

How to lead your team in the new normal

By [Sandi Richardson](#)

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The work environment as we know it changed dramatically over the last year and in a very short space of time. The way that businesses interact with their customers, suppliers and employees has changed irrevocably.



Sandi Richardson, HR executive at RCS

Initially, companies were called upon to react immediately to a hard and unexpected lockdown at the end of March 2020. We saw businesses accelerating their digital strategies and rapidly initiate work-from-home (WFH) policies. At the same time, companies also had to implement strict office health and safety protocols. One year later, regulation continues to change and evolve. The need to make provision for these constant regulatory changes has kept companies on their toes. In retrospect, the year we have gone through as an HR team, and as a company, has been an invaluable learning curve to adjust to what we now regard as the new normal.

Embrace and accommodate diversity

At RCS, our infrastructure needed to change to accommodate over 1,500 employees. This was no easy feat considering that our employees are diverse – diverse in the roles they fulfil, and diverse in their backgrounds and circumstances. We had to understand what our employees needed in order to set them up correctly when working from home. We took time to understand their situations and experiences and support them as best we could. We drew on our collective resources to do this – from IT to operations to employee

wellness.

Learning point: Your employees' experiences of WFH will be as diverse as they are – some will flourish working from home and enjoy the flexibility, some will find maintaining a work-life balance to be a challenge, others will struggle with the isolation from colleagues and friends, and others will become frustrated with infrastructural problems related to connectivity challenges and load shedding. At the same time, opinions around office-bound work will most likely be divided – some employees will have to go into the office due to the nature of their role or circumstances, and may fear for their health and safety. This is something that will need to be taken into account.

How are you making provision for the employees who WFH and those who are office-bound? The key is to understand that people are different and have different needs. This is a reality that will have to be navigated in the interests of employees and the business. If you don't know what employees need and want, ask them. Send out staff surveys and pay attention to the feedback garnered by managers from their teams. Based on your findings, publish guides to help employees and managers get to grips with the new environment. Managing this hybrid working model is essential to the new normal.



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Embrace and accommodate flexibility

Many employees' jobs have undergone drastic changes over the last year. Some roles ceased to exist while certain skills

became critical. At RCS, it was important for us to accompany our employees through these changes. Our business decisions always take into account the impact on our employees and their livelihoods. We know that for every one person we employ, there are several people who are dependent on them. The new way of working has also benefitted our teams as using technology has enabled us to get key messages across to larger audiences. We are now able to include more employees in global conferences that would have previously been restricted by a travel budget.

Learning point: The key to navigating these uncertain times is to remain flexible. Sometimes that means making re-skilling and upskilling a priority so that you can support your employees and capacitate your business needs at the same time. This is not without its own challenges and requires thought and planning. Simply moving an employee into a new role without making sure that they have all the knowledge and tools they need to adapt is bad for performance and morale.

Embrace change

Over a year later, and while still grappling with the evolving pandemic, most companies are considering their options in terms of how they can operate in the future. At RCS, we are asking ourselves how we will drive collective productivity, promote collaboration, and retain our company cultures. We know work from home is here to stay and we are now entering a period of hybridity that supports office-bound work and working at home. It is our, and our shareholder, BNP Paribas Personal Finance's ambition to "make our business a great place to work – at home and in the office". We have a special and unique culture and we want to preserve this. As the quote goes: "culture eats strategy for breakfast".



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There is a bigger picture

Lastly, there is a larger social consciousness that we are passionate about supporting – whether experienced by our employees or communities in which we operate. That is the issue that has been well-documented over the course of lockdown – domestic abuse has skyrocketed. We need corporate South Africa to unite and take action beyond the wellbeing of their employees and support our nation to eradicate this "shadow pandemic".

We have endured much, and we are enormously proud and grateful to our employees for their resilience. The lessons of the past year have made us stronger and I am convinced that through continuous collaboration across the organisation, we can be even more successful in the post-Covif environment. Communication, change management, training and enabling smart ways of working to support the new normal have become the central themes as we focus on the remainder of 2021 and beyond.

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