Dispersed Team Leadership

Identifying the critical behaviours needed by our leaders in the new working environment

tap'd
SOLUTIONS

Introduction

The first few months of 2020 initiated one of the most impactful periods of change for society and organisations in modern times, outside of periods of conflict and war. The stable routines of populations were disrupted and businesses found themselves with strategies that were less useful, or typically, irrelevant. The pace of change affected everyone, all levels of society and in a global fashion. Supply chains were disrupted, passenger travel was highly restricted and the workplace, for most people, changed considerably.

Now, with the dust settling, we are starting to see that there has been a shift in human behaviour that will, in all probability, be for the long-term. This behaviour has been fuelled by a virus that will re-emerge sporadically over the coming years and an increased level of background anxiety which now exists in the general population about being in a close proximity to others. This could well be labelled "societal PTSD": The population as a whole has suffered a trauma so intense that as the trauma subsides we learn to cope with this by adopting new behaviours to interact in the future, never really returning to how we acted in December 2019. Others have called this the "new normal" yet this can be easily disputed as we at Tap'd would challenge if there was actually a "normal" in the past, as society is ever
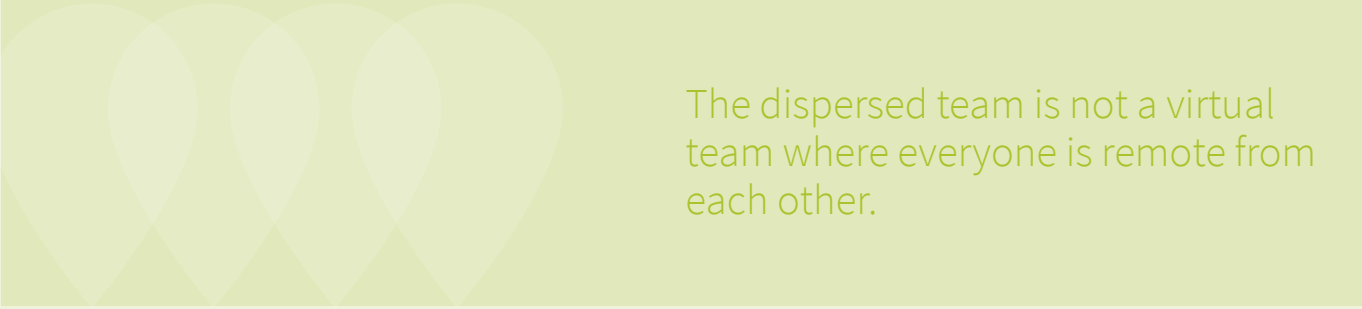
technological developments.

Alternatively, a possible view is the pandemic has actually accelerated future behaviour to the present. Pre-covid predictions of the future of work have included more flexible working practices, more home working, a greater reliability on technology for communication and less need to travel for physical meetings. Essentially, a number of predictions for 2030 have arrived by 2021. Those of you home working at the moment may recognise this. So, in essence, the medium to long-term challenges for businesses and organisations could be assigned to:

- **The increase in anxiety in individuals based on the fear of Covid-19 and the stress and trauma of rapid change.**

- **The sudden changes to how organisations operate, both internally and externally to their stakeholders and customers.**

- **The subsequent financial challenges that come with the suppressed movement of people on the economy.**

These challenges have put an enormous strain on our managers and leaders. Even the most nimble and experienced ones have been tested on getting to grips with how to adapt to leading their people in these times of flux. Obviously, a number of organisations

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still require people to be physically present in the workplace to produce their goods and services, yet the vast majority of organisations now have at least some, if not the majority, of their people working outside the physical working environment. For some organisations, this has been the first encounter with remote, or virtual working, even if it is only back office functions.

However, as we see workplaces reopening in a "covid-secure" way, our leaders have an even greater challenge: The Dispersed Team. Collins English Dictionary describes 'dispersed' as "Things that are dispersed are situated in many different places, a long way apart from each other". The dispersed team is not a virtual team where everyone is remote from each other. It is where there may be clusters of your team working physically together in small groups or pairs, with others working remotely to these clusters. For example, if you have a team of 10 employees and three of them are now back in the office in a socially distanced environment with the rest having to work at home, the result is a dispersed team.

So, what's the issue? In short, varying needs and team culture. Those working remotely may have differing motivational needs to those working physically with others. And then there is evolving team culture which is driven by the rituals and artifacts of daily interaction: the funny joke in a meeting, a significant moment, etc. There is a risk that the culture of the more physically present employees may accelerate away from those working remotely, resulting in a two-speed intra-team culture,

thus straining team unity.

So, how does a leader approach and deal with this?

This is the real challenge of Dispersed Team Leadership. It needs our leaders to rapidly adapt to the new world, and we need to support our leaders if our organisations are to successfully adjust to the period of uncertainty and change that lies ahead.

At Tap'd we have undertaken a study in this area and have developed our Dispersed Team Leadership model to help support organisations through this time of change and to identify what behaviours and characteristics our leaders need to amplify or "dial up" to become great Dispersed Team Leaders.

In this paper, we look at what we can pull from previous leadership thinking and our current understanding of the situation we're in to help us support your leaders to overcome today's challenges. We will briefly explain our model and conclude with some practical questions you can reflect upon with your own leaders and managers.

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Anthony Ryland, CEO of Tap'd Solutions

Relating to known models and theories

In the creation of our Dispersed Team Leadership model we researched the key needs of individuals and the team that needed to be satisfied, and also the characteristics of the leader that would most meet these. We also focused on other skills that would support the team through the scale of change they are facing. Our findings were split into the two forms of leadership behaviour:

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Our findings into person-orientated behaviours revealed that there were three characteristic themes that could, if "dialled up", give an advantage to a leader of dispersed teams. These came from leadership theories and the concepts of positive psychology and emotional intelligence.

One of the first theories of leadership was the "great man" theory. These were the innate qualities and characteristics possessed by great social, political, and military leaders. Debunked over time as ineffective, it is interesting that the current pandemic has exposed that those global political leaders who have tried to emulate the "great man" have seem to have had the least impact with their "followers". Whereas, looking at countries and regions such as New Zealand, Germany and the Nordics we can start to see that the leadership traits that are more effective in turbulent times, are honesty, trust, openness and humility. The fact that the majority of these countries have female political leaders also suggests a less masculine approach to leadership may have advantages. To be clear, the gender of the leader is separate from the masculine or feminine style of leadership. It may

be the ability to demonstrate empathy and supportive, compassionate emotion in a clear communication style that is advantageous.

To try and define specific characteristics that would benefit dispersed team leaders in 2020 and the coming years, we first need to look at the needs of the team members. The most commonly referenced need for employees during the current pandemic centres around mental health. Issues include feelings of isolation, fragmentation, anxiety, loneliness, coping, and a loss of drive and motivation among others. The NHS website lists 5 key areas to help improve mental wellbeing:

- **Connect with other people**
- **Be physically active**
- **Learn new skills**
- **Give to others**
- **Pay attention to the present moment**

The leader of a dispersed team can have a degree of impact on all of these areas through:

- **Focusing quality time with each team member**
- **Allowing flexibility in working practices**
- **Encouraging learning and growth**
- **Supporting informal collaboration**
- **Ensuring everyone knows their purpose**

This is underpinned by an effective leadership communication style. In addition, positive psychology identifies the building blocks of a healthy mental state. Leaders can directly facilitate the building of the skills and practices of positive psychology to enable mental resilience within themselves, individuals and team practices.

What we can derive so far is that it is likely that the traits of a successful Dispersed Team Leader are mainly focused on the emotional connections that promote a positive mental state in their team members. This can be further built upon by

reviewing the studies of successful leadership traits. A number of more recent models of leadership have highlighted behaviours that have been correlated to positive employee attitude and subsequent improved employee engagement and performance.

James Burns (1978) first identified Transactional and Transformational leadership styles that were further developed by Bass (1985) and Bass & Avolio (1990). Transformational leadership attempts to engage followers' values, emotions and consciousness to mobilise them to change whereas transactional leadership is focused on the more immediate action-reward dynamic.

Transformational leadership is commonly described by the "four I's":

- **Idealised Influence (setting the example)**

- **Individualised Consideration (providing support and encouragement)**

- **Intellectual Stimulation (getting followers to see problems in new ways)**

- **and Inspirational Motivation (communicating an appealing vision)**

It is not difficult to see a link here to leading dispersed teams, focusing on their needs and mental health through role modelling, providing support, reframing issues into positive scenarios and being future focused.

Other models build on these positive leadership traits. Authentic leadership (Avolio et al, 2004) draws on positive psychology and highlights the consistency between a leader's words and actions is key to building trust which is critical when your dispersed team has limited vision of decisions within the organisation.

This model highlights that a leader's self-awareness is key to building this trusted relationship. McKinsey (2020) and the CMI (2020) also highlight self-awareness as a key trait when promoting compassionate leadership as a suitable contemporary model for 2020, with showing vulnerability, empathy and compassion as important characteristics.

This focus on empathy and trust also appears in Robert Greenleaf's work on servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) which has recently regained popularity. Greenleaf puts the team member at the centre with the leader empowering the individual so they can take more control over their work, resulting in a more positive feeling to the task.

This links to the concepts of control in both resilience and positive psychology. He links trust to open and honest leadership.

Finally, ethical leadership models also focus on empowerment and empathy alongside the altruism of helping others and humility of treating others with respect.

Summarising this whirlwind tour of leadership models, for a leader to be able to overcome the challenges that dispersed teams are currently enduring, a leader could potentially pull on the theories above to develop the following:

- **A focus on their own resilience and self-awareness**

- **The need and benefit of the individual team member to achieve a positive mental state**

- **The collective need for a dispersed team to socialise, collaborate and be empowered**

- **The need to be the conduit between the organisation and the team, communicating a positive future, having empathy and showing compassion.**

From a task-orientated approach, the leader and the team are being subjected to an unprecedented amount of change in these times. Commentary on social media highlight crisis management techniques to overcome this, however as we journey further into the "long-haul" of getting through this pandemic, the type of change we are encountering is less about crisis and more about uncertainty in our opinion.

The volatility of local lockdowns, the additional complexity of how to run an organisation, and the ambiguity of when society will have overcome coronavirus into a manageable background activity will dominate more in decision making than immediate crises. The leader and their team therefore need to learn how to understand and make sense of the world in flux around them and how they can effectively make the best decisions they can without being stuck procrastinating or in "analysis-paralysis".

In addition, building team resilience will help minimise the feeling of fatigue that is already starting to affect a number of our dispersed teams as the "novelty" of remote working and isolation wears off.

This brief summary of our research has led us to create the Tap'd Dispersed Team Leadership model which is described on the following pages.

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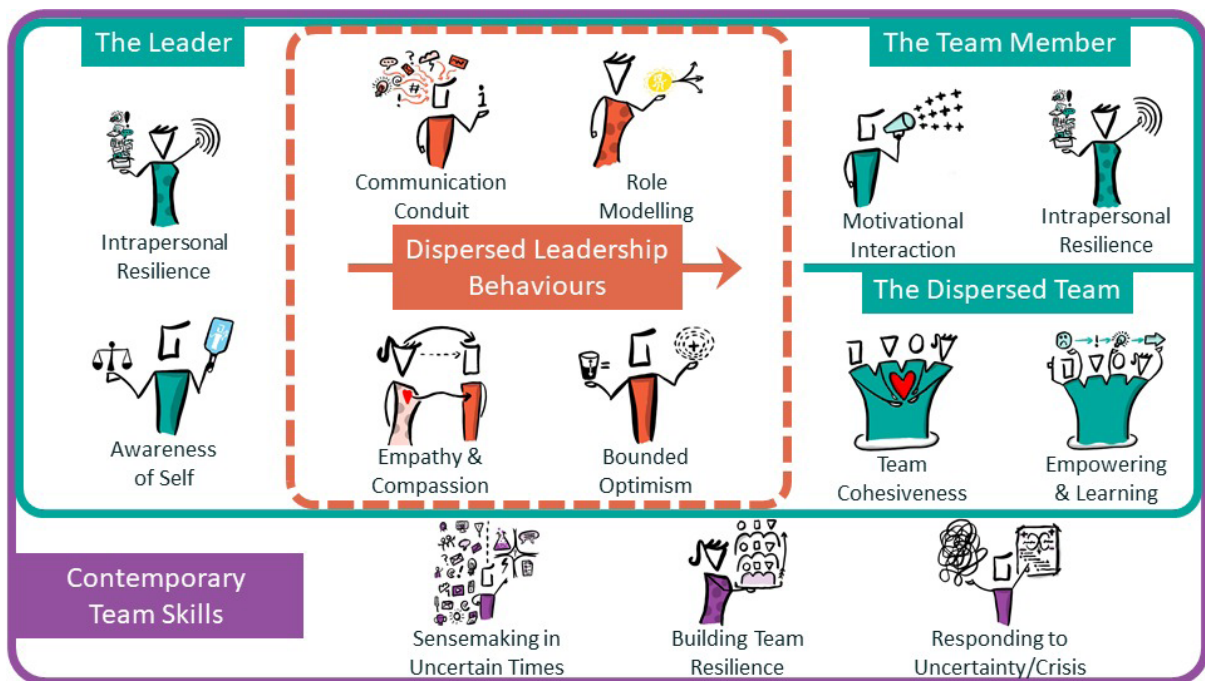
Our Dispersed Leadership Model

From our understanding of the context of Dispersed Team Leadership and the relevant theories, Tap'd has created an underlying model for our approach to helping organisations understand today's leadership challenges:

Our model breaks down the complex issue of Dispersed Team Leadership into component parts which each interplay with others.

Firstly, it looks at the intrapersonal, or inner, characteristics of the leaders themselves: what is it the leader needs to build within themselves to be a great dispersed team leader? It also separates out the needs of the two key stakeholder groups: the needs of each team member, and the needs of the team as a whole to function in a coherent and productive way.

The section called "Dispersed Leadership Behaviours" is key to the whole model. These are the behaviours that the leader displays that are most critical to generating the energy in the dispersed team environment to overcome the challenges of fragmentation and are common to both individual needs and the needs of the overall team.

Finally, the last section is "Contemporary Team Skills". These are the task-orientated skills that the leader and the team need to develop to overcome the challenges of the current changing work environment in an efficient and effective manner.

The following section will briefly give an overview of each section of our model and why it is important that we amplify or "dial up" these behaviours.

An overview of the Dispersed Leadership Model

1

THE LEADER

The leader has a key role in creating and maintaining a dispersed team.

Yet before they develop these external skills, they need to look inward and ensure they have a solid foundation to build upon. In these times of flux, managers and leaders will have their own doubts and anxieties about themselves and their capabilities.

Leaders need to be able to spend quality time reflecting on these and ensure they are satisfying their own needs as well as others. Understanding their own drivers and individualised motivators is key.

How can you sustain the behaviours to motivate others if your inner-self is distracting you?

Positive psychology and work about personal resilience helps the leader understand what to focus on and what drains their energy unnecessarily.

What can the leader control and influence and to focus on these. Do they know both their and their teams' purpose in these changing times? What challenges are they experiencing and how can they adapt to these personally in a positive way?"

2

THE TEAM MEMBER

The team member in a dispersed team has individual needs based on personality, work task needs, cohabitation situation and living/working space.

It is important that every person in the team has a healthy mental state with regards to remote working so they can be the best they can be and feel achievement in their role. This then creates intrinsic motivation that acts like a dynamo and makes them more self-sufficient.

To enable this, the dispersed team leader needs to ensure that each individual gets a fair amount of their time with the leader to interact on a one-to-one. The leader needs to ensure that they adapt their leadership style to match the needs of the individual. And crucially, they need to be observant through their one to ones and seek any signs of unhappiness and act on them immediately.

Furthermore, the leader should ensure that each team member is equipped with the skills to build a level of internal resilience to the stresses that come as part of being in a dispersed team in times of uncertainty.

3

THE DISPERSED TEAM

The leader of a dispersed team needs to actively encourage the behaviours that are stifled when a physical team becomes remote.

Recent months have shown that meetings using video technology have become commonplace for remote teams, yet almost exclusively they are scheduled into the diary in advance. Physical team cohesiveness and collaboration is much more spontaneous. The dispersed team leader needs to create mechanisms where informal dialogue and chat can become the norm for a dispersed team. This will help to satisfy the social aspect of positive mental health. In addition, the danger is that, if this is not present, any element of the dispersed team that is physically together (e.g. portion of the team in a Covid-secure office) will interact informally more often, resulting in a sub-team culture heading off on a tangent to the wider dispersed team.

Furthermore, the dispersed team will become more effective if it can control more of the workload without the leader's direct input. The leader needs to ensure development and growth continues with the dispersed team. Learning allows better decisions to be made, enabling leaders to give more autonomy and empower the team further. This is important for a dispersed team for when the leader is not present, they need to be able to move forward with the work tasks. The absence of being able to make a decision erodes the perception of control over your own work and lowers team resilience at a time where it needs to be robust.

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DISPERSED LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS

At the centre of the leader-individual-team communication are the behaviours that a leader needs to amplify to ensure they create a heathy and positive dispersed team environment.

We observed four sub-themes that leaders can increase their skill level in that would benefit both individual and team interaction. Firstly, a key dispersed team characteristic is a sense of disconnect with the wider organisation. The leader needs to be aware that they need to act as the translator of the changing strategies to gain team understanding and buy in, creating emotional connection to generate team member motivation. In addition, they are a two-way conduit and need to gather insight to feed back to the organisation to help senior leaders understand burning issues and the level of satisfaction in their people. The leader also needs to "dial up" their visibility as a role model for the team.

In a time of change, team members look to their leader as an emotional crutch and will quickly adopt the positive or negative behaviour of the leader. For this reason, the leader also needs to outwardly create an optimistic persona with a can-do attitude that assists the team with their own internal coping mechanism. We referred to this as "bounded optimism" since a positive attitude needs to be accompanied with the realism of current challenges. Too much optimism can result in a loss of leader credibility. Finally, and importantly, empathy is a behavioural skill that is critical to the dispersed team leader. Predicting and understanding individual and team challenges at work and at home (as they are often the same) is key. Yet this is only useful if you then visibly act on what you see or hear in a positive way, demonstrating compassion to your team as you support the resolution of their problems. Successful dispersed team leaders excel at empathy and compassion.

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CONTEMPORARY TEAM SKILLS

The fifth area of our model differs from the other four as it addresses the task-based behaviours rather than people-based behaviours, yet is as important for a dispersed team navigating through the current pandemic.

Dispersed teams and their leader need to firstly understand the changing external world that effects the organisation. This world is currently in a state of flux and is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Learning the techniques and tools to effectively scan the external world will ensure you collect useful and accurate data.

The team then needs to use this data to make decisions that react to the external world and also predict future possibilities as best they can. Decisions will need to be reviewed regularly and effective communication within and without the team are critical for business alignment as we go through this flux. Change is a great opportunity for innovation and those businesses that predict, flex and adapt will have the best chance of success. Overarching these skills is the ability of the cohesive team to stay resilient to these external pressures and collectively traverse through the stresses and traumas that present themselves.

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Practical tips

Our Dispersed Team Leadership model comes with its own diagnostic tool for organisations to self-assess how their leader, teams and team members are coping with the current working environment. Contact us if you would like to know more about our diagnostic. Below are a few thought provoking questions that might support your own internal observations:

1 Have you asked your teams for open feedback about the recent months acting as a dispersed team? What did they say and what would they change?

2 How do you gauge the mental health of your people? Are they equipped with the tools to be proficient in personal and team resilience to self-service their own mental health?

3 What leader behavioural skills have you highlighted as critical to your current business success?

4 Which leaders in your organisations are dealing with dispersed teams better than others? What are your criteria for this and how can you share good practice between your leaders?

5 Are you getting the optimum impact from your development budgets during the pandemic? How do you measure this and are these measurements still appropriate for these highly volatile times?

Conclusions

Our Dispersed Team Leadership model brings together the latest thinking in leadership theory, the concepts of positive psychology and emotional intelligence, observations from recent months and our own professional experiences at Tap'd.

This white paper was designed to walk you through some of the aspects of leadership and team dynamics that might need amplifying or "dialling up" for your leader populations to have more impact in these turbulent times.

There is always a trade off between depth and readability in a paper such as this.

So, if you're intrigued by aspects of our model outlined in this paper then please get in contact to learn more.

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If this sounds like something your organisation can benefit from then get in touch with us at Tap'd and we can start a great conversation!

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