



**LEADING WITH YOUR HEAD & HEART  
IN HYBRID AND REMOTE WORKPLACES**

**Kirstin Ferguson**

Just as heroic leaders are a relic of the past, so too are traditional workplaces where we can expect to see the people we lead, or are led by, every day.

There is much talk about the loss of human contact many leaders now feel in a remote working environment. A survey of almost 11,000 employees across sixteen countries found that 78 percent of leaders are concerned about the ability of remote employees to build solid interpersonal relationships with colleagues, and 72 percent are concerned with a potential deterioration in organizational culture.

The quality of leadership impacted human connection and a sense of belonging well before the pandemic saw many of us work from home. Anyone who has worked in a toxic workplace culture knows simply being in the same location as the people you work with is no guarantee of a sense of belonging.

Human connection happens when leaders make deliberate and thoughtful choices about how to lead with their head and hearts, whatever the context. Whether the people you

lead live in the same home or are people you may never meet in person, the same mindset and approach to modern leadership applies.

Much of the debate about remote work erroneously reduces the discussion to a binary decision—work at home or work in an office. This approach simplifies a complex issue to a transaction of thinking about where you physically sit to complete your work.

Clearly, not all roles can be performed at home; teachers, nurses, bus drivers, butchers and so many other essential roles need to still be done in a workplace. However, increasingly a large proportion of the professional, white-collar workforce can complete their roles at home and the pandemic demonstrated they could do so effectively.

Having a workforce you do not physically see is not a new idea. For decades multinational companies have worked across borders, time zones and cultures with company leaders rarely physically seeing all those they lead. Some leaders seem to wistfully remember the good old days, when everyone arrived at the office on time in the morning, shared laughs and impromptu moments over morning coffee and attended the same meetings at the same time. And there were plenty of positive times in those days. Bonding with colleagues happened easily, opportunities to be mentored and learn from more experienced colleagues abounded.

But those days were not everyone's experience. It was never the case that serendipitous interactions necessarily happened for whom, and when, they may have been most needed. For those working in dysfunctional workplace cultures, having to go into the office every day caused challenges for physical and mental wellbeing.

If you were unfortunate enough to be led by a narcissistic boss, having to deal with that person every day was confronting. If you were disabled or had caring responsibilities, the juggle of a daily commute was a challenge that would soon wear you down. And if you were not earning a salary sufficient to be able to afford a home near to your office, forget it.

Leading with the head and heart is not about the physical location of the people you lead, but about how you embrace flexibility in your thinking about how the work you need completed is done.

Just like everyone's experience of working in an office and from home is different, the debate about working remotely is not one that has a uniform answer.

What might work in one company may not suit another. The way one individual might be most productive and effective may be vastly different to their colleague performing the same role elsewhere. A solution that might work within one team in a company, might not be conducive to the performance or outcomes of another team.

The critical component in any consideration of remote work is flexibility and this requires modern leaders who lead with their head and heart to solve the issue.

If we are not able to embrace flexibility—both in mindset and in practice—we run the risk of being a traditional leader of the past. Leading with the head and heart is not about the physical location of the people you lead, but about how you embrace flexibility in your thinking about how the work you need completed is done.

Modern leaders put people at the center of that decision-making, understanding that without an engaged, motivated and purpose-led workforce, any business goals are likely to fail.

If leaders want to successfully transition to leading with their heads and hearts with people they lead remotely, they need to design hybrid working arrangements with people at the center. Modern leaders need to radiate energy and purpose to the people they lead wherever they may be working from.

### **THERE IS NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH**

Hybrid working is sure to lead to unhappy leaders and employees if traditional ways of leading remain. The relevance of how many days someone works in an office or at home, or anywhere else they might choose to work, is also rapidly losing importance.

Edicts from companies like Tesla, which demanded employees return to the office for a minimum of 40 hours per week or lose their job, is likely to see employees for whom flexibility is critically important, move on. Technology company Atlassian reported that after Tesla founder Elon Musk demanded employees return to the office in an email with

the subject heading “Remote work is no longer acceptable,” Atlassian saw a 500 percent increase in employment enquiries via its careers website. Scott Farquhar, co-founder of Atlassian, believes “anyone that says we still need to be in an office to get stuff done is living in a 1950s version of reality.”

Atlassian is going all in on working from home. In 2021 the company announced a “Team Anywhere” policy for their 5700 employees around the world. This means if you work for Atlassian you can work from any location in a country where Atlassian has a corporate entity, where the individual has the legal right to work, and where the time zone they are in is broadly aligned with that of their team members.

“Requiring office attendance is outdated,” Atlassian’s Head of Team Anywhere, Annie Dean, told *The Australian* in an interview. “Work is not a place; it can happen anywhere. Companies are sinking an enormous amount of resources and spinning wheels trying to figure out an effective return-to-office strategy instead of putting their time and energy into building for the future.”

Atlassian recognizes talent doesn’t just exist within 50 kilometers of one of their offices. Pay is based on the labor costs in the region where the person will work from, and employees will only be expected to visit their nearest office four times a year.

CEO and co-founder of Slack Stewart Butterfield has also gone all in on virtual work and argues asking people to return to the office is “a doomed approach.” Butterfield believes “work is no longer a place you go. It is something you do.” The location of workers has become, at Slack, inconsequential.

Slack has a permanent remote work policy, which they say is helping to attract top talent and stay competitive. One of the benefits Butterfield has found is that the world “had prematurely narrowed our view of what works at work.” He says, “There’s a lot of opportunity to rethink and reimagine.”

While Atlassian and Slack may be championing remote work for their employees, it does not mean this approach will necessarily work everywhere. Different companies will adapt their approach to what will work in their industry or context. There is no right or wrong answer but, for modern leaders, there needs to be a curiosity about what is possible and a focus on putting the people you lead at the center of your decision-making on the issue.

Irrespective of the position you take on remote work, there are some fundamental ways modern leaders need to think about their head and heart leadership in the context of the changing world in which we work.

## **WE NEED TO USE PHYSICAL OFFICE SPACE AS A CULTURAL TOUCHSTONE**

There is a close relationship between purpose and place—people draw meaning and ownership, energy and commitment because of a strong sense of alignment with the place in which they live and work. This has never been more evident than during the pandemic as different styles of personality and preferences for working came to the fore.

As most people recognize work can be done from anywhere, the question of the role of the office or workplace becomes critical. It is all very well to encourage people back to work, but have you considered why? Are you making their commute worthwhile or just causing them to wonder why they spent two hours of their day on public transport when they

could have been working from home? In a virtual or hybrid environment, have you thought about whether you want your office to be a social anchor, a schoolhouse or collaboration hub?

The new hybrid office needs to be a cultural touchstone where you can reconnect and reinvigorate those you lead with a shared common purpose. If you want people to come into your workspace, what kind of feeling are you hoping they are being injected with by the time they leave?

**There is no right or wrong answer but, for modern leaders, there needs to be a curiosity about what is possible.**

If the office is full of workstations and meeting rooms, you may as well inject your valued employees with a sedative. They will be wondering why they came in at all. Instead, if you make your workplace somewhere they can collaborate with colleagues in a way that is unique, fun and valuable, you will be injecting them with a dose of energy they simply can't replicate at home or online. Meeting rooms can become brainstorming rooms for sharing ideas and working together on strategies and projects in a way that online tools can't replicate.



Researchers understand human cognition depends not only on how the brain processes signals, but also on the environment in which those signals are received. Being physically co-located, even for short periods of time, can help people interpret others' moods and personalities, making it easier to build and reinforce relationships. This needs to be at the forefront of planning how workplaces are used by modern leaders and their teams.

## **WE NEED TO TRUST THOSE WE LEAD**

There is a lovely analogy of trust in a conversation between organizational psychologist Adam Grant and psychotherapist Esther Perel on Grant's podcast, *WorkLife*. Perel reminds us of the game of peekaboo where babies laugh with delight as adults hide behind their hands, say "peekaboo" and reappear before a baby's eyes once again. The game is, according to Perel, a foundation for trust. It tells young children and babies, that even when you can't see me, I am still there. As adults, we learn people still exist inside of us even when we can't physically see them.

As leaders, Perel extrapolates, this means I don't need to check on you. I trust you and know you will be there even when I can't see you.

I suspect some who resist having a flexible mindset when it comes to remote work might need to consider how much they trust those they lead. Traditional leaders worry productivity levels will be lower if they cannot physically see the people they lead. In one study, 60 percent of bosses doubted or were unsure their remote workers performed well or were as motivated as those in the office. This is a staggeringly high number of leaders who believe that physically working within the four walls of a specific geographic location means employees are more motivated or engaged than someone working elsewhere.

If we trust those we lead, which modern leaders do, we know they will be responsible for the outcomes and outputs we require of them regardless of where they may physically sit. In other words, "Trust is to capitalism what alcohol is to wedding receptions: a social lubricant."

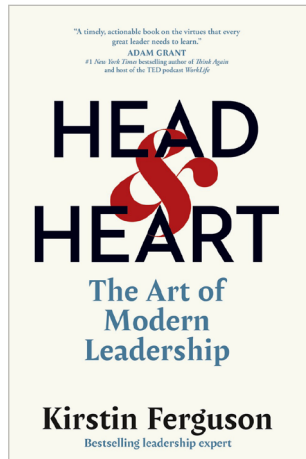
Modern leaders evaluate the success of those they lead remotely through the quality of their work, the level and quality of their online interactions and engagements, and feedback from others. These criteria are far more likely to be an indicator of success in a role than the number of hours someone spends in any one physical location.

By obsessing over productivity as somehow being directly correlated with where someone physically sits to complete their work, we miss the wood for the trees. If we trust others, they will in turn trust us to lead them. Productivity will be enhanced, not reduced. And as modern leaders we know we can have challenging conversations if we need to so we can get performance issues back on track.

A modern leader is focused on understanding the tasks of those they lead and identifying the optimal way for the work to be completed. **Even better, they are empowering those they lead to make those decisions autonomously.** 📌



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Kirstin Ferguson is a business leader, company director, keynote speaker, and executive coach. Beginning her career as an officer in the Royal Australian Air Force, Kirstin has held roles that have included CEO of an international consulting firm, and deputy chair of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Kirstin writes a weekly column on leadership and work in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and is also a contributor to the *Australian Financial Review* and *Forbes*. Kirstin was included on Thinkers50 Radar List in 2021 and shortlisted for the Thinkers50 Distinguished Achievement Award in Leadership.

In 2023, she was appointed a member of the Order of Australia, in recognition of her "significant service to business and gender equality."



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