line managers should set up a 30-minute virtual or face-to-face session to address any concerns.

We should have senior management do follow ups with new team members later in the month.

We should encourage the use of a buddy system

At Entelect, we use a team-buddy system for new recruits with an assigned senior manager and HR representative.

We should set up group stand-ups for new joiners to create touchpoints and allow people to ask questions.

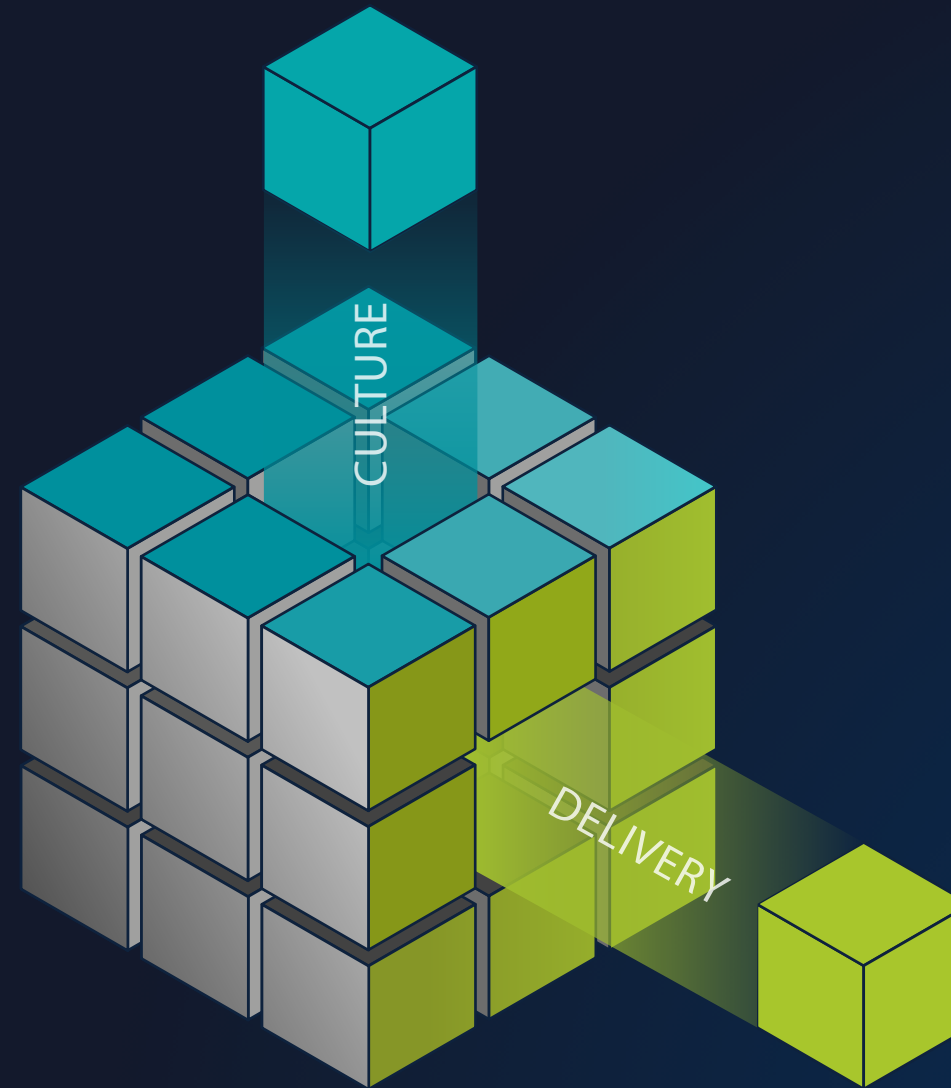


START THE CONVERSATION

→ solutions@entelect.co.za

We have been building and running diverse technology teams for more than 20 years at Entelect. We'd like to share these experiences crafting a culture that draws in the best possible talent across all disciplines, and leading large teams to real business results through skill, meaningful processes and critical thinking.

Shape your business for the future.



Recruitment

Magnetising your EVP
Finding the right candidates
Smart interviews
Onboarding

Retention

Culture and community
Practical tools for growth
Leadership development

Working remotely

Remote Conversations
Decision-making manifesto
Keeping culture alive

Problem Solving

Facilitated design sprints
Upfront versus continuous analysis
Co-design and collaboration

Methodology

Flexibility in process
Context, conduct and awareness
Prioritising business value
Communicating with business language

Quality

Pragmatism in practice
Shared expectations of done
User adoption and buy-in



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