

An aerial photograph of a dense city, likely New York City, serves as the background. Overlaid on the left is a large, white, semi-transparent icon of a person with a circular head, representing a remote worker. On the right, a coin-operated binocular viewer is prominently displayed, with its lens and coin slot clearly visible. The viewer's frame is metallic and textured, and the coin slot is labeled 'QUARTERS ONLY' and '50¢'.

# THE PROMISE AND CHALLENGES OF LEADING A REMOTE WORKFORCE

Kevin Eikenberry & Wayne Turmel

# When we're busy working every day, things can change

in all kinds of ways and we don't realize what's happening until we wake up one day and everything seems strange.

Working remotely and leading at a distance is one such trend. On one hand, we have examples of leaders working remotely for centuries. After all, Genghis Khan ruled half the known world and the sun never set on Queen Victoria's British Empire—they both succeeded without a conference call, email or even phones. Yet in recent years the world has changed. More and more people are spending at least part of their time working at a distance from those they work with. Consider these facts:

- Today, according to Project Management Institute, 90% of project teams have at least one member (usually more) who aren't co-located with the rest of the team.
- An increasing number of project teams and task forces are made up of people who don't report to the same manager. The leaders of these matrixed teams must influence and lead people without being their boss or having traditional reporting relationships.
- Today, over 80% of white collar supervisors have at least one direct report who works in a different location—at least part time. This includes everyone from colleagues on the other side of the world, to a team member who has decided to work from home one day because of the weather. Either way, they aren't sitting within arm's reach of you or each other.

And, despite a few well-publicized (but limited) examples, this trend isn't changing. Sales of home office furniture and technology continues to rise, and you can't walk into any coffee shop or public gathering place without seeing people working on laptops or looking like they're talking to themselves, while they are really on conference calls or meetings with people halfway around the world.

Sometime in the last few years you woke up and realized—whether you had a policy in place, wanted it to happen, or even thought about it—that you have a remote workplace.

This manifesto is written not to promote or announce the trend, but to place the realization in front of you, so you can consider and address it. You have, or will soon have, a remote workplace. And with a remote workplace, there are promises, and challenges. For you and your organization to be more effective and productive now and in the future, leaders must recognize this fact, learn how to overcome the obstacles, and benefit from these challenges.

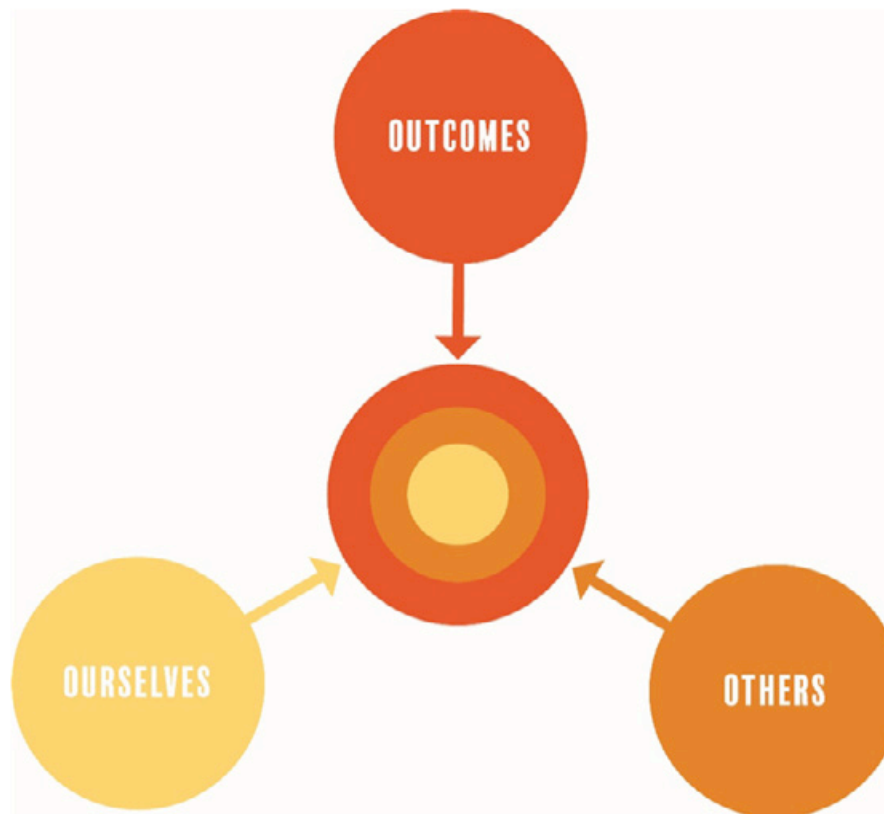
We will both describe the current situation for you and give you some places to begin to do exactly that.

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# The 3-O Model of Leadership

In our book *The Long-Distance Leader: Rules for Remarkable Remote Leadership* we introduce a leadership model we use with our Clients. We call it the “3-O Model of Leadership.”

While in the book we use it to talk about the role of a leader (and we will say a bit more about that here too), for now we share it to make an important point. As your teams moved from working all together to being more dispersed, the overall goals of getting work done (outcomes) from the team (others) hasn't changed, but the interactions between them, and the impacts of those interactions affect the outcomes we achieve. And as leaders we must take care of ourselves and adjust our approach to leadership, too (ourselves). Within the shift described in this paragraph lies both the promises and challenges we find in this new world of work.



# The Promises

Now we can acknowledge that our working world is different. The good news is there are many bright spots in a world where we don't see all our co-workers every day. While these benefits don't come automatically, they are promises we can use to our advantage if we are aware and savvy. As you read the promises that follow notice that each includes the word "can." That means that while these promises exist, there are things we must do to make these promises real for individuals and the organization.

**Promise 1: A remote workforce can provide greater flexibility to the organization and individual team members.**

Perhaps the most obvious benefit of remote work is flexibility. From the perspective of the organization, costs can be reduced, or at least delayed. If people can or will work from home, less office space is needed, reducing overhead and alleviating much of the space planning that growing organizations are faced with. This provides cost and cash flow flexibility and may allow additional space for collaboration when remote team members do come to the office.

From the perspective of the individual, there may be more flexibility in working hours—and certainly all of the frustrations, time, and costs of commuting are reduced. This change alone can add tremendous value to a team member and could be the biggest reason they want to work remotely. Making the most of this fact rests squarely on the shoulders of the leader and the expectations they set on team members. If you are leading a remote team, talk with those team members about how you can best support them and provide them flexibility while getting productive and successful work accomplished.

**Promise 2: A remote workforce can provide access to a wider range of talent.**

Talent is the lifeblood of your organization, and having access to the right people will help your organization thrive and grow. If you need everyone to come to the office to work each day, and you live in Peoria, Portland, or Paducah, you are limiting your talent pool to that location, or to the people who might move to that location (if you can find them). But if the work can be done anywhere, and you have created processes, platforms, and leadership skills to support a remote team, you can hire anyone who wants to work anywhere.

If you are in Portland, Oregon or Paris, France this might not be a big deal—after all the talent pools are probably deep enough regardless of your industry, but in Portland, Indiana or Paducah, Kentucky, it might be an entirely different matter. Additionally, if you are equipped and ready to allow people to work from home, you can increase retention when a great employee needs to move for personal reasons. If you allow them to work from home, you can keep the great team member. If you don't, they are gone. The challenge is to provide the same leadership, guidance coaching, and support as when you're within eyeshot of each other.

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**Promise 3: A remote workforce can increase employee satisfaction.**

Organizations everywhere are looking for keys to engaging their workforce. A whole sector of the consulting businesses has been created to help solve this problem. While allowing people to work from home won't solve all the workplace culture and leadership issues that you experience, they can increase satisfaction and engagement. Balancing the benefits to both the company and the employee of working from somewhere else, with creating a cohesive culture and keeping people engaged with the work, is perhaps the Long-Distance Leader's biggest challenge.

When leaders and workers are prepared for the new reality of working remotely—both technologically and in terms of skills and expectations—studies show that people will be more satisfied with their work. In our own informal surveys, most people say that once they have worked remotely, they would never want to go back to the office. But once employees disengage, problems like missed deadlines and high turnover will surface. The leader of the future must consciously engage their people, regardless of where they work, and maintain good working relationships to be successful over the long haul.

**Promise 4: A remote workforce can increase productivity.**

If you have ever worked the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, you know why this is true. That week is so productive because you are in the office alone, or nearly so! You aren't getting nearly as many work—and non-work related—interruptions and distractions. In many ways working from home is like that every day. While some leaders are worried that people won't get anything done, and of course there will be someone who is distracted by their home environment, on the whole people can be far more productive at home for most kinds of work.

Like anything else on this list, there are no guarantees. It takes an intentional effort by the organization to help team members be more productive at home and define their work while

creating the means to interact and collaborate in the ways that are needed. But when these support systems and expectations are in place, more will get done when you let people work away from the office.

## The Challenges

We have just painted a pretty good picture. Yet, if you have a remote working team you know that it isn't all good—there are pitfalls and challenges that exist. In order to reduce or eliminate these challenges we must recognize and acknowledge them.

### **Challenge 1: A remote workforce can increase employee turnover.**

You might be thinking that If you do it well, you will increase flexibility, satisfaction, and productivity—and if that is true, why would people leave? First, there is the “do it well” part that must be mastered, but beyond that, while all of those are things that people value in their work, the number one reason people leave a job voluntarily is that they fire their boss. So, if you aren't leading successfully (including the nuances of doing that remotely), you are still at risk.

Perhaps broader than that, though, is that once people work from home, the barriers to change are drastically reduced. Think about it: if you work in the office, you have your commuting routine, childcare plan, and a hundred other things figured out. If the new job opportunity is in another part of town (or requires a move), there are a myriad of factors to consider before taking a new job. If you work from home, and the new employer offers the same hours, benefits and work as you do, the barriers to change are drastically reduced. That is why headhunters salivate over remote job openings, and qualified candidates who already work from home.

**Challenge 2: A remote workforce can dampen employee engagement and participation.**

While the promise of remote work is that employee satisfaction can rise, there is no guarantee that is true. While working from home can reduce distractions, some of those “distractions” are a part of the work. Those distractions often allow team members to see the broader picture of the organization and its goals. With that broader picture it is easier to see how one fits into to it, and how to engage more fully.

It is often in the informal conversations that collaboration forms—and those are often missing in a remote team. When working remotely, it is easy for a team member to be isolated and in a mental bubble. Neither of these states increase engagement and participation.

**Challenge 3: A remote workforce can reduce teamwork.**

While teamwork is about more than whether people know and like each other, relationships are certainly a part of most successful teams. When people work apart, connections, relationships, and trust take longer to build, if they happen at all. Given that these factors play a part in successful teamwork, it is easy to see how teamwork can be stunted when team members work remotely from each other.

Beyond that though, as has been hinted at already, when a person works on their own, they often become insular in their thinking; they focus on “their” work and don’t see beyond that. *Harvard Business Review* has shown in multiple studies that, left to their own devices, people will focus on their tasks rather than those things that require input and collaboration from others. This is the ultimate in siloed thinking, and without clear direction and support from a wise leader, it is more likely to occur than not. To avoid this, intentional measures must be in place to engage remote team members into the work of the team so that they naturally view “their” work as “our” work.

**Challenge 4: A remote workforce can reduce communication effectiveness.**

Two clichés ring true here: “Out of sight is out of mind,” and “absence seldom makes the heart grow fonder.” Both can be true in large part because of the lack of communication. Yes, when people work remotely they don’t see each other in the hallway, in the break room, or on the walk from the parking lot. They also don’t “see” when they are available and pop into their office or cubicle to get an answer to a quick question.

When you aren’t in the office, serendipitous conversations don’t happen spontaneously, and when you do reach out to ask a question on the phone or over instant message, the conversation becomes very transactional, with no relationship or connection building included. We avoid “chit-chat” in the name of efficiency, but those casual conversations are often what help build working relationships that grease the skids of our work. With clear discussions about when, how, and by what mediums we communicate, these challenges can be overcome, but it won’t happen naturally or automatically.

The leader of the future must consciously engage their people, regardless of where they work, and maintain good working relationships to be successful over the long haul.

# Next Steps

It is helpful to lay out the promises and challenges. But a manifesto is a call to action—and our goal is to spur you to action to improve your personal and organizational results. While each of the promises and challenges above point to suggested actions, it's time to get prescriptive. When you take action on these five suggestions, you will capitalize on the promises and overcome the challenges of a remote workforce.

**Give Leaders an Enhanced Set of Skills** | Not everything about leadership changes when people work remotely, but the nuanced changes matter a lot. What we must do hasn't changed, but how we do it is very different. How successfully individual leaders make those adjustments goes far in fulfilling the promises and avoiding the challenges we've talked about. Think through the changes required for your leaders, not the least of which is knowing and skillfully using the right technologies for the right communication situations, and make sure your leadership development programming (organizationally or personally) takes those skills into account.

Look at your existing leadership development processes to make sure they include these remote leadership needs, and if not, find resources to augment those programs to give your leaders the awareness and skills to be more effective in a remote working world.

**Put a Greater Focus on Expectations** | Setting crystal clear expectations that are mutually understood by the team member and the leader is one of the most foundational tasks of leadership. Getting this right improves so many things in the working relationship and the quality and quantity of the work output. If it is possible, this is even more important when team members aren't seen regularly by the leader.

Traditionally, expectations have been set on what needs to be done and the quality that is required. In a remote environment those still matter, but they aren't enough. When team members are scattered we must also be clear about how the work will be done, and how we will communicate, coordinate, and collaborate. Without these clear agreements and understandings, people will do what they think is best, and it may not meet the needs of the leader or the rest of the team.

**Use Technology More Effectively** | Many leaders make the mistake of thinking that if they provide sufficient technology, people will figure out how to use it. This is rarely true. Left to their own devices, people will default to the communication styles (and tools) they are most comfortable with and will avoid using anything that makes them feel uncomfortable or is too much trouble to learn.

There are two challenges for Long-Distance Leaders when it comes to the use of technology:

1. Which tool should I use for which purpose? This isn't as obvious as it seems. We have a wide array of technology at our disposal, but if you've ever been caught in an endless email thread where no one picks up the phone, you know that some tools are more effective than others. When do you pick up the phone? When do you get on a plane? When will an instant message or text suffice and when should you get on a webcam conversation? If you're not making these decisions intentionally and wisely, you're probably defaulting to what feels natural. That may or may not be the right answer.
2. Do I use the tools effectively? Having access to technology is not the same thing as using it effectively (if at all). In fact, 80 percent of people use only 20 percent of the features of most technology. If we are doing a tough job, relying on technology with which we're uncomfortable or inexperienced, and we don't use it well, we are creating a serious handicap for ourselves and our people.

**Create a Conversation About How We Work, Not Just Getting the Work Done** | It is important to have a clear focus on task completion and accomplishing goals. As we've already pointed out, though, a sole focus in those areas may create silos or people becoming hyper-focused on their work at the expense of team results. Too many leaders assume that well-meaning, smart people will figure it out for themselves, but the research doesn't support that. Teams need to have explicit, constructive discussions about how the team will communicate and function. Some of the things to consider are:

- What are the “rules of engagement?” Do you have expectations about how often the team will meet (in person or virtually)? When do you pick up the phone? What is the expected return time on an email request?
- How often will you communicate with the team members as individuals? As a team? This can mean the difference between checking in with people, and looking like you're “checking up,” or micro-managing.
- What are the team's expectations for working together? Does everyone understand their role in the team's success, and are they committed to helping achieve organization outcomes as well as their own performance goals?
- What tools does the team have to be productive, and will everyone use them?

**Build Your Culture Intentionally** | Every organization has a culture. The only question is: is this the culture you want, or did it just evolve? It is most likely you haven't considered this enough, especially as it relates to the now remote nature of your team's work. **Effective leaders understand the culture they wish to create (collaborative, competitive, individual contributors, or shared wisdom) and intentionally work to ensure everyone understands, buys in, and contributes to attaining that standard.** 📌



# Info



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