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*Engage*


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## Dispersed but connected: How can teams flourish?

by TAMARA MAPP-BORREN

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*“How do I know how my people are feeling when the only connection with them is through a screen?”*

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That’s a question we’re hearing from a number of our leaders, as COVID-19 has made working in dispersed teams an unexpected reality for many of them

Here are some of our top tips for leading dispersed and mixed model teams (that’s where some team members are online and the rest are in the room) to ensure you foster high engagement, great results and personal connections, regardless of location.

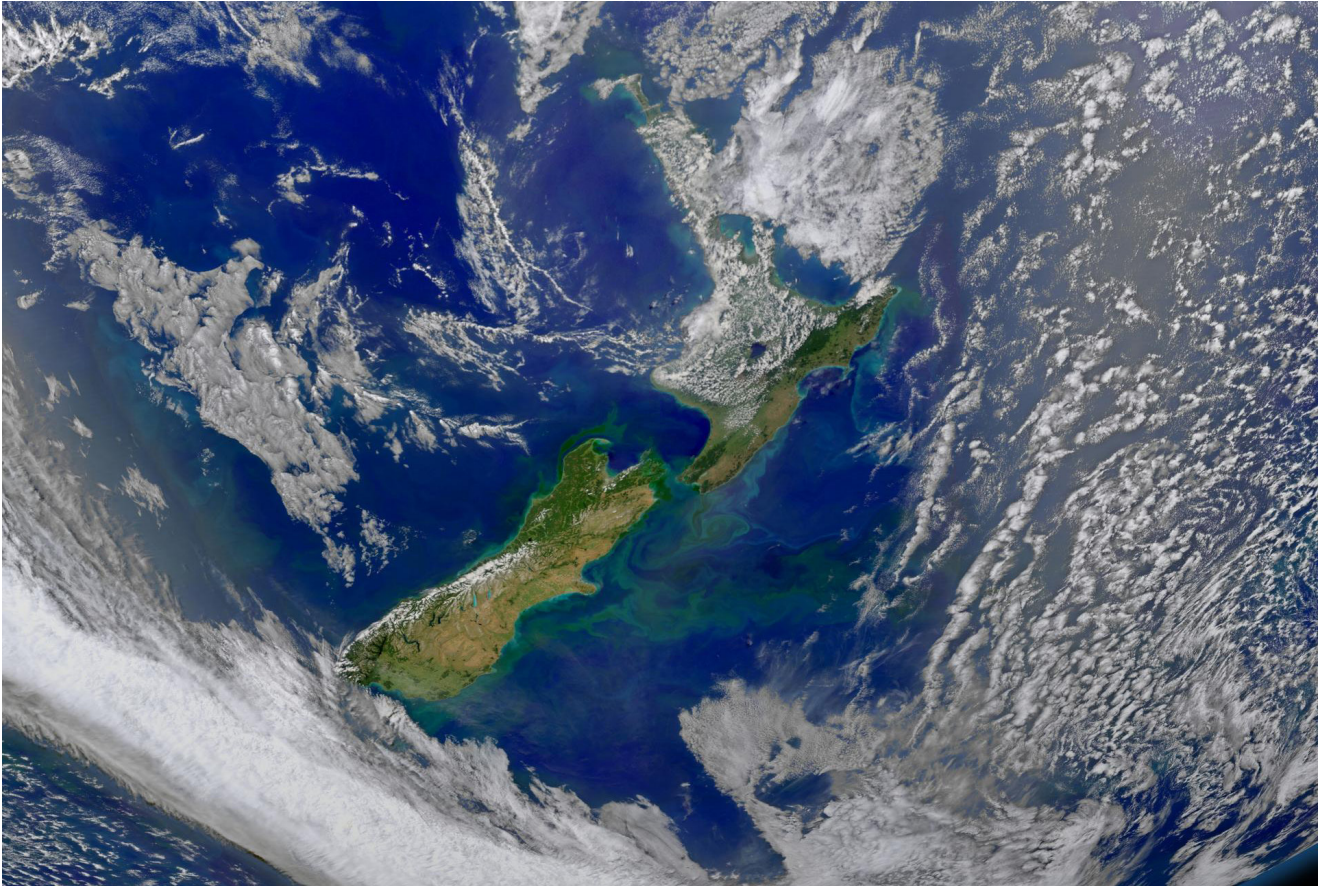
- 1 Lead with alignment and autonomy:** Work together to get clear on team purpose, define what “great” looks like, and align work programmes to deliver on that. Clear roles, accountability and keeping on track can be balanced with the team having the autonomy to make this work in the best way that suits their unique locations. We need each other in order to create cohesive global operations, but we also need the diversity of unique approaches across locations and cultures to ensure operations are well embedded.

Our advice: *Empower people with the ‘why’ and the ‘what’ and they can bring it to life with the ‘who’, ‘when’ and ‘how’ in more creative and successful ways than I could have come up with myself.*

- 2 Create personal connections:** Regardless of where we’re based in the world, we have an innate human need to connect and this is equally true for a dispersed team. There is a lot we can learn about people if we create the time and space to connect, the difference online is that you don’t get the casual corridor conversations but there are plenty of other pieces of information to pick up online. Consider asking people the stories behind the pictures on their walls, and welcome the unexpected appearances of pets and family members.

Our advice: *Be curious and take the time to get to know your people. Ask questions, remember what they share with you and proactively build your working relationship.*

- 3 Creating safe and inclusive environments:** Well-functioning teams talk and debate together, and this can be harder when you’re not in a room together reading body language and sparking ideas off each other. As a facilitator of a meeting, there are things you can do to create this environment online:
  - Acknowledge the team joining together and the effort that’s taken. Note those who might be joining in different time zones (e.g. saying both good morning and good evening where appropriate), end the session acknowledging some people are heading to the office, others into lunch, some to bed. These details help the team to connect together rather than just with the facilitator.
  - Take the time to set up the session. Set a clear outcome of what success looks like for the meeting, be clear on the rules of engagement (e.g. using the chat function for questions), and do a check-in of all the people on the call on what they need before the discussion starts (which also gives you a sense of how present the team members are).



- Co-ordinate the conversation. You may feel like a conductor at this point but watch people's faces for reactions, ensure people who want to speak have a chance to, and check-in on those who are not speaking up to give them the opportunity (and for large groups, use the chat function).
  - In a mixed model – where you have some team members online and some in the room with you – ensure everyone has good visibility of each other and treat everyone as though they are there equally present. The biggest mistake made is forgetting to ask the online people to join the discussion and leaving them hanging.
- 4. Get creative:** If you have a preference for whiteboards and post-it-notes, you'll discover that anything you want to do in a room together with a group is possible online – with a little bit of creativity. Set up whiteboards behind you; use the whiteboard function via zoom sharing your screen, and capture ideas via chat while listening to the team share. No whiteboard marker? Just hold up a drawing on a pad of paper, and the laughs from the team at your efforts are part of the fun...
- 5 Plan well:** Having a team meeting online requires an intense level of concentration and remaining present. Respect your team members' time by planning these sessions well:
- A clear, realistic agenda with pre-reading so everyone comes prepared.
  - Stick to the rule of thumb that 90mins together is a good amount of time to connect as a team on a topic, deep dive into conversation, and align on the next steps. Longer than this can mean diminishing energy returns and shorter can reduce the quality and depth of the discussion.
  - Avoid all general "information" sharing in a team meeting. Anything that can be sent on email should be and a team meeting is saved for those items requiring collaboration.
  - Include unstructured time in the agenda, there will be topics that are sparked that are worth having the time to explore as a team.
  - Online meetings always take longer than you expect to ensure a conversation across screens, be generous with your timing.



**6 Be responsive:** Notice the body language over screen and be curious about changes you notice. We can see when people are paying attention or are distracted, sending emails or on their phone. We can see facial expressions change. As a facilitator it's your job to notice this and call it out, for example: *"Fiona, I noticed your nose screw up at that suggestion, tell me more about what you're thinking to ensure we get the right solution here."* Or, *"Team, I can see that the energy has dissipated and you appear distracted, we need to land this action and then we can move on."*

Our advice: *Be brave to bring it up but also be ready to be wrong and listen to what the team tell you in return.*

**7 One source of the truth:** Use the numerous technologies we have available to us to ensure the team have one place to go for the documents or information they need. One intranet, one team hub, one online library.... Save the documents you're sharing, collaborating on, or needing for reference, as the one source of the truth to help the team be consistent and create cohesion across approaches. At Umbrella we use a Microsoft Teams site to do this and it saves multiple emails across multiple time zones and multiple people!

**8 Reward and recognition:** Celebrating means something different for each individual team member and it always surprises us how few leaders know how their team members like to be recognised when we ask them. With a dispersed team having this conversation upfront is key and our advice is simply to ask. *"If I have some great feedback for you, how do you like receiving that?"* And equally important, *"For the times when I might have some constructive feedback for you, what's the way you'd like to receive that?"* You'll get a range of answers to these questions but they are both core pillars for your work together. From a quiet and regular "Well done", through to a team "wins of the week" each Friday, email recognition, an organisation shout-out, or a handwritten note in the post, being recognised for the work you do and supporting a growth mindset of continued learning is core to job satisfaction, which leads to better individual and organisational wellbeing.

**9 Build capability:** In a dispersed team, it can be easier to sit back and let others take the lead, the idea of facilitating an online meeting is not everyone's idea of fun. Take turns at hosting a regular meeting and although there will be different levels of confidence to start, everyone will build their ability after just a few meetings. Sharing accountability for the team to connect means it's not just the leader's job, and ensures that the team prioritise topics that are important to them and not just business from the top. In a world where creating dispersed teams is likely to become more and more usual, these are skills to support everyone to develop strength in.

**10 The little things build culture:** We've learnt over time that the little things we do are the things that make the most difference in creating team culture. They might not start with that intent but they can stick and become "how we work" over time. When Tam led a global team at NZTE, she noticed four ideas that took limited effort but showed that she consistently cared about the team:

- Every time I travelled to see one of my team members, they would get a photo of me sitting in the plane to let them know *"I was on my way"*. I had no idea how much this meant to them until one day, after a couple of years I forgot and my miss was quickly communicated to me.
- On every global operations call, I would take a screenshot of all our faces online at the same time, and attach this picture to my follow-up email with the actions. It reminded us that we were in it together, when often we could feel alone at our desks.
- Once a month, we had a team meeting that everyone could join, and we took turns at which team member would take the rough timezone shift. From New Zealand it was always between 11pm and 1am but making the effort to wake up for that call built trust, empathy and understanding between team members, knowing we were globally dispersed but still committed. I'd sleep in the following morning to make up for it, but the culture of connection was always 100% worth it.
- Over time I worked out that members of my team would take a break for a cheese scone either when there was something to celebrate or they were under stress. Noticing this with the team, the *"cheese scone"* then became a shorthand way for the team to check in on how someone was feeling and for us either to rally around to congratulate them or to help problem-solve the challenges. Your team are likely to have their own equivalents if you look closely.

Creating a dispersed team culture can be more time-consuming in set-up and maintenance but can also lead to great efficiency with a team online and able to connect at short notice from wherever they are. If you're interested in talking more about dispersed teams or wellbeing strategies feel free to get in touch with Umbrella.

Thanks to [Tamara](#) for this post.