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Leading from a Distance with Lessons from Online Teaching to Engage a Remote Workforce

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With many organizations and institutions now operating remotely due to the global coronavirus pandemic, leaders are now finding themselves in a position where they have to effectively lead and manage people and projects from a distance. Some are predicting that remote work may be a new normal for many organizations, with companies offering work-from-home opportunities permanently (Kelly, 2020). Because of the long-term implications for remote working, leaders will need competencies to successfully engage remote workers using new and creative strategies, techniques, and technologies. The field of online pedagogy has useful applications for engaging remote teams particularly in areas of communication, community-building, and retention. This chapter presents some lessons from online teaching that can be applied to leading a remote workforce. Women leaders in higher education institutions who have had to shift to leading teams remotely can find useful applications from the field of online teaching to their own remote workplace contexts, particularly from the literature of online student engagement.

Introduction
The impact of COVID-19 has dramatically shifted the workforce with more than 50% of U.S. workers now working remotely (Ozimek, 2020). Prior to COVID-19, remote work was steadily on the rise with the pandemic now accelerating the trend. According to a survey of over 2,000 global organizations, 78% of employers reported increased productivity during lockdown with 88% of workers appreciating a more flexible approach of working from home (Robert Walters Group Company, 2020). Having employees work from home can reduce overhead and increase cost-savings for employers on office space. It can also expand access to a pool of potential employees not restricted to geographic location. While many employees enjoy the convenience of working from home without the commute, it has also been a challenging time. There have been reports of increased stress and anxiety due to COVID-19, parents having to juggle work and childcare, and feelings of isolation from being physically distanced from coworkers, friends, and family (Parker, et al, 2020). Leaders may find themselves challenged to maintain strong working relationships with employees, motivate team members, and maintain morale while physically distant. Strategies from online teaching can be helpful to leaders who are seeking ways to engage their workers particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when many people are working remotely. Leaders can look to the field of online teaching for ideas on how to engage a remote workforce that comes from the literature on online student engagement.

Online Teaching versus Leading Remotely
For those who teach online courses, some of the issues of engagement, motivation, and relationship-building done from a distance are familiar in a different context. Online instructors have to be purposeful and creative in how they engage, motivate, and connect with students when teaching online courses and some of the practices used in online teaching can be applicable to leading remote teams. Even though leading a team of employees and teaching a class of students are very different endeavors, there are still some useful strategies from online teaching that can apply to leaders of remote teams within the university workplace. It should also be pointed out that the role of teaching in an online modality is different from teaching an in-person class. Much of traditional in-person teaching involves an instructor or professor standing at the front of a room while presenting a lesson or giving a lecture while students passively listen and take notes. In other words, the role of the in-person instructor is traditionally one where the

instructor transmits their knowledge to students verbally. In online teaching, typically all of the course curriculum content is available online, which students access through a Learning Management System. The course site contains self-paced units or modules that usually consist of readings, videos, assignment instructions, and student-to-student learning activities such as threaded discussions. Students are expected to progress through the modules on their own, complete assignments, and participate in activities. Online courses require students to be self-directed and autonomous learners. The role of the instructor in an online course is to facilitate student participation, give feedback, and guide student progression to achieve the learning outcomes of the course. This is typically done through frequent asynchronous communications to students both in written form such as email or replying to discussion posts as well as synchronous communications such as class or one-on-one Zoom meetings with students.

Leading teams remotely is also different from leading teams in-person. For example, leaders of remote teams have to rely more on written communications than they normally would if they were in the same office as team members and could communicate in person. Even though students taking online classes are different from employees working remotely, both have to take ownership for completing their tasks, assignments, and projects independently in order to be successful. The job for online instructors and remote leaders, then, is to empower and engage their students and workers to achieve the goals set out for them through the use of intentional strategies and methods. The following literature review connects research on online student engagement to employee engagement in a remote workplace context.

Literature Review
Engagement has become a highly researched topic in educational and organizational contexts. Student engagement and employee engagement are of interest because both tend to result in improved outcomes for the learner and the employee, as well as the employee's organization. Research has shown that when students are engaged in their learning it tends to result in improved student satisfaction, achievement, retention, and graduation (Zilvinski, Masseria & Pike, 2017). Research has demonstrated that employee engagement can result in improved employee productivity, retention, satisfaction, performance, and business outcomes for the organization (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). Although there is no single agreed-upon definition of engagement, it tends to include affective or positive emotional feelings toward the topic being studied or work being done in a class or workplace as well as a behavioral output such as high levels of participation, quality of work, and positive interactions with peers or coworkers. It also includes a cognitive component in how the student or employee thinks about their subject being studied, job being performed, or goals being accomplished in relation to their workplace or school. These aspects can vary by cultural differences so it's important for instructors and leaders to account for these differences (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019).

One engagement framework used in online teaching has been called the 'Trifecta of student engagement' (Leslie, 2020). This framework comes from Michael Moore's (1989) seminal work of identifying the three essential types of interaction for students in distance education courses: student-content interaction, student-student interaction, student-instructor interaction. For students to be fully engaged in an online course, they need to regularly and meaningfully interact with their course curriculum content, with their peers, and with their instructor. This framework places students at the center of all course interactions.
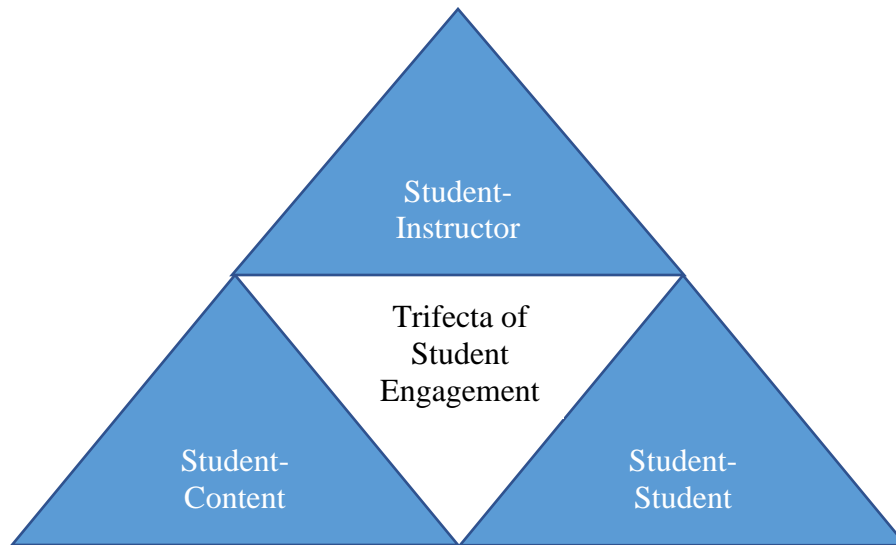
Figure 1

Interaction is essential in online courses to engage students. Studies show that interpersonal interaction leads to better student outcomes (Long, et al., 2011). It's not just about the quantity of interactions though. There is a qualitative component. Mehall (2020) defines quality interpersonal interactions as purposeful, social, and supportive and contribute to intellectual growth. Purposeful interaction with students communicate information that relates to the instructional content of the course. It can entail disseminating information about the course or course content, garnering student interest, or giving feedback or guidance on student work.

Because students are separated by time and distance in the online environment, it is easy for them to feel isolated. Faculty need to reduce this transactional distance by providing students with support so they can successfully progress through the course. Support interactions ensure that students have what they need to succeed (Mehall, 2020). This can include technical resources and assistance with various aspects of their learning needs, including socio-emotional support and guidance which can come from their professor as well as their peers. A key component of support interaction is empathy. Empathy in an online learning context is the ability of instructors to understand their online student's needs and be able to adapt their communication style to fit those needs. One study that examined the online teaching practices of award-winning online educators found that the use of empathy to "Let the student know that you've heard or understand them" was a key part of the relationship-building process (Martin, et al., 2019, p. 40).

The literature illustrates the importance of engagement in online courses. Student engagement includes interactions students with coursework, with their peers, and with their professor. Quality interactions are purposeful, social, and supportive. Leaders of remote teams can use a similar framework to intentionally engage employees with their work, with their coworkers, and with their leader (or supervisor) by facilitating interactions that are purposeful, social, and supportive with and among team members.

Methods
The following narrative describes a framework and strategies used in online teaching and how those can apply to leaders of remote teams. This narrative is limited to the perceptions and

positions of one online instructor who is also a staff member at a university. Online teaching practices used to engage students are presented and these are connected to suggestions for leaders of remote teams to engage employees. It is proposed that leaders of remote teams can adapt the Trifecta of Student Engagement framework for employee engagement.
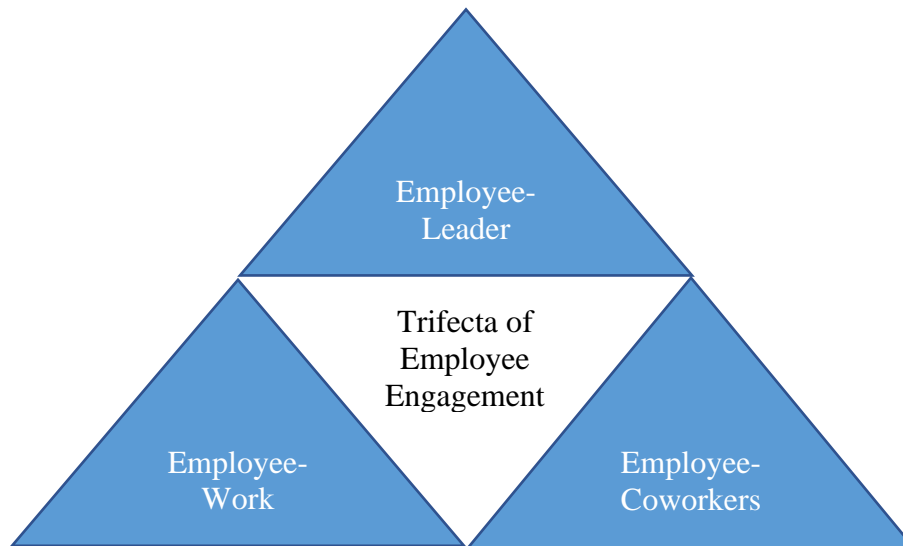

Figure 2

Engaging Students with Coursework
As the literature describes, engaging students online requires instructors to be purposeful in their interactions (Mehall, 2020). When aiming to engage students online, assignment instructions should incorporate what students find relevant, interesting, and meaningful to their lives. If instructions for an assignment are given without explaining why students are being asked to do something or what students will gain by completing the assignment, students may view the assignment as busy work. And students may not be very motivated to do the assignment if they do not understand how it connects to their goals. So, the first step is to understand students' goals and interests so that assignment instructions can be framed to engage learners. This information can be obtained through student surveys at the start of a course. This information can then be incorporated into presentations and assignment instructions so students see the connections between what they are asked to do and how it relates to their goals and interests. Assignment instructions can begin with why students are being asked to do the assignment (and how it relates to the goals of the course) as well as what students will gain by completing the assignment. Instructions can then explain what the assignment entails (i.e. a research paper, video presentation, portfolio, etc.) and details on how to do the assignment (i.e. number of references to include, the formatting style, etc.). To summarize, being explicit about the why, what, and how of an assignment can engage students with their coursework (Darby & Lang, 2019).

Engaging Employees with Work
Leaders may also engage their employees in their work by communicating how their work is aligned to their goals, interests, motivations, or strengths. The first step is to find out employees'

motivations, goals, and interests. Leaders may find out what motivates or interests their employees as they get to know them over time or during formal performance reviews. But it may be challenging to find out this information in a remote setting if there is little informal socializing and much of the interactions are characterized as transactional (Mattiske, 2020). Information about employee motivations, goals, ambitions, interests, and passions are nonetheless important for leaders to know so that they may use this information to help drive employee engagement using a purposeful approach. For example, prefacing a project assignment to an employee by explaining the why, what, and how this particular project will give the employee skills, knowledge, or experience to help them meet their stated career goals could garner employee motivation for doing that project. If a leader just assigns tasks and projects, employees will likely do as they are told but may not go the extra mile or be as motivated to do a good job if they do not see the relevance of the project to their goals and ambitions.

This is not to say that leaders should preface all work assignments with "what's in it for you" statements, but periodically connecting the assigned deliverable to employees' goals and sense of purpose can be a strategy to engage employees in meaningful work which can translate to improved outcomes. Research has shown that when employee's individual sense of purpose and goals align with their work, it can improve motivation, engagement, and performance (Berg, 2015). The payoff, then, is well worth it for leaders to frequently communicate alignment of their employee's goals to that of their work and how it contributes to the organization's goals, objectives, mission, and vision. Ideally, there is an alignment of purpose between employee and organization in their symbiotic relationship for synergy to be realized.

Surveying, interviewing, or meeting with employees virtually to gather information on what motivates, interests, and inspires them can be ways for leaders to solicit this information. Questions such as "Where do you want to be in five years?" can be asked not only during the interview process but throughout an employee's tenure. Theoretically, the more information a leader can glean about their employees' aspirations, long-term and short-term goals, and work that they find intrinsically motivating, the more likely a leader can seek to align the employee's and organization's purpose for improved outcomes and employee engagement.

Like good teachers, good leaders are genuinely interested in their employees as people and want their employees to succeed and thrive. Leaders can ensure that their employees know that they care about them, want them to succeed, and can help them achieve their goals by articulating the alignment of purpose between the employee and organization frequently to individual employees and teams. Leaders can use the 'why', 'what', 'how' framework when assigning major projects by starting with why the employee will benefit from the project (particularly by connecting it to the employee's personal and professional goals or interests), what the project entails, and how to do the project successfully. It is further helpful to articulate this verbally such as in a Zoom meeting and in writing as it is easy for miscommunication to occur remotely. In online courses, instructions for assignments are usually spelled out for students in writing and often reinforced in class meetings or through other mediums such as email reminders. When writing up a work assignment, it helps for leaders to be clear, compelling, and succinct. Further details can be explained when meeting virtually with employees. The use of both written and verbal communication can reduce the chance of misunderstanding while working remotely.

Engaging Students with their Peers

As humans, people are social beings and the need to socialize and connect with others is a requisite for both learning and working contexts. One study found that people's brains crave social interaction the same way people's brains crave food (Tomova, et al, 2020). Isolation can impact mental health resulting in depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and a broad range of other mental health disorders (Galea, et al., 2020). Finding ways to engage people socially while working or learning online is an important task for instructors and leaders as a way to guard against the mental health impacts of isolation.

In online courses, it is important to include opportunities for students to express their individuality and identity by connecting course concepts to their personal experience and sharing their reflections and insights both synchronously and asynchronously. Ideally, students not only engage in course topics but also get to know each other better as the course progresses. Asynchronous discussion forums can give students time to think deeply, do research, and craft a substantive post, and respond thoughtfully to peers. Synchronous meetings over Zoom can allow students to engage with each other in real time. The use of combined synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for student-to-student interaction can allow for the opportunity of a learning community to develop. In addition to course-related interactions, creating spaces for informal socialization, such as a "Café" discussion forum, can allow students to build community and network with peers.

Socialization is equally important for remote workers. Opportunities for employees to socialize asynchronously and synchronously, not only about work-related topics but also just to catch up or get to know coworkers better is important for leaders of remote teams to consider. One study found the use of internal social media in organizations correlated to increased employee engagement (Men, O'Neil, & Ewing, 2020). Even if an organization does not have an internal social media platform, there are other tools that can be used to promote socialization among remote workers such as chat message boards for team members to use for informal socializing. This can be a virtual 'water cooler' space to share memes, jokes, and other non-work-related communications. Finding new ways to socialize online has become an important way for team members to stay connected while working remotely which can promote group cohesion, engagement, and community.

In addition to designing spaces for work-related communication, leaders of remote teams can encourage online socializing by setting up designated spaces and virtual events for employees to communicate about topics not related to work. Leaders can make regular meetings more engaging by having themed meetings where presentation slides reflect the theme or team members are encouraged to wear theme clothing. Leaders can also have an ice breaker activity, a mindfulness breathing exercise, or quiet journaling time before getting down to business during meetings as a way to promote socialization and mental clarity. Empowering employees to come up with ideas on team-building and socialization can be another strategy for engagement that is employee-driven. One remote library team came up with the following activities to support their team's social-emotional health and wellness (Hudson-Vitale & Miller Waltz, 2020):

- Building a shared playlist asking team members to share three to five of their favorite songs. Team members can guess who picked which song.

- Scheduling virtual hobby sessions such as coloring, crafting, painting, or video gaming. These sessions can be proposed and led by team members.
- Scheduling group fitness sessions like yoga or walks.
- Coordinating group wellness challenges such as walking a certain number of steps or distances on a regular basis or drinking a certain number of glasses of water a day.
- Coordinating recipe swaps where team members share their favorite recipes.
- Encouraging team members to use sick time and step away from work when they are not feeling well.
- Inviting team members to share photos of their coworkers (pets, children, spouses, or houseplants), to share a meme that represents their day so far, or to respond to a silly conversation starter such as: Your quarantine name is your high school mascot + the last thing you ate.
- Encouraging team members to spend time outdoors with nature and share photos of what they saw or were inspired by.
- Mailing a care package to team members. Ideas include a movie-night care package with popcorn and hot chocolate; a game night package with silly, inexpensive games; or cozy self-care items such as socks or candles.
- Having meeting-free days so team members can focus on projects or engage in wellness activities.
- Having discussions about books, movies, or podcasts as selected and facilitated by team members.
- Engaging in professional development with team members such as courses, trainings, or conferences.

In addition to encouraging informal socializing among remote employees, leaders can initiate online team-building activities to build a sense of community among coworkers. Activities such as virtual coffee breaks, challenges and competitions, book clubs, appreciation sessions, team member trivia, or meditation classes can boost employee morale and engagement.

Facilitating Engaging Meetings
There is much research on the effectiveness of active learning which seeks to engage students as participatory contributors to the learning community rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Virtual workplace meetings often consist of one or more people presenting information where the person giving the presentation does the majority of the talking while others listen passively. To engage employees during meetings, leaders of remote teams may want to experiment with "flipping" their meetings by sending information ahead of the meeting, giving time for people to digest it. Then the meeting time can be spent engaging in productive conversation by asking questions, clarifying confusion, solving problems, or generating ideas. To get employees interacting, leaders can begin meetings with warm-up activity such as an icebreaker where everyone participates which will, ideally, set the energy for the discussions that follow. Leaders can prepare questions, prompts, and activities in advance and use the time during meetings to get employees participating. Leaders can facilitate the discussion by thanking team members for their contributions to the discussion and inviting those who have not participated into the conversation by asking them what they think, reinforcing that their opinion is valued. Leaders can also delegate different roles to team members such as note taker and have different team

members take turns facilitating meetings or parts of meetings to further engagement, involvement, and participation.

Engaging Students with their Instructor
Leaders of remote employees should be very intentional about engaging employees just like online educators have to be very intentional about engaging students. This is especially important during the pandemic when, like students, many employees are reporting high stress, fatigue, trauma, and burnout (Skallerup Bessette, 2020).

Students need to know that their participation in the course is being noticed and valued by their professor as this impacts their performance and satisfaction (Dennen, et al., 2007). This can be done by regularly sending out email announcements giving shout outs and kudos to students or emailing students privately to let them know they are doing a great job which can encourage them to continue. If a student has not participated or logged into the course in a couple days, emailing the student and checking in with them can aid in retention. Framing communication with concern for the students' well-being can help student stress level and create rapport and trust. Some call this radical compassion or empathy. Being flexible with students so they can successfully complete a course is part of a pedagogy of care many instructors use.

Engaging Employees with their Leader/Supervisor
Likewise, leaders can show radical compassion, care, and empathy to their employees through their communication methods. Regular check-in meetings to find out how employees are doing are good practices for leaders of remote teams, especially during COVID-19 when many are struggling. Periodically sending thank you notes or positive praise can motivate employees (Clack, 2020). If leaders see that an employee has not been active online or has been missing from meetings, they can provide outreach to the employee and ask how they are doing, being sure to communicate care for them as a person first. That way the employee knows their leader comes from a place of concern. It's important to show sensitivity to the stress people are feeling during the difficult months of the pandemic and allow flexibility, when possible.

Showing empathy to employees by listening and displaying a caring attitude can go a long way in helping employees feel heard and valued, which can translate to improved engagement, morale, retention, and performance (Spranger, 2019). Showing empathy can consist of asking employees questions, soliciting their participation, and actively listening to their ideas, opinions, and feedback (Mesh, 2020). Regularly expressing gratitude to employees can also boost morale and help employees feel valued (Grant & Gino, 2010). Leaders who express gratitude and give praise or kudos can impact employee engagement, making their employees feel appreciated for their hard work. When employees feel valued, they can have higher job satisfaction and motivation and perform better (J. Mills, et al., 2013). Leaders of remote teams can express gratitude to team members during team meetings, in one-on-one meetings, and in written correspondence such as email. By regularly expressing gratitude, giving kudos, and showing empathy, leaders can help motivate, engage, and retain employees.

Conclusion
While it is unknown what the future of work may look like, using strategies for engaging workers will be an essential part of leadership whether teams work remotely, in-person, or a

combination. There are some useful strategies from online teaching that can be applied to engaging remote workers using the Trifecta of Engagement framework. This framework, when applied to the workplace, seeks to engage employees with their work, with their coworkers, and with their leader or supervisor in purposeful, social, and supportive ways. Leaders can engage employees by aligning employee and organizational purpose, prioritize mental health, encourage employee socialization in new and creative ways, show empathy by asking questions and soliciting participation, and express gratitude by recognizing employee performance, hard work, commitment, and resilience. The good news is that these practices can be done in any modality whether employees are remote or in-person. Collaboration technologies such as Zoom, chat, email, and social media platforms make it possible for employees to communicate and socialize while working from home. Leaders can be intentional in their strategies to engage employees by using the technologies available to them in new and creative ways as well as empower their employees to come up with ideas. While technologies will continue to develop and enhance the workplace, humanizing the workplace will also be a way to strengthen and improve it. Attending to the emotional, social, motivational, and mental health needs of employees will be an essential objective for leaders now and in the future.

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