

ILLUminate Blog Transcript: How to be Better at Working from Home: Tips for Team Leaders and Team Members

Recorded March 17, 2020. [Listen to it here.](#)

- ROB GERTH: 00:01 Welcome. I'm Rob Gerth, director of marketing and communication at Lehigh University's College of Business. Our topic today is working from home in the Coronavirus environment. We're recording this on Tuesday, March 17th, 2020. Lehigh University is one of many universities that announced last week that it was moving all of its classes online for the remainder of the spring semester, which means our employees and our students are also dealing with the topic of how we can work from home. I'm fortunate enough to have two faculty members from the college of business on the line to discuss the subject.
- First, is Corinne Post. She is the chair of the department of management here at Lehigh business. She was one of the authors of a recent paper, *Team Dispersion and Performance Examining the Role of Team Communications and Transformational Leadership*. And Liuba Belkin is an associate professor in the Lehigh business department of management. She studies interpersonal effects of emotions, the influence of electronic communications on employee relationships, decision-making, and performance, and also trust. So welcome to you both.
- CORINNE POST: 01:07 Thank you.
- LIUBA BELKIN: 01:08 Thank you.
- GERTH: 01:10 So there's three of us. Appropriately enough, we're recording this on Zoom from three different locations. With these type of tools that we have, we can hear each other. We can see each other. We can share our screens. We can share files. We can move into breakout rooms. We can caption the whole thing with closed-caption. We can anonymously poll each other, not to mention there's Slack, and there's teams and, of course, good old-fashioned texting and email. Now, let me start with you, Corinne. With all of this, it should be pretty easy to run a team from all over the map. Is that right?
- POST: 01:42 Well, the technology is certainly there. There are a lot of features as the ones you mentioned that allow us to mimic as much as possible and, in some cases, even improve on in-person meeting. So for example, with the Zoom, if we're in a meeting, and we have somebody who's kind of overbearing and taking over the conversation, we could still have somebody who might be less likely to interrupt that could put in a little chat to interject and raise an issue even if someone else is kind of hoarding the mic so to speak. So there are some ways to absolutely mimic what we have in person. But at the same time, there are also some hurdles there. So first of all, we're assuming that we all can know each other and develop some sort of rapport and trust. And certainly, for us here at Lehigh, working with people that we're familiar with, that is there. But as you're perhaps working virtually with people you don't know all that well, that could be problematic. We're also assuming that we all have access to the same tools, the same technology, the same setup as we're working from home. But that's not necessarily the case. Personally, many of us are working with maybe family members that are home that aren't usually there or a different cultures might have different expectations for telecommuting, teleworking, and so might not have those sorts of setups available. And then, finally, time-zones are not flexible. I

guess that's the one thing that's not flexible. So when you do have to hold a meeting, and you have members located in Brazil, Australia, The Netherlands, and both coasts of the United States, for some people it's going to be 5:00 AM and, for others, 10:00 PM. So in some ways, we can mimic what's happening. In other cases, there are some things that are going to be problematic. And so leadership's going to be key, and how we're thinking about our communication is going to be key for running that effectively.

GERTH: 03:29

I like the idea of adding a chat to my live meetings once we get to in-person meetings so I could chat with somebody right there in the room and express my concern about the guy hogging this floor. That's brilliant.

Liuba, let me ask you are employees who are working from home now for an extended period of time, maybe for the very first time, are they going to have trouble dealing with the fact that there's now no-- like Corinne was talking about, there's no physical barriers anymore, no boundaries between work and home, is that going to be a problem for people?

BELKIN: 04:01

Well, I think it will be a steep slope, let's be honest, especially if the employee's never had an experience working from home. Again, as Corinne mentioned, many of us already use the technology. And at least we're familiar with how to use that. And also some of our family members are probably familiar that we have some certain hours and certain spaces maybe where we work. But if this is something that's employees experiencing first time, it's not only hard for them but also for their family members to understand what's called work-home boundaries. And I think we'll maybe talk about this a little in detail later today. But that's an important thing that family members also understand that employees are actually working during the time, and allow them to have their own space without interruptions. And of course, as Corinne mentioned, I also think it's a critical role in these times is also in leadership from organizational side allowing employees all the resources to be able to effectively manage this work-family time working from home.

GERTH: 05:22

Corinne, your research, you talk about the relationship between geographical dispersion, team leadership, team communication, and team performance. So I'm going to ask you to summarize that in a few seconds [laughter] of all the hard work you put into that. But give us an idea of what the relationship is between those.

POST: 05:42

Well, when you have a team that's dispersed geographically, that brings some very specific challenges to the team. Those challenges have to do with communication, with cooperation, and with coordination. So as team members are dispersed, it becomes really difficult for members to communicate and coordinate effectively with each other. And oftentimes, we have to rely on each other to get tasks done, right. We rely on some people to do some part of the task and others other parts of the task. And so there is really kind of that challenge of coordination. And that multiplies when you have geographic dispersion. Also when team members are dispersed across space, people find it increasingly difficult to understand each other and to trust each other. And finally, when you're not kind of close to those and feeling trusting and understanding of others, there is also potentially less of a sense of joint responsibility in shared kind of goals. So those are some of the very specific challenges that geographic dispersion brings about. And so as teams go virtual, it's really key that leaders can play a role here in addressing these challenges of communication, of

cooperation, and of coordination if they want their teams to continue and to work and to perform effectively.

- GERTH: 07:09 So let's talk about the leaders for a second. How do they need to adjust their style as far as people running teams?
- POST: 07:18 So there are multiple fronts, right. One of them that might be important, especially if the team in question has no experience with working virtually with one another, is that it's important to kind of build the team, to focus on the collective, to help the team as a whole understand which member knows what, and which member brings what to the team because, as we're separated, we might kind of lose focus around the difficult time of understanding really who we can rely on for what in accomplishing our goal. So that's one key feature that leaders need to do. So that's kind of talking overall about working with leading virtual teams. Another important part of this is to structure work, to make clear the team knows what it is we're accomplishing, to really maintain strong communication if we have virtual meetings and make sure everybody is always on the same page. So those are some of the ways in which leaders might have to adjust. So again, building the team, making sure that we're all feeling connected and a collective as well as paying attention to structuring work so that we can coordinate effectively.
- GERTH: 08:45 And let me stick with you for a second, Corinne. So you've told me what leaders need to do. What about members, like me as a team member, what do I have to adjust, or should I be adjusting things of my style or my personality or anything I can control?
- POST: 09:00 I think there are a few things one can do as a team member. One is, I think it's important to recognize and acknowledge each other's contributions. Often, on virtual teams, people will contribute their piece, and it kind of goes into a black hole if you like. So we might, on the receiving end, read and adapt and incorporate the material or the information received from our team members or process it. But that person has no way [inaudible] has no way of knowing where it went. So I think acknowledging each other's contributions, recognizing those contributions is one key step.
- GERTH: 09:40 Liuba, let me ask you-- so we talked about the tools that we all have or we may or may not have access to. But in the end, there's still nothing better than a face to face meeting, is that right? The tools are never going to be able to replace that, right?
- POST: 09:55 We don't think so, at least people who work in this area. So we come really close with all this technology and Zoom and facetime. But still, there is what's called psychological distance. In realtime-- It seems like we are together, but it's still different. So we're very social creatures, and we do need human contact. So again, we're lucky we have this technology now. Again, 15, 20 years ago, we didn't have that. But still it's not exactly the same as being able to be in the same room with people you work or with people you love.
- GERTH: 10:36 So, Corinne, let me get back to you for a second. In this specific circumstance where everything is sort of ad hoc and happening really fast, is there anything leaders should keep in mind?
- POST: 10:47 Yes. I think one thing that's critical in a situation like this where everything's sort of unstable, where there's a lot of anxiety amongst individuals who are trying out new things, is to manage people's emotions, so manage the emotions of people on the

team. I mean, that can take various forms. One, it's critical that leaders modulate their own emotional responses. That helps calm others down. Another strategy is to shift the tension away and have other potential beneficial benefits or outcomes that-- of the situation that's unfolding that could be positive. What are we learning? What does this enable us to learn and to do as a group? And also-- and I think Liuba mentioned this, is providing resources to help individuals manage through the crisis. That can help also reduce and moderate some of that anxiety. And then in terms of another adjustment in real-time or I would say in face-to-face teams, leaders who act in what's called a transformational leadership style. Leaders who inspire, act as role models, focus on developing and mentoring their followers, those sorts of leadership styles can be especially difficult to implement when a team is entirely dispersed and especially when they're geographically dispersed because what may seem as genuine and trustworthy in one particular setting can become unauthentic and even suspicious in another setting. So I think that's also one adjustment that leaders who rely on this transformational style might need to dial that down a little bit, especially when teams are very, very dispersed geographically.

- GERTH: 12:41 And let me ask either one of you, if you have a good team going into this new reality, is it going to remain a good team? Can you kind of start to take it for granted, "Oh, these guys are great. They're great together. This is going to be good," or is there a possibility that could all fall apart in this different circumstance?
- POST: 12:58 But if you had a good team going into this, it could fall apart if you're not paying attention to how work is structured. Maybe we need to have regular plan interactions. We need to know who knows what. We need to make sure everybody is on the same page. So I think if you have a good team going in, you're in a very good spot. But you need to make sure that whatever was happening face to face, you continue in a virtual space. I think some of the ways in which you could potentially fall apart is where individuals who have the lack of technical skills or difficulty accessing documents, poor capabilities for remote work. So those are, again, structural features.
- GERTH: 13:44 And will cultural diversity-- if your team happen to be culturally diverse, is that going to be helpful, or is that going to make things a little more challenging? What do you think on that?
- POST: 13:53 I definitely think it will make things more challenging. From the work that I've done with a couple of colleagues such as Julia Eisenberg and Nancy DiTomaso that was published last year, we had specially identified it as-- as the geographic dispersion of the team increases so it's further and further away from each other, that can, again, break down trust, break down communication. So in those settings it becomes really critical to make sure we're creating this sense of collective of team and also structural work, and at the same time, be mindful of the limitations that people have or the cultural differences in approaching teleworking.
- GERTH: 14:42 I know you both have done work on gender. Is gender going to play a role here? Is there a better leader or is there a better team member based on gender?
- BELKIN: 14:53 One of the papers that Corinne and I did with another colleague last year actually focused on the role that gender plays in times of crisis for subordinate and employee trust. And, well, we found that gender does make a difference, especially in times of uncertainty. Gender not just in terms of a male or female, but more gender-specific

behaviors. For example, what we saw is that in times of crisis or uncertainty when people are anxious, there is perception of threat. People expect leaders to implement kind of this relational and emotional management behavior. So be more empathetic, regulate their own emotions, and also try to help mitigate negative emotions in their followers. And that really makes a difference for the followers in times of crisis. So in that respect, yes, gender makes a difference. But it's probably also if male leaders adopt these more relational behaviors that usually are associated with female leadership, that this probably gives them an advantage in this time so followers will be more receptive to these behaviors. And they can probably increase trust and manage the crisis more efficiently.

POST: 16:20

Yeah, absolutely. And if I can follow-up a little bit. It's a really great point. It's not about necessarily female and male, but it's about the sorts of behaviors, and some of those are associated more with women than men. So I guess that's why things get complicated. But when leaders show empathy when they care for others, it can help virtual teams to develop the sort of creation I was talking about before. People tend to also engage and kind of a follow the lead of their leader and be supportive of others, be more mindful, help others out. So it can really help when you have a leader that can foster this sort of perspective-taking, foster empathy, so that other team members become more cooperative, more participative as well in the team's functioning.

GERTH: 17:08

Excellent. Right. Let me get to something really nitty-gritty here for a second because we're all going to deal with this more than ever, and it's a pet peeve with me, which is emails. Liuba, I know you've done a lot of research on this. You've done research on something you've called OEEM, or do you say that as Ome, Eome or something like that [laughter]?

BELKIN: 17:27

Probably, O-E-E-M, we just came up with this term-- kind of coined this term to not pronounce organizational expectations for email monitoring after-hours. So the idea of this concept is that-- people work 24/7 with modern technology. So before the current crisis with the pandemic, people will go to work physically, as they used to go for many, many years before, and then once they left the office, in the past, they kind of switched to their family or social life. But in today's environment, they do not because of all the smartphones and emails and technology. So what happens is that people literally work around the clock. And what we were studying is that it's not just the time that people spend which can exhaust them or overwhelm them and their loved ones and really negatively impact the quality of work as well, not just family but also work and creating this work-family conflict and family-work conflict, but also even if they don't do any work, but there is an organizational expectation that they have to be available. So, this constant anticipation that there might be an assignment, there might be something that they need to do on weekends or after working hours, this really drives a lot of negative effects for employees and their significant others.

GERTH: 18:58

And so, we're taking away this, what I consider, physical boundary. There's always that time when you're driving home from work, you have that moment to decompress a little bit and kind of put some stuff behind you. You're going to get home, and you're going to check your email. But now this physical boundary is disappearing for most people. And I understand from reading your research, there is something called boundary theory. Tell me a little bit about that.

- BELKIN: 19:20 Right. So, boundary theory kind of deals with specifically these boundaries between work and family time, right? And again, as I said in the past, it was pretty easy, you leave your factory, you leave your office, you leave your workspace. And then that's it, you kind of don't think about work, and you engage in your social life and your family life. But because of this blend between work and family due to technology availability, a lot of people have a hard time managing these boundaries because now they become psychological and not really physical boundaries. A lot of times, people don't really come to the office. They expect more and more jobs that allow remote access to work and when sometimes people actually take several days a week, and they work, so that's kind of the always blending, really, what now researchers that look at-- take boundary theory and look at what's called boundary violations study. So for example, if you have a business meeting in your, what's called, off-hours during weekend or after normal, let's say, 9:00 to 5:00 hours, that's a boundary violation of family life, right. On the other hand, if you're at work or at least during working hours and then you have to deal with a family situation, that's a violation of work boundary. And again, sometimes, we can manage them successfully. But sometimes, they will interfere with quality of either work or family life.
- GERTH: 20:58 I'm just impressed that through the three of us, no dog has barked in the background yet, so that's good.
- POST: 21:03 I just put my phone on silent, actually, it was silent [laughter].
- GERTH: 21:07 That's funny. Right. Let me ask, Liuba, there's a phrase that I saw in your research about micro role transitioning. And that's the idea of one minute you're taking care of your dog like we were just talking about, and the next minute you're explaining your research to somebody on the phone. So tell me about that a little bit.
- BELKIN: 21:30 Exactly. So we all micro-transition back and forth in our roles, again, now because that's the way we're managing our work and family life, and especially now, when most of the people are actually bound to work from home. And again, some people-- there is what's called-- probably like this natural ability and desire to blend this and switch from role to role, and some people are more comfortable doing them than others. But overall, it is really hard because there is some research on interruptions, actually, that studies that. And what they find is that once, for example, you engage with work and then someone interrupts you, your kids or your significant other asks you some other question, you're kind of mentally still with work questions, but then you answer them, and then they kind of go back. So what happens is you're not really mindfully engaging with either one because of these transitions. And it can really impede the quality of work you're doing, but it also can damage somewhat relationships at home as well if you're not really listening, and your family understands that you're still kind of doing your work mentally in your head while being present and engaging with them. So again, this is something that it's pretty tough to manage.
- GERTH: 22:58 You called it authentic engaging, I think. Is work going to be, in this situation where we're going into, where everybody is going to be working from home, what's going to suffer more do you think? Is it going to be the work that's going to suffer or the family that's going to suffer?
- BELKIN: 23:12 Well, there are ways to manage this successfully. It doesn't have to suffer.

- GERTH: 23:18 Okay. Take the positive outlook. That's much better than my negative outlook. Go ahead.
- BELKIN: 23:22 So this way, first of all, they let their loved ones and their family members to know that there are clear hours that they should not be interrupted. But also, organizations, when they know that there are certain hours that the employees are available and certain hours that they're not available, it also kind of creates better communication. And there is no expectation, for example, if you tell your supervisor, "I will not be available during these hours," so they really know that you're not answering because you're not available instead of thinking, "Well, maybe you're not willing to engage," etc. So this kind of clear communication is one thing and creating these physical boundaries. But another thing is that, really, people do need to engage in activities they like and authentically engage in them. For example, family time, if they love playing with the dog, love spending time with their spouses or kids etc., or friends, even virtually right now, they really need to be mindfully present while doing that because if we're engaging with our loved ones, having a dinner while thinking about work, we're really not there with them. And again, our family relationships suffer because of that.
- BELKIN: 25:05 And what we found is actually that this constant presence with work thoughts hurts relationships for employees with their significant others. It also creates more anxiety even detrimental to their health and to the health of significant others. So kind of taking away from this finding and, again, in other research we're doing, we saw that employees who were emotionally exhausted because of this constant presence, they can't detach, engage mindfully in activities. It's not that they have these perceptions of work-life balance skewed negatively, but they also have high intentions to leave organizations. So, organizations may suffer because of that, so work relationships should suffer as well. [inaudible] to answer your question. And again, going back to how to manage that, creating boundaries, clear communication is one thing, but also once you engage either with work or with family activities, be mindful, be there what you're doing. It's not necessarily quantity, it's the quality of the engagement that really counts.
- BELKIN: 26:18
- GERTH: 27:32 And then I've seen cases where employers have set policies. You kind of alluded to it. But I'm going to see if there's-- they have set very specific policies like email can only be sent between this time and this time and not after this time and not before this time. Do you think that's something that employers should consider?
- BELKIN: 27:51 It depends on the nature of work, I would say. So in some organizations-- and this policy is widely implemented in Europe, for example, because there are different cultural expectations and also their different employment law than in the United States. But some companies here do this as well. So yes, it is a factor because employees know that even if they're not planning to check email and send this email-- this is this concept of OEEM, right, the organization expectations come into play as they more anxious that someone else will send an email or, let's say, the boss will send an email or their peers will send an email, and they kind of have to be visible and respond. And that really drives kind of drives the stress. So, having this clear policy, there are no emails allowed during this off-hours, may help to manage that. However, sometimes the nature of work that doesn't really allow this. So, for these types of

works, jobs, industries, we suggest that these policies can be managed. For example, organizations can maybe elect a person or two to be responsible some days, right, in managing these emails during weekends, and others, other days. They know they have a time off. So, creating these flexible boundaries but also clear in terms of allowing employees to unwind but also know clearly when they are expected to be available and when not, really helps.

GERTH: 29:33

And Corinne, you mentioned tips earlier on. Do you have any other tips that leaders or followers might be able to enact in this new reality we're living in that will help them be as productive and as happy as they have been in the past in their jobs?

POST: 29:51

Yeah. And hopefully, it won't contradict too much with what Liuba's saying here. But I think there are two things. One is, what we're losing out by going virtually is a lot of the small interactions, the waving at somebody as you walk past their office, the smile, just catching up on each other. And so, some ways to do that by email is just-- I've seen this on teams and on my own teams is sometimes one of us will send out something funny. And maybe over the next few hours, we'd go back and forth. And then that ends. So, it's a little bit of bantering. It doesn't extend excessively, but it does a little bit of that, provides a little bit of that glue that can hold people together. Checking in with each other as well, it's one way that leaders can show their team that they care, that they're there, maybe even having phone calls occasionally so virtually doesn't need to be just the computer-mediated sort of communication. So those things can help preserve maybe a little bit of those social interactions, social fabric, the glue of teams.

POST: 31:03

And then in terms of accomplishing the task that the team has still to do, I would say focus on the essential but then have clear agendas. If there's a virtual team meeting, be mindful of time, of not running over in these meetings, of scheduling these meetings in a way that works for everybody on the team, summarizing the decisions that the team does come to in those meetings so that we're not constantly re-litigating what we've decided. Make sure the assignments and responsibilities and the timelines for each member and their individual work is clear. Provide regular updates to the team. Share some sort of progress that can happen with a spreadsheet or that indicates the different milestones that need to be reached and when they're reached, or through other virtual means. So those are a couple of things. Again, want to focus more on the, I would say, the softer relational side that we talked about earlier, the emotional regulation as well as getting the task accomplished in the most effective and helpful way so that members can keep coordinating and working together towards their goals.

GERTH: 32:29

What do you guys think is going to be the most surprising thing that people are going to find out now that we're in this new world?

BELKIN: 32:38

What I think, Rob, is that a lot of people may discover, on the one hand, new things they like. But also, I think we all will appreciate more a lot of things that we actually take for granted from, as Corinne pointed earlier, day to day interaction is just someone passing in the hallway, chatting, waving a hand, that really don't have this anymore. A lot of kind of this everyday pace and normalcy, the sense of that you have people around, you can really go out and socialize and hang out with people or be present at work. All these little things, I think, in one way we'll understand how we miss them. But it's a positive thing, we kind of will be more grateful and more appreciative in the future. I think it's a good thing. But also, we might, hopefully,

improve our family relationships. We'll be spending more time with people that live with us and, hopefully, we'll discover new things and engage in meaningful conversations with our kids and significant others. So I think that there is actually a positive thing. We might discover we can cook and create these interesting recipes or engage in some other activities that we really never had time to do because of all this fast-paced environment.

GERTH: 34:04

Nice. Well, let me extend that to your students then. Do you have any advice for your students or any hopes for your students starting in this new world finishing up the semester, this being the first week back to classes?

BELKIN: 34:17

Well, to me personally, and as Corinne said, clear communication is the key. So I've been communicating with my students. But I really see from them that they're really anxious for the sense of normalcy and to continue education no matter that they're bounded to their apartments or homes. And I see the tremendous response from my students that they're really understanding and they're willing to be there and engage during the class time. And so we're just starting this, so that's a really positive thing what I see. And I've been in communication with them through email but was starting this video chats this week. And what I see is that-- I clearly refuse to give in to this pandemic, so I'm determined to make this a success. And I'm sure they are too. So this collective sense of we will persevere, we will still do this. And the quality of education, not just time we spend together. It's class-time, but the quality of education will be really high as it's expected to be. It's something that I try to maintain. And I see the students already are very responsive to that. So I'm very optimistic.

GERTH: 35:33

How about you, Corinne?

POST: 35:33

Yeah. I have a few things. A few may be very, very practical tips. One is if you do have students and peers-- I'm thinking especially with group projects, for example, that are around the world-- I mean, many might not be back here in the US. For example, there's this tool called The World Clock Meeting Planner where you can input the location of different team members, and it comes up with the best possible time for holding virtual meetings. So that's one little tip. The second tip that I was delighted to discover is that for those of us who will be using Zoom, there is a way to use a virtual background. So, if you are a student and you're working in a space that you're sharing perhaps with others or that you're not comfortable having others see, but you still want to be present on the screen, that's an option. So, if you just google how to create a virtual background on Zoom, you'll find out how to do that.

POST: 36:30

So those are two sort of practical tips. But the bigger picture is-- I think we need to remind ourselves that we're all in this together. I mean, we're all-- not just here in Pennsylvania, Lehigh, but everywhere around the world, we're all in this together. We need to be patient with each other, and we need to appreciate each other. And so I would say to our students, be kind to yourselves, do what you can. None of us signed up for this at all. And so do what you can, marvel at what we're accomplishing and how resilient we are. I think that will be something to kind of-- sit back every day and say, "Look at what we're able to do despite and with all that's happening." And then again, maybe more practically, reach out to your professors. We all want to make sure that you do well. We're here to help. But maybe we can also be helped. Maybe you're seeing us struggle with something and you have a tip for us. Feel free to let us know as well. Again, we're all in this together. We'll persevere. We'll do well. And

we'll all look back on this someday and marvel at what we've been able to accomplish.

GERTH: 37:46

That's a perfect place to end, Corinne. Very hopeful message, I really appreciate it. And thank you both so much.

POST: 37:50

A pleasure. Thank you, Rob.

GERTH: 37:54

Corinne Post, whose research interests also include women in leadership and how diversity affects groups and organizations. And Liuba Belkin, one of the authors of *Killing Me Softly*. I love the name of this, Liuba. *Killing Me Softly, Organizational E-mail Monitoring Expectations' Impact on Employees and Significant Others Well-being*. Perfect. Great name. This podcast is brought to you by ILLUminate, the Lehigh business blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh business thought leaders, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news. And you can follow us on Twitter @LehighBusiness. Thanks, everyone, for listening.