**Becoming like water … leadership lessons for the remote era**
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As 2020 reaches its conclusion, and financial services settle into becoming a remote industry, most organisations have acclimatised to a life of "you're on mute". Leaders of industry are now searching for the optimal formula to sustain a high performance culture in the work from home era. Here, Bruce Lee's classic quote comes to mind: "be like water". In the same way that water has no intrinsic shape but takes on the form of whatever it's poured into, leadership styles must surely become what is required for the time. The environment for our daily operations has changed and so must our mindsets.

Here are some lessons I've learned on transforming how we manage others and ourselves in the remote era.
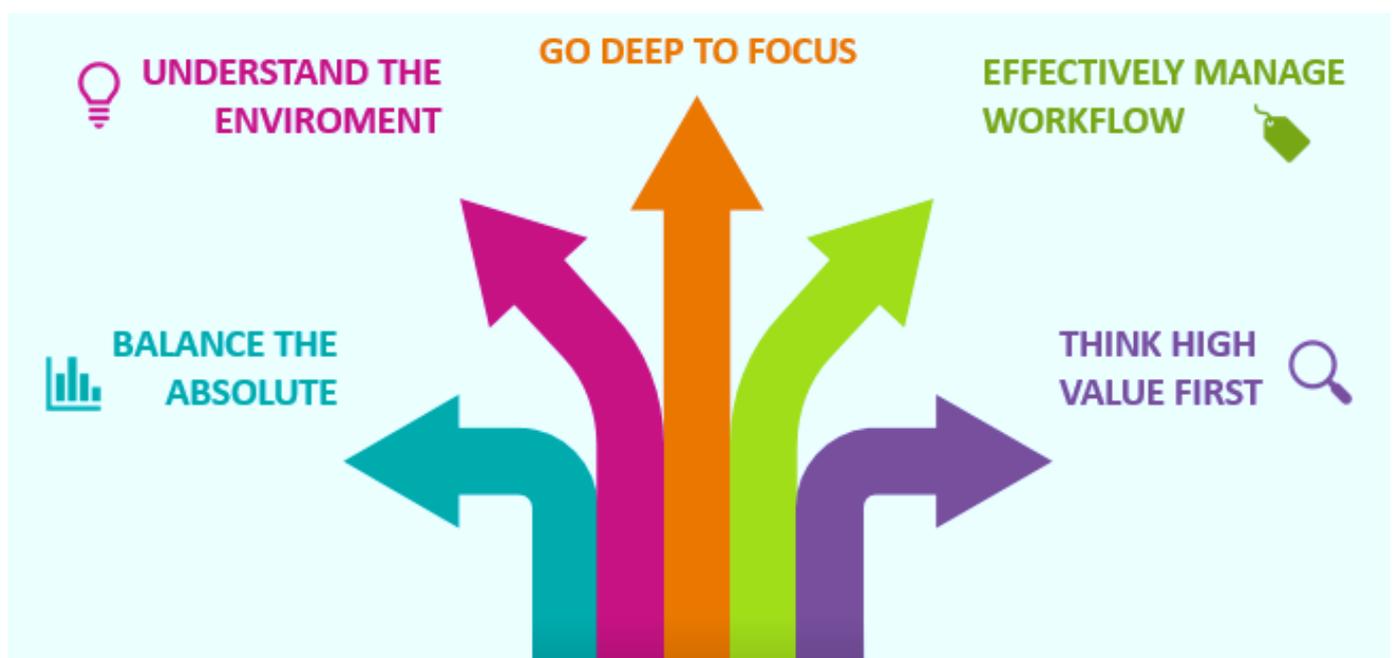
Balancing the absolute
In Einstein's theory of relativity, he describes the phenomenon of time dilation. He states that time will move more slowly near massive objects because spacetime is warped by weight. Enter the thought experiment called the twin paradox theory, and we now know time is relative.

In our reality, though, we experience time to be an absolute. It is one of the few things we cannot produce more of, no matter how hard we try: everyone, from admin clerk to president, has 24 hours in their day. In the pre-pandemic world, time at our desks meant something, even if simply to provide a sense of comfort. We went to work, spent the required hours at our desks or in meetings, and could psychologically bank an honest day's work - even if, at times, we felt the day just disappeared with nothing to show for it. Meanwhile, most of our days were not spent as effectively as we may like to believe. Gaining the comfort of *I did my job because I went to work*, well, that's over.

We now live in a world of outcomes. It's not about the amount of time spent in front of the LED screen, but, instead, the value created when we apply ourselves - the way it should be. This creates the need to balance how we use our time with the need for outputs.

Some quick wins:
1. Employees who are new to working remotely may have a need to be noticed so that they can demonstrate they are being productive. **Create a platform for team members to demonstrate their outcomes.** This will create a feeling of purpose and progress, and the satisfaction of completing work.
2. As a manager, take the time **connect to team members regularly** - not to check up, but to support, guide and learn from each other.
3. **Make time for your mental and physical wellbeing**. (More on this later.)
4. **Reduce meetings times**: break the default setting of a one-hour meeting. Reduce meetings to 35 minutes or, better yet, 20 minutes.
5. **Schedule meetings in a way that allows breathing space** to gather your thoughts between sessions, and avoid back-to-back sessions.
6. **Block out desk time in your diary.** Sometimes you need to say no. We often confuse a meeting invite with a meeting obligation.

Understand the environment

We are in a pandemic; these are not regular work from home (WFH) conditions. Know the difference and adjust accordingly. Traditional WFH is predominantly elective, where kids are at school and dedicated workspaces are a prerequisite. Under the current pandemic conditions, more flexibility is required. We are essentially inviting each other into our homes during video calls. This involves pets, partners, kids and other unplanned background noise. We should all try our best to reduce the impact of these factors but there MUST be an adequate level of understanding and patience during the pandemic.

Once we transition to elective work from home, expectations of professionalism can and should increase. We need to understand that pandemic conditions are not a holiday. Having understanding and patience does not mean a lack of measurement or expected output.

Consider creating a team charter. This will remind us of the standards and principles we agree to work by, and can be used as a baseline for reviewing and optimising our performance and sharing knowledge, especially when onboarding new people. These are important in the remote-working environment: a failure to agree expectations early can elicit miscommunication, frustration and waste. Data, data, data – record, analyse and improve.

Go deep to focus

I've found that managing my ability to focus returned even better results than managing my time. I recommend the book "*Deep Work – Rules for focused success in a distracted world*" by Cal Newport as essential literature for every knowledge worker. Newport argues that distraction is bad. "Deep work is the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task. It's a skill, which allows you to quickly master complicated information and produce better results in less time. Deep work will make you better at what you do and provide the sense of true fulfilment that comes from craftsmanship."

Take breaks from focus instead of breaks from distraction. Newport argues that pushing your cognitive ability will help reduce your time spent on shallow work, such as emails, meetings or web browsing (thieves of your time). To create new value you must engage your mind in deep work for a committed period. This results in increased overall productivity and generates more valuable outcomes. Imagine the difference in trying to write a novel in a traditional open plan office versus in an isolated cabin on the beach. I found this book to be thought provoking and close to life changing.

Some quick tips:

1. **Spend more time focusing deeply** - then schedule time for distractions, instead of the inverse.
2. **Embrace boredom:** resist the urge to whip out your smartphone every time you are in a queue or waiting. Studies indicate this has a negative effect on your ability to concentrate. Instead, replace it with a mindfulness practise. Concentration takes practise; the less you practise the more likely you are to be chronically distracted.
3. **Schedule downtime:** make sure you have downtime periods throughout the day, ideally with 45 minutes of concentration followed by 15 minutes of downtime.
4. **Recognise shallow work** and the rationalisation of time wasters.

Kanban Kung Fu (Manage workflow effectively)

Kanban is a Japanese word, which literally translated means to "signal" or "signboard". It's a method used to manage workflow and is designed to help us visualise work to maximise efficiency. This technique is transferable to anything that requires input to produce output.

Kanban uses the following principles:

1. **Visualise workflow:** this allows you to spot issues immediately.
2. **Limit work in progress:** stop starting and start finishing.
3. **Measure and manage workflow:** flow is the movement of work. Use the data.
4. **Make process and policy explicit:** pull instead of push work, define work in progress limits and process rules.
5. **Create feedback loops:** perform cross-team reviews and learn from each other.
6. **Use the model to recognise improvement opportunities:** make it safe to fail, use hypotheses, and set up models for measurement.

"In progress" is an expense; "Done" gets the bills paid.

Think high value first

Differentiate between "important" and "urgent". They are not synonymous. "*Mental Models*" by Peter Hollins describes this well. Everything, seemingly, is an emergency to be handled as soon as humanly possible, and horrible consequences will follow if you don't personally act. The mistake is not realising the difference between the two terms and how you should prioritise them. The ability to distinguish the two is a key step in lowering your anxiety, stopping procrastination, and making sure that you are acting in an optimised way. This mental model probably has the most impact on productivity when time is at a premium. We spend far too much time on "urgent" tasks when we should be focusing on "important" ones.

Important tasks: These contribute directly to our short-term or long-term goals. They are imperative to our work, responsibilities, and lives. They cannot be skipped and should be prioritised. They may not need to be done immediately and thus may not appear to be important. This makes it easy to fall into the trap of ignoring the important in favour of the urgent. Important tasks truly impact our bottom lines, and serious negative repercussions would result from skipping them.

Urgent tasks: These simply demand immediacy and speed, and are usually initiated by other people. This naturally creates a reaction that can make us forget what's important. Urgent tasks can overlap with an important task, but they can also demand your immediate attention without meriting it. These are usually smaller and easier to complete, so often we turn to them out of expedience, and this allows us to feel quasi-productive even though we've ignored what we really needed to be doing. Many urgent tasks can be delayed, delegated, or flat-out ignored.

Trello is an awesome free tool that allows you to record ideas and activities. You can set up your boards between urgent and important: an easy answer to your workflow needs. See: www.trello.com

Final thoughts

I'll finish with some Do's and Don'ts to create a sustainably healthy remote environment:

✓ **Don't send emails unnecessarily after hours**, especially if you are a line manager. It creates an unspoken expectation that others should mirror your behaviour. Prepare the mail and send it the next morning.

✓ **Don't send action items or critical information via WhatsApp or other social media platforms.** Reduce the types of "chat" platforms in use, so that it becomes standard practice to use the appropriate channels. This is not about what a single person prefers, but is about creating a common practice across the organisation. If WhatsApp is common practise, then so be it. However, consider how this relates to accountability and what happens when these platforms are used for personal convenience.

✓ **Don't continuously check up on people.** This is a barrier to trust. Create trust by trusting. Manage the **work** not the **person**. Set clear and realistic expectations then support each other to achieve them. Provide and expect clear communication. Support autonomy and adherence to team process and policy.

✓ **Do use written communication.** Use meetings to create outcomes, not to communicate information. An email will usually suffice and avoid stealing everyone's time. Write clearly. We have all sent that email which was taken out of context. If everyone misunderstood the message, then it was probably not clear to begin with. Explain yourself and your expectations; be clear and pertinent. Avoid one-liners with little context.

✓ **Do give people time to respond.** According to Bob Green, if you want to cut emotion out of the equation, increase the response time. Giving people time to think between question and response, rather than forcing them to blurt out the first thing that comes to mind in a meeting. Thought produces better results.

✓ **Do exercise regularly.** You do not need a gym or equipment. In our digital world a personal trainer is free - see https://www.youtube.com/user/KozakSportsPerform . Studies suggest that exercising first thing in the morning requires less discipline and is easier to maintain than putting it off for later in the day.

Don't make excuses not to exercise! ☺