THE LONG-DISTANCE LEADER

Rules for **REMARKABLE REMOTE LEADERSHIP**

KEVIN EIKENBERRY
and WAYNE TURMEL

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Praise for *The Long-Distance Leader*

"Kevin Eikenberry and Wayne Turmel have teamed up to produce the single best guide on remote leadership on the market today. Based on research with real-life practicing managers, *The Long-Distance Leader* offers nineteen rules that guide remote leaders through the most pressing challenges they face—everything from the best use of technology, to effective long-distance coaching, to achieving goals, to building trust at a distance. And even if you aren't a long-distance leader, at least not yet, you will definitely want to have this book handy. As the authors rightfully acknowledge and our research supports, you have to 'think leadership first, location second.' The engaging stories, the practical wisdom, and the reflection and action questions will help you improve your leadership wherever you and your followers are."

—Jim Kouzes, coauthor of the bestselling *The Leadership Challenge* and Dean's Executive Fellow of Leadership, Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University

"Finally, a superb leadership book with a purpose: dealing with the challenges of long-distance leadership. A must-read for leaders of all organizations dealing with the increasing demand for and challenge of long-distance leadership. As global economies force more and more organizations to deal with this leadership challenge, this book provides a well-thought-out and practical guide you will want all your leaders to inculcate."

—Major General David Ralston (US Army, Retired)

"When I discuss what a leader is with midlevel managers, this book will be on the reference list for them. They can assess themselves on the leadership skills ladder, establish goals, and work directly with their managers and mentors. I particularly like the 'check-in' section . . . I find my development participants increase their impact and performance with the knowledge they have a voice and are thought about, even though their leaders might physically see them only once a year . . . A practical approach to the journey of success as a remote leader . . . We should all consider what skill we are going to focus on today."

—Alicia Davis, Director, Global Finance Learning and Development, Dell Inc.

"Leaders who are determined to make an impact in the fiercely complex world of the 21st century will benefit greatly from the insights and principles in the *The Long-Distance Leader.*"

—Doug Conant, founder and CEO, ConantLeadership; Chairman, Kellogg Executive Leadership Institute, Northwestern University; former Chairman, Avon Products; and former CEO, Campbell Soup Company

"Leadership isn't easy. Working remotely adds a new dynamic. The practical tips in this book give readers the edge they need to be successful leading remote teams. Many teams struggle with communication; add the component that you have remote employees and it gets more difficult. The tools in this book give you what you need to be a better leader, as well as the competitive advantage to get the most out of your remote teams."

—**Marcie Van Note, MBA Director, Mount Mercy University**

"Wayne and Kevin's book offers the reader a solid foundation in leadership in any circumstance and layers it with virtual leadership or leadership at a distance. It is full of nuance and nudges that will help you navigate through the labyrinths of leading at a distance. I especially appreciated the snippets where Wayne and Kevin reveal their ways of working together; this added a very real and personal touch. I encourage you to purchase the book, study the rules, reflect on their questions, put the book into practice, and become a leader who can 'go the distance.'"

—**David Zinger, founder and host of the Employee Engagement Network**

"Great book. Spot-on timewise. Moving from 'managing' people to 'leading' people has never been more relevant when overnight everything we do as a business could change. A manager manages people; a leader employs great people and trusts them to achieve amazing results."

—**Ann Andrews, CSP, author of *Lessons in Leadership***

The Long-Distance Leader

Rules for Remarkable Remote Leadership

Kevin Eikenberry and Wayne Turmel

The Long-Distance Leader

This book is dedicated to our teammates at The Kevin Eikenberry Group and Remote Leadership Institute for being our inspiration, our support, and occasionally our lab rats. You are all truly remarkable.

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Contents

Contents

Section Five   Understanding Ourselves

Section Six   Developing Long-Distance Leaders

Rules for Remarkable Remote Leadership

Rule 1   Think about leadership first, location second.

Rule 2   Accept the fact that leading remotely requires you to lead differently.

Rule 3   Know that working remotely changes the interpersonal dynamics, even if you don't want it to.

Rule 4   Use technology as a tool, not as a barrier or an excuse.

Rule 5   Leading requires a focus on outcomes, others, and ourselves.

Rule 6   Leading successfully requires achieving goals of many types.

Rule 7   Focus on achieving goals, not just setting them.

Rule 8   Coach your team effectively regardless of where they work.

Rule 9   Communicate in the ways that work best for others rather than based on your personal preferences.

Rule 10   Leading successfully requires understanding what people are thinking, not just what they are doing.

Rule 11   Building trust at a distance doesn't happen by accident.

Rule 12   Identify the leadership results you need, then select the communication tool to achieve them.

Rule 13   Maximize a tool's capabilities or you'll minimize your effectiveness.

Rule 14   Seek feedback to best serve outcomes, others, and ourselves.

Rule 15   Examine your beliefs and self-talk—they define how you lead.

Rule 16   Accept that you can't do it all—you shouldn't try anyway.

Rule 17   Balance your priorities to be a Remarkable Long-Distance Leader.

Rule 18   Ensure your leadership development prepares Long-Distance Leaders.

Rule 19   When all else fails, remember Rule 1.

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Introduction

Principle comes first; action thereafter.

—Todd Stocker, speaker and pastor

The best place to start is at the beginning. We don't want you to search for or try to surmise the premise of this book.

Our premise:

Leading a team at a distance is first and foremost about leadership, and the principles of leadership haven't changed—they are principles. What has changed is that people are working in different places and perhaps at different times. Given those changes, how we apply the timeless principles of leadership in this new world matters a great deal—for the team members working at a distance, for you as their leader, and for the organization that you all serve.

This book is about both the principles and the nuances that matter so much.

While there are adjustments we need to make to lead in a world with more distance between team members, there is far more that won't change. We plan to show you the principles *and* nuances and help you recognize the difference.

This premise leaves us with a few things to clear up before we begin in earnest.

What Is Leadership?

More is being written about this topic than ever before, and still we need to set the context, since the words "leadership" and "leading" are both in the title of the book. Here is what we believe:

Leadership is present when people are choosing to follow someone toward a desired future outcome.

So . . . You are only leading if people are following.

There is a lot in those two short statements. Let us unpack it a bit more by sharing some truths and myths about leadership.

Leadership is complex

In visiting with leaders from NASA (a.k.a. rocket scientists), Kevin asked which was more complex—rocket science or leadership. The response was swift and simple—leadership was the clear and decisive winner. The group explained that in the world of building rockets, they can determine a right answer; they know the equations and formulas. They explained that if they put the right numbers into the right formulas at the right time (and check their math), they will get the right answer.

> **In visiting with leaders from NASA (a.k.a. rocket scientists), Kevin asked which was more complex—rocket science or leadership. The response was swift and simple—leadership was the clear and decisive winner.**

But as a leader, you are dealing with *people*—and people are inherently more complex. And the issues, while perhaps not as dramatic as sending a rocket into orbit, are far more dynamic and are seldom black and white. Leadership isn't easy or simple. And, like rocket science, it is something that requires study and practice to become skilled. And when we add the complexity of leading people in different locations, it becomes even more complex.

Leadership is an action

Leadership is typically considered a role or a person, i.e., "They are the leader." While the dictionary says "leadership" is a noun, "leading," the actions that define leadership, is a verb. Leadership is not really something that we have or

possess; it is something that we *do*. When you think about leadership, think about actions and behaviors. The point of this book is to answer the question: What are the actions and behaviors that will help you help your teams (specifically remotely) get better results?

And if leadership is an action, that means it *isn't a title or position*. You are a leader when people follow you—if they aren't following, you aren't leading. The actions of others aren't guaranteed by a job title, the color of your desk, or the size of your office. A title that proclaims you a leader doesn't make you a leader any more than calling a lion a zebra creates black stripes.

Think of it this way: chances are you have observed or worked for a person with a leadership position who wasn't really leading. Alternatively, you know people who don't have or don't want the position, but people choose to follow them anyway. It is action, not titles, that makes leaders.

Leadership is a responsibility

When you were placed in or accepted a formal or informal role of leadership, you received a significant amount of responsibility. This may seem obvious if your title is president, CEO, or business owner, but your responsibility is massive as a first-level leader too. Think about it this way: outside of people's closest family and friends, you as their boss are about the most influential person in their life. You have an impact on their pay, their work environment (even if you aren't sitting in the same location), the level of stress they experience, the amount of satisfaction they find in their work, and a hundred other things.

People are looking to you. If you are leading, people are *following* you. You have a responsibility, therefore, for more than yourself and your own results. You must make sure that the direction you are headed is a useful and valuable one too. You can try to ignore this responsibility, but it won't change the significance of the role.

And while it is a responsibility, *it isn't a power grab*. The behaviors that lead to others granting you "power" don't come from you simply wanting it. They come from your relentless focus on serving others. If you try to grab power or claim authority, you aren't leading. When you lead in the ways we will discuss throughout this book, much "power" will likely be granted to you.

Leadership is an opportunity

Nothing positive happens in the world without leadership. The opportunity to make a difference is huge and exciting. Whether you are thinking about the difference you can make for your team, your customers, your organization at large, or the communities where you work and live, or even if you're thinking about changing the world, it all requires leadership.

When you exhibit the behaviors of leadership, you are actively trying to create new results that will make a difference in the world. Few things hold greater opportunity than this. Always remember that you have an opportunity to make a difference. Helping you make that difference with a far-flung team is a big reason why we wrote this book.

Leadership isn't a gift from birth

Leadership skills aren't doled out in the genetics of some while others are left wanting. All of us are given a unique bundle of DNA that can allow us to become highly effective, even remarkable leaders. Do some people have innate strengths that help them as leaders? Of course, but so do you—even if they are different strengths. None of that matters, though, if we don't do the things to use those strengths and do the things to improve in areas that are harder for us. Few things are sadder than unfulfilled potential. Leadership success isn't nearly as much about genetics as it is learning and improvement.

Leadership isn't management

The skills of management are focused on things: processes, procedures, plans, budgets, and forecasts. The skills of leadership focus on people, vision, influence, direction, and development. Both are valuable skill sets, and it is likely you need all these skills to be successful in your role. While not downplaying the management skills, recognize you are reading a book titled *The Long-Distance Leader*, not *The Long-Distance Manager*, and our focus will be on leadership throughout this book. The differences are clear but not distinct: think of the skill sets as overlapping circles, as seen in figure 1. We need to exhibit both sets of skills, but great leaders aren't necessarily great managers and vice versa.
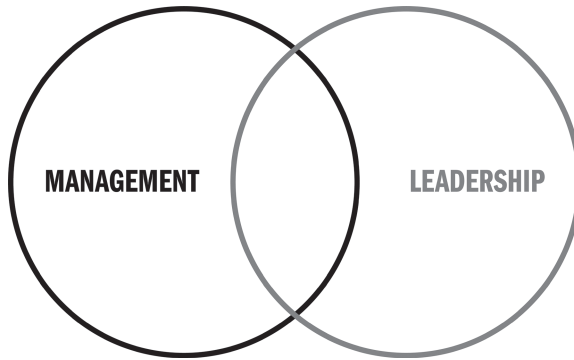
Figure 1   Two Parts of Your Role

To further make the point on the difference between leaders and managers, consider these lists.

Some Skills of Management

- Coordinating
- Planning
- Forecasting
- Budgeting
- Sourcing
- Directing
- Maintaining
- Problem solving
- Setting objectives
- Being tactical
- Focusing on the business
- Creating incremental improvement
- Doing things right
- Attending to details
- Focusing on processes

Some Skills of Leadership

- Collaborating
- Coaching
- Guiding
- Communicating
- Team building
- Creating change
- Providing vision
- Supporting
- Encouraging
- Setting goals
- Being strategic
- Creating purposeful disruption
- Doing the right things
- Thinking (and talking about) the big picture
- Focusing on people

While neither list is comprehensive, notice that all the behaviors in both lists are important, and to be at your best, you will have capability at all of them. Hopefully, though, the two lists make our point that the skills *are* different. This book will dive into some of the skills on the leadership list but few on the management list.

Remember, this book is about leading at a distance, which means we will talk about some critical leadership principles to provide context for what changes are necessary when leading remotely. This book isn't a complete treatise on leadership, so if you are looking for that, you are reading the wrong book. If you want or need more grounding on leadership principles, we recommend the books noted in the suggested reading list on page 195.

With this solid foundation, we are ready to get started. Let's start with what we have learned, and are learning, about Long-Distance Leaders.

Pause and Reflect

▶ What are your beliefs about leadership?

▶ What is your personal balance of skills between management and leadership?

Section One

Getting Started

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Chapter 1

What We've Learned about Long-Distance Leaders

Rule 1: Think about leadership first, location second.

You cannot manage men into battle.
You manage things; you lead people.

—Admiral Grace Hopper

Eric is a solid manager and has had a traditional team in place for five years. Lately, he's been dealing with people working from home several days a week. On the surface everything's fine, but as he told us, he spends too much time worrying about what he doesn't know, or what might be happening, rather than the work itself. He second-guesses himself more than ever and feels less confident in his decisions. As he said, "So far so good, but for how long?" There are a lot of people like Eric.

If you're reading this, you agree with us that doing "okay" or "not terrible" isn't nearly good enough. Leadership is aspirational; no one who picked up this book wants to be merely average or normal. You want to be an excellent leader and, if possible, to achieve that with far less stress than you're experiencing now.

When we started looking at the day-to-day challenges faced by Long-Distance Leaders, we had a pretty good idea of what we'd find—after all, we've worked with dozens of organizations and thousands of people over the last few years. Still, we wanted to quantify what's happening in the world and check our assumptions with measurable data. That led to our Remote Leadership Survey.

In 2017, we conducted a voluntary survey of more than 225 managers who have at least part of their team working remotely.[1] Admittedly, this is a small sample size, but the results bear out what we're hearing every day. If we were looking for shocking results or data that came out of left field, we didn't find it. What we *did* discover is that the challenges for remote leaders very closely mirror those for managers in any situation, and that the majority of leaders report that things are . . . okay. Not perfect—things could always be better—but certainly not the-place-is-about-to-collapse awful either. There are also signs that as part-time teleworking increases and more companies change to a remote labor force, the cracks we did find will only grow.

The survey highlights challenges that arise because of the distance between people and the use of technology to bridge those gaps. As you'll see in a moment, that makes perfect sense, and it confirms that what we are experiencing with our clients isn't unusual. The data points out what needs to be done to prepare leaders for a new way to work and to help develop the skills required to do the job well.

Here is what we learned.

Demographics

- *The managers crossed every possible industry and discipline.* Government and sales accounted for 11 to 12 percent each, and even with seven categories, 46 percent of respondents were "other." This is an important point—leading remotely is a fact of life not limited to specific industries or disciplines.

- *The size of teams is changing.* Of the respondents surveyed, more than half had teams of ten people or more, 25 percent led two to five people, and 21 percent led six to ten people (figure 2). This is slightly more than the average of direct reports under the same roof and may indicate a new trend
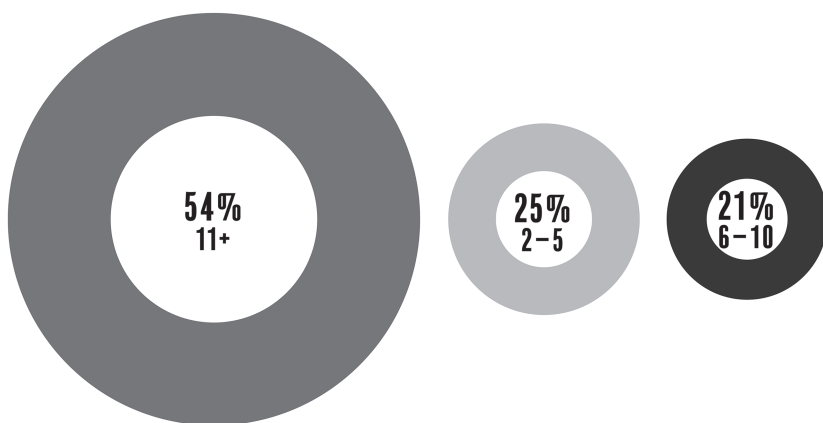
Figure 2   Sizes of Remote Teams

toward broader spans of control, which only exacerbates the challenges of leading remotely.

- *"Remote teams" doesn't mean everyone's working elsewhere.* We often think of remote teams as either wholly remote (everyone is scattered to the winds) or co-located. In fact, over 70 percent of leaders said they had a "hybrid" team, with a 50-50 split between teams with full-time and part-time remote employees. The other 30 percent had a completely or mostly remote team (figure 3). This is by far the fastest growing segment of the workforce. Failure to address this now means more stress down the road.
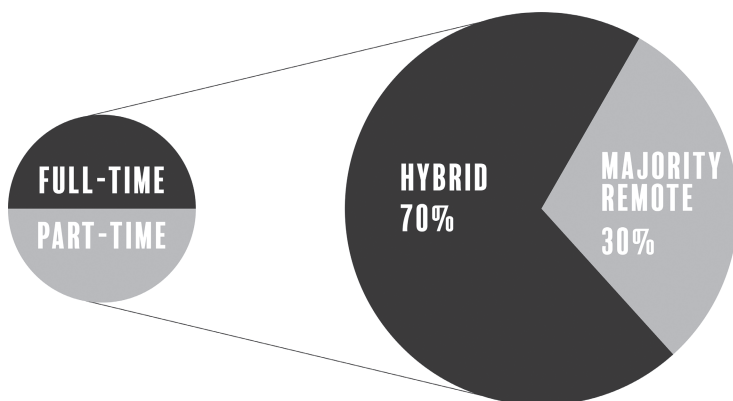
Figure 3   Team Makeup

- *Other demographic data.* Respondents were 60 percent male, 40 percent female, and they were an experienced bunch: 34 percent were aged forty to forty-nine and 37 percent were fifty to fifty-nine. A surprising 19 percent were over sixty. This makes sense since 78 percent of them had been managers for eight years or more. This confirms an important point: time as a leader doesn't seem to make the transition to long-distance leadership any easier.

What's Going On out There?

We reached a group of experienced managers, across multiple industries. Yet when we asked, "How's it going?" the answers were strangely in accord. Here are some examples:

- Over half say they "get the job done," and an additional 28 percent say their team is "highly productive."

- When asked, "Where do the productivity challenges lie?" 10 percent say the problems are with remote members, 4 percent say they are with the "home team," and 69 percent say there's no pattern to it or it's hard to identify the roots of the problems.

- Trust runs a little below productivity, and while most managers say the level of trust is okay (both between themselves and individuals, and between the various members of the team), there are more problems reported here than anywhere else on the survey. The largest part of our respondents say that trust levels aren't awful, but it's a gap worth working on.

The Biggest Worries

Finally, we asked specific questions about challenges these leaders face. We presented four common questions remote leaders often ask themselves and The feedback we received is shown in figure 4.

The first question gets asked most frequently when working remotely is new, or in organizations or industries where trust is traditionally low, including highly regulated union environments and government. Based on our experience, senior leadership is overly worried about precisely what people are

28%	46%	52%	58%
How do we know people are really working?	Are people getting enough social interaction?	Are we getting good feedback when we need to consider options?	Can we be as effective a leader as when we're co-located?

Figure 4   The Biggest Worries

doing at any given time. Notice that remote leaders are more worried about the last three questions, which are more personal.

What Are People Afraid of?

On the surface, it sounds as if everything is generally fine. You have experienced people feeling pretty good about the people they lead, and the work is getting done. What's the problem? But when you explore the written comments, you see the cracks in the armor, and they echo the concerns we hear every day.

- "With people around the world, it's become impossible to 'turn off.' I'm connected 24/7/365."

- "We aren't efficient at meetings. Too many people check out or don't participate."

- "There are divisions between the remote people and those who work in the office."

- "We don't see many engagement or performance challenges until it's too late."

- "We're great at getting work done that's properly defined and scoped. It's coming up with new ideas, dealing with surprises, or implementing new things that create problems."

- "Focusing on the urgent vs. the important is hard enough, but you don't know what others are focused on."

We could go on, of course, and we'll share more comments and stories as we go, but here's what the data says to us.

- Leaders are making things happen in this new environment because they are working longer and harder. They want to succeed in the virtual world, but they're doing it through effort and guesswork. We believe there is a better way.

- Although many organizations are starting to plan for teleworking (with policies and support) and training their remote leaders, the planning lags behind the reality. Leaders are trusting their instincts and doing the best they can, yet they aren't finding the support they need in existing company training or general business literature.

- They lack confidence in themselves. Phrases like "I'm never sure . . ." or "I worry about . . ." pepper the comments. This uncertainty undermines effectiveness and adds to the stress of a new and unfamiliar work landscape.

- Experienced leaders sometimes struggle with technology. As psychologist Jean Twenge says in her book *iGen*, experienced leaders are used to a different way of working.[2] Though many of the things that enabled their success are still relevant, there's a feeling that they're working with one hand tied behind their backs and struggling to connect with younger, more tech-savvy employees.

- Generally, those new to leadership roles are comfortable with technology but lack fundamental leadership skills.

Some Important Things to Remember

As you read through the rest of this book, here are some important things to think about:

- Remote leadership, while becoming far more common, has always existed. It can be done well, and you can do it.

- Leading at a distance is still leading—and while there is far more that has remained the same, the differences must be acknowledged and addressed to have the success you want and your team deserves.

- The skills you need to communicate, influence, build strong working relationships, and engage people can be learned, developed, and replicated throughout the organization, but only if you understand the dynamics at work and identify the skill gaps to mindfully address them.

- It's not just you. The very questions, doubts, and concerns that brought you to this book are simultaneously challenging millions of other smart, talented, dedicated—and exhausted—leaders.

Pause and Reflect

▶ What are your biggest concerns or challenges about leading at a distance?

Online Resource

If you'd like to take the survey for yourself, go to

http://RemoteLeadershipInstitute.com/LDLsurvey

and add to the data we're collecting to help other future leaders.

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Chapter 2

How We Got to Long-Distance Leadership

Rule 2: Accept the fact that leading remotely requires you to lead differently.

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.

—Henry the IV, Part 2 by William Shakespeare

Being a leader has never been a simple task. The struggle to be effective, to achieve your (and your organization's) goals, and help the people you lead reach their destination is constant. It's a challenge, and you've accepted, so get on with it.

Patty is one of those leaders. She's worked with the same team for three years, with everyone in the same location, and a big part of everyone's social activity revolves around work. Two years ago, people were allowed to work from home if necessary—snowstorms, sick kids—but now half the team is out of the office at least three days a week. There is no plan, no standardized processes, and her training has always involved face-to-face communication over everything else. Also, she's not terribly fond of technology and relies too much on email. As a result, she's holding off communicating until everyone's all

together, but that is leaving some people out of the loop or with information that isn't timely. It's frustrating, and she has asked us, "How did this happen?"

It's easy to discount the challenges of the way the workplace works today, especially the impact of distance and technology-enabled communication, and just focus on what has always made leaders effective. After all, Genghis Khan ruled half the known world and never held a single WebEx meeting. The sun never set on Queen Victoria's British Empire, yet there's no recorded instance of a single conference call. It's not like others haven't done it before us, and there is no reason we can't do it more effectively, productively, and with less stress. Discounting or diminishing the problems doesn't change the fact that there's been a fundamental change both in the way people work together and how leaders are expected to communicate. As Patty has noticed, and her company has yet to address, this change has had a profound impact on leadership behavior, attitudes, and results.

When Genghis had to communicate an order, there were real live people in front of him, professional clerks who carefully wrote down his words and then passed those commands on down the line. When you need to communicate change order to your project team, how often do you stare out at a sea of empty desks (or the strangers in the Starbucks where you are working) tapping out instructions on your phone, wondering if the team will understand and heed the directive?

It may have always been lonely at the top, but now we're literally, physically, by ourselves much of the time. When Queen Victoria grumbled, "We are not amused," the person she was scolding stood in front of her and knew she meant it. They couldn't slough it off with an "LOL" and a shrug emoji.

In fact, the world of work has changed a lot in the last quarter century or so. Here are some of the ways it used to be:

- *The number of managers, team leaders, and others who sent their own written correspondence was very low.* Above a certain level in most organizations, letters and documents were created by assistants, clerks, or other trained professionals. At the very least, such communication was checked by someone else before going out into the world. You didn't (and couldn't) simply hit "send" or "reply all."

- *Email didn't exist for most people.* Some of us can remember our first email accounts. We couldn't access them except by computer (usually at work), and there was no guarantee that your intended audience had access to that tool either. Now it's probably the number one form of business communication (and the most complained about).

- *Most business communication that wasn't face-to-face was done on the telephone.* Less than fifteen years ago, the percentage of time people spent talking on the telephone outweighed the time spent reading and writing email significantly. Now the time spent on those activities has reversed, and the trend continues.

- *Most team leaders, supervisors, and managers had the people they worked with in a single location, or within easy physical reach.* Only leaders at the regional level and above in large companies had to worry about managing people remotely. Leadership development and training assumed a lot of face-to-face contact. That may not match your reality today, and most leaders say they haven't received sufficient (or any) training in the real dynamics of leading remote and hybrid teams.

   And there is more that has changed over that twenty-five years . . .

- Today, according to the Project Management Institute, 90 percent of project teams have at least one member (usually more) who aren't co-located with the rest of the team.[1]

- 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, nearly 80 percent of white-collar supervisors have at least one direct report who works in a different location—at least part-time.[2] 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.

- Social media and electronic communication have changed how information (or disinformation) spreads, and how quickly. It used to be that responding to a request took at least enough time to dip the quill in ink and handwrite a response, drop it in an envelope, and ship it across the ocean. Or the person communicated with you directly.

The important thing about all these numbers is that it drives home how much things have changed in terms of how we do our jobs. There are two major repercussions for leaders as a result:

- The communication methods that enabled us to succeed (if we've been around for a while) have changed. You may be terrific in a face-to-face meeting . . . but how many of those will you have today? Maybe you're a great listener, but if Bob in Dallas only communicates with you through email, that strength is negated, and it begs the question whether the two of you are really working as effectively as you could and should.

- The notion of a leader's sense of isolation is no longer simply emotional. You're not only lonely because you have the sole responsibility for decisions, or the weight of authority, or feel responsible if people lose their jobs—you're often actually physically alone.

First, you need to cut yourself some slack. After all, if you've been doing this job for a long time, the things you're expected to do and the tools you're expected to use have changed considerably in a short period of time. If you're new to the role of leader, chances are the people who mentor and teach you aren't familiar with working the same way you do. This is still largely uncharted territory.

Before, when you made a decision, asked a question, or gave direction, you looked in the other person's face, or at least heard their voice. You could tell if you were understood or if they agreed with what you were saying. You had real-time feedback so you could coach, answer questions, or change course quickly. If you needed answers, you got them immediately. You even occasionally got a smile or a "thank you" that made you feel good. These are just some of the real emotional rewards that can come with being an effective leader.

But now, some of the rewards may be missing. Like Patty, it feels as if you're working in the dark, unsure what's happening, operating largely on faith (even when you don't have much), and doing it all in ways we and our predecessors have never done before.

One of our clients put it this way: "Managing has always felt like herding cats. But now I'm trying to herd cats by email."

Before we get caught up in how things are different and how much things have changed, let's take a breath. The truth is that while there have been significant changes to the way we lead, the act of *leadership* itself hasn't really changed all that much.

"Managing has always felt like herding cats. But now I'm trying to herd cats by email."

This is a first-order change, not a second. What's the difference? A first-order change means we need *to do the same things but in a different way*. We need to do something faster, smarter, using different tools, but the task at hand is fundamentally the same. A second-order change implies what we're doing doesn't work at all, and we need to do something completely different.

Here's an example. Let's say one of your team members is chronically late to work. There are plenty of ways you can help them address this problem: they can leave home fifteen minutes earlier, change their route to work, or even agree to stay fifteen minutes later each day so they're putting in the same amount of work. Those are all first-order changes.

If those solutions don't work, you might work to accommodate their needs, or suggest they find a new job. That's a second-order change: how you're doing things isn't working, so you need to change what you do.

Being a Long-Distance Leader may feel radically different from how you've worked in the past. Maybe you were more comfortable when you shared an office space with your coworkers or got to see them face-to-face more often than you do now. Those changes may be creating emotional stress that impacts your productivity and how effective you can be.

What you do may not be the problem, but how you do it may well be. In the next section, we'll share a model that helps illustrate that fact.

Pause and Reflect

▶ What has been the biggest change in the way your team works over the last year? If you're new and don't have a good answer, what is the biggest change you've noticed from the way your previous bosses handled the job?

▶ Have you noticed any changes in your leadership behavior because of working separately from your people? If so, what are they?

▶ What is the most stressful part of leading people who work apart from you?

▶ What is working well? What do you know for sure is not working well?

Chapter 3

What It Means to Lead at a Distance

Rule 3: Know that working remotely changes the interpersonal dynamics, even if you don't want it to.

Sometimes when I consider what tremendous consequences come from little things . . . I am tempted to think . . . there are no little things.

—Bruce Barton, ad executive and US congressman

Ahmed had been a supervisor for a couple of years, but all of his team was right down the hall. With a corporate policy change, three of his team members are now working from home. He knows the world has changed but doesn't really understand what that will mean for him and what he must do each day. He's often surprised at how little misunderstandings turn into problems and how people miss messages he thought were perfectly clear.

In this chapter, we are going to talk more about the distance that Ahmed (and you) are experiencing and what it all means. We are going to expand on the last chapter to make sure you know where you are and where you want to go.

The title of this book seems simple enough. A Long-Distance Leader is someone who leads from a physical location separate from at least some of the people he or she leads. That covers a lot of situations, though, based on the way the modern workplace works.

Remote vs. Virtual

Here's some basic terminology that will be important as we continue. First, there's the issue of "remote" teams and "virtual" teams. They are used interchangeably but aren't necessarily the same.

According to Dr. Karen Sobel Lojeski,[1] formerly of Stonybrook University (SUNY Stonybrook) and now CEO of Virtual Distance International, here's the distinction: Remote distance is just what it says. The people you lead are somewhere else at least part of the time. Perhaps you're a sales manager with people working from the road who are constantly on their laptops and phones. Or you're a project lead with team members scattered from Bangor to Bangalore. Or the company you run has a single location, but you have one person who, because of childcare needs, works from home one day a week.

The important thing about these teams is that team members may not be in physical proximity to each other. They lack the constant visual and other cues that frequent interaction and exposure to each other provide. Communication might be constantly mediated by screens and email. Meanwhile, the reporting structure and the power balance is fairly traditional. Things are different, but it's to a much lesser degree than it feels at first.

Virtual distance is more complicated. Communication is primarily through technology, and you may be separated by distance, but there are structural differences to the relationship. If you lead a project where your team is made up of people from different departments, for example, you may have all the responsibility of a leader but none of the actual authority. Project teams and ad hoc teams are frequently "virtual"; there's a project manager or leader, but that person may have no direct supervisory power—everyone on the team has a "real boss" they report to. This makes influence, rather than authority, the main way to get things done. The traditional levers of power ("I'm the boss, you have to do what I say") aren't as simple as in the past. It's hard to twist arms through a phone line.

Additionally, virtual distance can be emotional. If you have a coworker who would rather send you an email than actually talk to you, there is virtual distance, even though the "remote distance" is easily covered. Now imagine

they are literally out of sight (they couldn't walk to your office if they wanted to)—how much more difficult would it be?

Types of Teams

We also need to be clear about what we mean when we talk about team dynamics. Whether it's a functional team, a project team, or a political campaign, there are three types of teams a leader today might work with:

- *Co-located teams.* Here everyone's working in the same location the vast majority of the time. This is the kind of team most of us grew up on.

- *Completely remote teams.* People work together toward a common goal, but they do most of their work physically separated from each other. Most communication then will not be face-to-face. A classic example is a sales manager with one direct report per region.

- *Hybrid teams.* Some of your people share a workspace; others are in other locations. This might include full-time teleworkers, people in other offices, or even those working on a client site. A subset of the hybrid team is when people work from home a couple of days a week—or whenever they feel like it. If you've ever held a meeting with some people in a conference room and others dialing in on a speakerphone, you know there are some unique challenges. One of the fastest-changing challenges for hybrid teams is that people are constantly changing where they work—sometimes they're in the office, sometimes they're away—so processes and access to information can change almost daily. Your team might be a hybrid, with most people in the office one day, then completely virtual the next.

Each of these types of teams has things in common (they need to get work done, exchange information, and build on each other's work) and unique challenges (management by walking around doesn't work if you are in Seattle and part of your team is in Sydney or Singapore). But our focus will be on completely remote and hybrid teams through this book.

Beyond these distinctions, there are further differences for your remote or hybrid teams, based on the context of the work. Consider the following:

- *Sales teams.* If you have a team of salespeople, it is likely that you once were one of those salespeople. Sales teams have been doing the remote thing longer, which can mean they experience less pain working remotely, or as we have often found it just means they don't know how much better it could be. They have accepted the issues and difficulties of working remotely.

- *Project or ad hoc teams.* These teams may be shorter lived, with high-stakes results on the line. You might be leading a project team and not have some (or any) of the team members reporting to you.

- *Individual contributor teams.* Sales teams likely fall into this category, but they aren't the only example. When you lead a team of individual contributors, the focus on remote teamwork and collaboration might not be as strong, yet you still must keep them from becoming too insulated or individually minded. They are still on a team, with team goals and objectives.

- *Global teams.* At some point if people aren't in the building, it doesn't matter how far away they are . . . except where cultural differences and vast differences in time zones make communication and relationship building more challenging.

What Hasn't Changed

Kevin has had this question on his whiteboard for several months: *"How does leadership change, and what shouldn't change?"* In many ways that sums up this section of the book, and it certainly is the focus of this chapter.

First, here's what shouldn't change . . .

- *The leader's primary focus.* Whether they are outside your office door, down the hall, out in the warehouse, or in another time zone or country, leadership is still about human beings. Too often leaders want to move to the

details of situation or context without first remembering that team members have feelings, emotions, needs, and personal objectives that need to be considered. Start with the idea that everything starts with people and you will start in the right place.

■ *The fundamentals of human behavior.* Since you are leading people, the more you understand the psychology of people—their wants, needs, desires, fears, and anxieties—the more successful you will be. Contrary to what you might read in the popular or trendy business press, the fundamentals of human behavior have not changed because people work from a different location, use a certain type of technology, or were born in a certain year. We will point to these fundamentals throughout the book.

■ *The principles of leadership.* Along with the fundamentals of human behavior, there are skills and characteristics that lead people to follow some people more than others. These traits, characteristics, and skills haven't changed as people have migrated from the office to their homes or a client location.

■ *The roles of leaders.* Regardless of where the team is located, leaders are asked to coach, influence, and communicate. They are expected to coalesce and collaborate with teams, set goals, and lead change. We talked a bit about this in chapter 1, but it deserves a reminder here: the basic roles expected of leaders haven't changed as the team has dispersed.

■ *The high-level expectations of our output.* Our organizations still want us to hit production targets, finish valuable projects, meet a budget, work safely, and a hundred other things. These high-level work goals don't change when people work in different places.

While those important things haven't changed, we must recognize and address the differences caused by distance or, like Ahmed, we'll experience frustration and unexpected surprises.

What Has Changed

You're reading this book because something has changed dramatically in the way you work. Odds are, it's one or more of the following.

Geography

We've worked with organizations that talk about leading teams on different floors or different buildings on the same corporate campuses. There is no doubt that some of the long-distance factors we will discuss in this book are valid even over short distance. What is changing is how geographically dispersed we have become. Kevin has for many years led a team spread across seventy-five miles, but now that team spans from Richmond, Virginia, to Chicago, to Phoenix, to Fort Wayne, to Indianapolis and beyond. Even that isn't as dispersed as many of you face, with teams spanning the globe from Dallas, Texas, to Dubai; from Dublin to Danforth, Illinois. These geographic changes matter, perhaps in different ways than you initially might think.

Now you don't just have distance but time zones, cultural norms and expectations, and generally more complexity to your work as a leader . . . as if it wasn't complicated enough.

You are out of sight

This may seem obvious, but when leading at a distance you aren't seen as often by the people you want to influence.

If you want to lead by example, it is much easier if people can see you. If you want others to help each other, they need to see you are willing to roll up your sleeves yourself—after all, if you aren't above doing the dirty work, people will notice. Those physically around can see that your behavior is consistent with your values.

When you share space with people, they can ask questions on the fly or request a meeting at a moment's notice because your door is open or they know you are around. People not in the office can't have that awareness, so you must have processes to overcome this difference.

As strange as it feels at first, your physical presence conveys the power of your position and your willingness to lead. If people need to schedule time with you, aren't sure if now is a good time to ask a question, or haven't

developed a warm personal relationship with you, you have both immediate and long-term problems to overcome.

Whether we're talking actual physical presence or "virtual presence" where you are available and visible to your people, "being seen" is critical to leadership and suffers in a long-distance relationship.

Technology

Kevin started his company with a fax machine and internet through CompuServe. Besides letting you know that Kevin has been around awhile, it reminds us how much the world of technology has changed and will continue to change. Recognizing the technology available to you and using it appropriately and effectively can be a big lever for your success as a Long-Distance Leader. Keeping up with new tools that make your work and communication more effective is part of your job.

If you aren't using the available tools, your team won't either. And if you aren't using them well, the resistance will increase. If they don't have a model of success because you aren't using the tools well or at all, good luck getting them to use those tools.

If you are a Long-Distance Leader, and perhaps especially if you are of our generation, this means you must encourage the use of the right tools at the right times, and you must use them yourself.

Working Relationships

Although people aren't working in the same building or corridor, they still work together, hand off work to each other, and therefore must communicate successfully.

And although relationships don't develop or improve simply because of regular face-to-face interaction, personal contact provides a boost in creating working relationships. So, the need for working relationships (both practically and psychologically) doesn't change when people work remotely from each other, but the opportunities and context for building those relationships changes drastically. Learning how to build and maintain them is always an important part of your work as a leader.

And . . . *virtual communication changes the interpersonal dynamic, even if you don't want it to.* As a Long-Distance Leader, it gets harder—and perhaps even more important—to intentionally nurture relationships with all your team members.

You get fewer communication cues

When you speak to someone face-to-face, you get instantaneous feedback. Some of it is purposeful—people can ask questions or comment, and as a leader you should encourage honest responses to your messages. Much of this is involuntary; the broad smile of acceptance or the furrowing of a brow tells us we need to adjust our message, repeat it, check for understanding, or get more information before we proceed. We constantly and naturally adjust our messages on the fly based on those real-time responses.

When working at a distance, the balance of communication modes changes. Think about how much of your interaction takes place in writing. Email, texts, and online communication are your most frequent methods of passing information back and forth. That often feels impersonal and cold. It's one-way communication and demands that you hone all your communication skills, not just your verbal ones.

When we do speak, it's on the phone—with only our tone of voice and words and without the supporting evidence of smiles, winks, or posture to help support our message. And even when people can see us (if we're using webcams or videoconferencing), there is a conscious separation from our audience that video alone can't completely overcome.

In a world where those immediate cues are missing, you must ensure your message is easily understood and that you find other ways to receive critical cues. Sure, you sent that email saying you're changing how the process for the Jackson account is going to work. But does that mean people really have the information they need to change or know how this will impact them? Are they blithely accepting the news, or are they freaking out and frantically instant messaging each other while you sit back thinking everything's fine?

We have all spent a lifetime learning to communicate in person—and now we're conducting our most important work in ways that we may be less effective and comfortable with.

Information gets filtered

The way information is received is often filtered and mediated in unexpected or unintended ways.

As a leader, you don't just send messages; you receive them . . . in mass quantities and multiple forms. When you work in proximity with people, you can pop in for a clarifying chat or watch their body language as they give you bad news and respond accordingly. When you receive information on the phone, often without context or advance notice, it is hard to make sure you're really reading carefully, processing the information clearly, and responding in ways you are proud of.

Your approach to leadership may be out of date

For a lot of us, our first leadership experiences occurred where everyone was in the same location. We could walk through the cube farm and see who was (or at least appeared to be) working and who wasn't. We overheard conversations or saw actions and could respond proactively and immediately.

Like us, you may have had managers or leaders who relied on the old "command and control" method of getting things done ("Because I said so"). Because they were nearby or could pop in at any moment, they watched everything we did and made sure we did it exactly the way they wanted it done. Whether that was good or bad, it was at least *possible*.

But when your team is scattered to the far corners of the continent, it is impossible to know what every person is doing all the time. Even if you wanted to monitor absolutely everything they do and make sure people weren't slacking off, you couldn't do it, and it's important to ask why you'd even want to. Since you can't know exactly what everyone's doing at any given time, you need to find ways to make sure people have the proper guidance for their tasks, are clear on the metrics, and their progress is communicated to you in ways that give you what you need to maintain progress—and your sanity. Stated another way, to lead successfully at a distance you must build greater trust with your team members—command and control won't work and will drive you crazy trying.

(Some of) people's needs change

The basic needs of humans don't change, but the context of working locations may make some needs more important or obvious than they were in the past. If you have team members teleworking from their home, they may have interaction needs that were previously met in the workplace that now are missing. As a Long-Distance Leader, you must notice the needs that surface and find ways to help meet them. Why? Because as those needs are met, people are better able to focus on and complete their work successfully.

> **As a Long-Distance Leader, it gets harder—and perhaps even more important—to intentionally nurture relationships with all your team members.**

This isn't only true for the more extroverted on your team who especially might miss the interaction and flow of life at the office while working remotely. In this digitally connected world, people have become increasingly isolated from each other physically, and the workplace has been for many that oasis of connection. Now, as people work from home, we as leaders must be aware of these needs. If we help people meet those needs and encourage them to do so, we get not only more productive team members but healthier and less stressed ones too.

More individual work focus

Often as people work remotely, their work becomes more focused on individual tasks and individual contributions. This shift to an individual focus and away from "the team" isn't necessarily bad; in some cases, it probably leads to better results. It is, however, a change that needs to be recognized by the organization, by us as leaders, and perhaps most importantly by the individuals doing the work. Recognizing this focus and making it overt—and at the same time not inadvertently individualizing the focus too much—is a nuance worth noting.

Working in isolation

Leading at a distance is literally a lonely job.

While it's lovely to have uninterrupted time to get your work done, part of the joy of leadership is being with other people. Hearing other opinions, getting timely answers to questions, brainstorming, and building on ideas is an exciting part of your role.

But where do you turn when you have a simple question? Do you have access to trusted advisors when you experience doubt? Can you check your assumptions, or do you come up with an idea and fire off orders without running them by someone close by first? Moreover, you don't get to see the acceptance of your ideas or hear good news firsthand . . . never mind being able to celebrate over pizza or a slice of birthday cake in the break room.

Our survey confirms that feeling isolated from their teams is a huge concern for leaders and impacts their effectiveness and job satisfaction. But who are you supposed to turn to for information, inspiration, and companionship in an increasingly long-distance workplace?

Now What?

Yes, being a Long-Distance Leader is difficult. It's also not impossible. (Remember, Genghis Khan and Queen Victoria did it . . . so can you.) You have to think about your job in new ways, be aware of the changing dynamics that impact you and your work, and change some behaviors.

In the rest of this book we'll look at each of the challenges we face as leaders, how leading at a distance affects them, and the new attitudes, points of view, and behaviors we'll have to apply to these changes.

Pause and Reflect

▶ What type of team do you have, and how does that inform how you lead?

▶ How has distance changed the way your team works and your effectiveness?

▶ How has working apart from people changed your approach to leadership?

▶ Which of the changes are impacting you the most?

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