Affinity Distance Transcript

This is video five in the managing remotely module that looks at ways you can harness the value of remote work and reduce the cost of virtual distance. In this video we're looking at ways you can reduce the impact of affinity distance.

00:18

Welcome back to the videos on managing remotely. We talked in the last videos around the things that you can do to help reduce the physical distance and the organisational distance. We're now moving on to look at what are some things you can consider as a manager to help reduce the impact of affinity distance. And the two areas here that are really important, are building trust. And this sense of connection, because many of the challenges of remote working centre around feeling isolated from your colleagues. People always talking about feeling out of the loop, especially if some colleagues are still together at the office, and then other colleagues are isolated in their own locations, whether that's at home or in offices in other cities. There's a sense… perception of an imbalance in power where you have a different satellite offices as well. And there's a sense that the most power is in wherever the headquarters tends to be, or the largest office, even if it's not the headquarters sometimes. And this sense that there's a lack of social connection because you're not seeing each other anymore, you're not connected in the same way as when you meet in the morning and you say hello over a cup of coffee, or have a cup of coffee together. And, and a lot of people are talking about they're not feeling that the manager is really looking out for them, that you don't have their back when they're not in the same space.

And very often there's a sense that well you're feeling uncertain that other people are also doing their work. And this is especially true if you're in an organisation where there's a culture that working at home is kind of in inverted commas, and it's kind of like “it's a day off”. And so there's a perception that if you're working at home, you're not actually doing your real work.

So these are some of the things that we need to overcome in order to reduce the costs of affinity distance when we have remote working. So, critical to build a sense of connection and to build this feeling of trust that we have with our colleagues. And your trust with them, as manager with your, the people that you manage, and they're trust in you as their manager. So again, I'll invite you just pause the video for a moment and consider what are all the things at the moment that you're already doing? And then we can talk about some of the other ideas, and you can see what new ideas come out and maybe things to refine, or maybe there are things you're doing that we're not even covering and that's brilliant, especially if it's working for you and your team and your people. So, just pause a moment here, give you a chance pause the video. Again, if you're on your own brainstorm ideas for yourself. Ideally, do this with a colleague, another manager and brainstorm ideas together because it can be a lot more fun that way and you'll generate some really interesting conversations that will bring you as much insight as doing the programme itself. This is why when we were doing live, we had a lot of breakout conversations because that's where a lot of the real insights come from for people not just what I can deliver to you. So, and if you're doing this on your own, why not find a colleague to have some conversations with that are stimulated from what you're doing on this or watch the videos again together.

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Okay, welcome back if you paused the video. So hopefully that gave you some, some thoughts to think about what are you doing around building trust and building a sense of connection?

So, the key thing for trust is people really do need to feel heard and understood. so this is where you really want to listen to their concerns. Invite them say how are they feeling. And what is working, what's not working, how do you show that you really care? How do you relate to them and understand their emotions as well? And this is about thinking about what, what, understanding “what motivates them and how to tap into their motivations?” And understand what's getting in the way? What are the barriers that's getting in the way of them working effectively? What are the frustrations they're feeling when they're working at home and they've lost that infrastructure that they used to having when they are working in the office? And that can be very frustrating, not just for you managing them but for the person actually in the office themselves. Sorry, working from home now, themselves. And understand how are they coping with the shift to working at home, or remote working or setting up a workplace at home if it's going to be for the long term? And it's really worth your while, If you haven't already looked at the video on working remotely, then, then do this because even if you're not working remotely, it’s even more important for you to really have a good sense and understanding of what are some of the issues and the challenges that people are facing when having to work remotely, and work from home.

5:02

Coming back to this thing about needing to feel heard and understood. You… it’s quite surprising how much this truly makes a difference. This, this feeling heard, feeling understood, being listened to. And one example of this is one of my one to one clients she’d been brought in as a manager. This wasn't remote working. So, this is important whether or not you're working remotely. But there was a lot of hostility. nobody had told them that their manager was going to be changed. They were very much behind on a project. And so, the new manager was saying “you know it's terrible there's so much hostility, we can't get anything done. Nobody’s listening. We have all these meetings, and we need to tell everybody what they need to be done. We've only got two weeks to get the project done, and nobody would listen.” and then at the end of every presentation everything would erupt, and there's just so much hostility. So we came up with a way where she actually just put listening on the agenda. So instead of leaving time for Q&A at the end of an information session, which is very often the way that we run our meetings. She actually put a whole one hour session on the agenda, just called it over to you. This is “let’s give you an opportunity to raise your concerns. What are you anxious about? What are you uncertain about? What do you need clarification about? What answers are you looking for? I'll answer what I can hear, but if I don't have an answer right away, what I will commit to is going away and try and find an answer for you. I can't guarantee to have all the answers off the top of my head.” and she found this was just remarkable. What started out with full hostility at the beginning of the meeting, because people did have their questions heard, they felt because it was right on the agenda, that it mattered to management and that in itself is just an enormous thing to keep in mind. how much showing how much it matters that you listen to what they're talking about. And then the act of either if you have an answer now but if not commit to finding out the answer and come back and tell them what it was. To come back and take action on the questions that they're asking. And, and again if anytime you're inviting people to put information to you then have a way of demonstrating that you're listening to it, you're understanding and you're making a decision, even if that decision is not to make a change, but to explain why you're carrying on with the way that you are. So that people do feel that their concerns have been understood.

So, that that's a fundamental way of actually having people able to then hear what you need to say. So first you need to go over to where they are and show that you understand this situation from their perspective, and only then can you start putting on your perspective and say yes, also from my perspective here are some things. and this is really critical when we're working remotely. So, when you're managing someone remote, they need to really feel that you understand how it is for them, and any frustrations that they're feeling and dealing with the office and connecting back with all the hardware problems, perhaps, and not… having the communication issues that often come up.

8:03

Another area of trust to really think about is: you as manager really need to trust that each person is going to do their work. And so what gives you confidence? And as I mentioned in the last section here on some of the tips for you managing remotely. Using this coaching style, where you are asking them how they want to do something when you're delegating a task, that helps them to define the task rather than you. And it gives you more sense of trusting that they know what they're going to do and how they're going to deliver it and you end up with a plan of when they're going to come and report to you on what they're doing and what the results are that you can expect to see, or the indicators of when you're on track.

Equally team members need to trust that you have their back and care about them, and you need therefore to show how you have this.

Another really important thing to do is to show recognition. So as a manager, the way you can show recognition makes a huge difference to how your team members, your people, feel about the work and how much they feel valued. And in the handouts I've also included some notes about the five languages of appreciation. because in work, we quite often just think about giving positive feedback, but unfortunately more often than not we even forget to do that. And we focus on all the problems so we typically forget to notice what's positive. And that's a really important thing. so first we have to look out for the things that are going well. When someone is when someone has a task to do, then show recognition for when they actually do it, don't just assume that “well it was the plan so we expected it. And therefore we take it for granted” which does happen rather a lot. Even at home and in everyday life, not just in the workplace. So it needs a real positive intention, as a manager for you to actively look out for what's going well. And notice it, remark on it, share that with your team that you're noticing it because that will help them to feel very much more valued.

However, words are not the only way to show recognition. Quality time is another way - so how much can you support people. Quality time means different things for different people. It’s quality time giving them enough time with their peers, for example or, allowing them time to connect and be social. I'll be coming on to this in a moment, as well. It doesn't necessarily have to be time with you. A quality time with you as a manager is your one to one, where you're paying attention to how they're feeling, what their aspirations are, how you can support them. Ask them what, what would they like from you to support them to: get better in their role, to develop, personally, and in their career. Whatever it is. But you’re showing that personal attention that is quality time that you can give to somebody and that's a really good way of showing recognition.

And there's gifts, is quite often used. So bringing in cakes can be useful when you're in the office. Sometimes remote workers, everyone arranges that the office might provide pizzas, for example, it just depends on, on the kind of situation. Gifts you need to take care that they relate to the actual person's, what they like – it’s no good giving something that is not appreciated by them, it won't be felt as appreciation.

So there’s a bit more detail and the other two languages are in the notes, so do have a look at those. Those are the three most frequently used in the workplace.

We've also talked about establishing your structured daily check in already in the previous section of this module. That is a hugely important way that you can help to build this sense of connection because it's keeping everybody in the loop, and it's building that sense of trust because everybody can see that everybody's playing their part. And it's helping people feel that everyone, you know you're on top of things together. Important things to consider about that. It is about raising feelings of inclusivity but a part of that you need to make sure that it's not always an inconvenient time for one or two people in the team. So recognise what's the best time for everybody. And if there is no best time for everybody, then shift the time of the meeting so that people take it in turns to be inconvenienced. So again that's making it inclusive.

Another thing to think about is how do you make it easy for your colleague to call you just for chat about the work that you're doing. So arranging the times when it's okay for you to just pick up the phone and call me and I welcome that. So again it's, it's, it's helping your people that you manage feel it's okay to call you. And even if that means you know we need to arrange certain times when it's okay to call, because those are my work hours or those are the times when I have my open door policy, and I have my power hour when it's focused work and not to be disturbed at certain other times. And the more that you can be clear about when those times are, the easier it is for your colleagues to pick up the phone, at a time when they just need that really short moment of connection.

13:04

Something that we haven't talked an awful lot about yet but it is absolutely, critically important is to provide opportunities for these social interactions, even when we are remote. So it's one of the most essential steps that you can take as a manager. Come together, plan out ways together. Ask each other “what works for us?” because you can't say there's a one way that works for everybody because we're all different. So one of the people that I worked with, they arranged a board game, an online board game session, where they all had a copy of the board game and they all like doing board games. Now there are other people I know who go, “oh, what an awful thing! I couldn't begin to think about having to do board games with my manager”. So, you need to choose an interaction that's really appropriate. some people have gin and tonic session. Some people have a cup of tea and cake. other people have a wine and chat. And more often with the workplace It'll be around a cup of coffee, and we'll have biscuits and it's a bring your own but we're all on a video chat together. And we'll check in about how are we feeling? How are we coping about the lockdown, (which we're making it just at the moment)? What are some of the social things we're doing? What are the sports that we like doing? And what have we been up to recently socially? How are our families coping? What about the children? So it's all those social conversations that don't, haven't, we don't have enough time for in a work meeting and … but, which are really important for us to get to know each other as real people and feel that sense of human connection with each other. And that's even more critical when we're working remotely. When we work in the office we have those 5/10 minute conversations and Monday morning you'll have a 5/10 minute conversation with someone where you're talking about “what did you do at the weekend?” So we need to find a way to make it possible for these meetings, these conversations to happen while we're working remotely.

15:02

Now I said there's no time for all of this in a work meeting. actually what we do need to do is at the very beginning of our team meetings and other work meetings, is allow a few minutes just to have that emotional check in. Hello how are you? Think of when we’re in a real live, you know, in person meeting in a, in a venue, we would all come in at different times and we just, you know, get ourselves a cup of tea or a coffee and a biscuit and we talked about what were you doing yesterday ? Have you had a busy day? All that little bit of social chitchat but it's, it's good to just get that sense of human connection with each other.

And another thing that's important to think about as a manager is: how are you showing that encouragement and emotional support? So, again, listening to, how are people feeling, making time to ask them their emotional state, and particularly if you've got a busy work meeting and somebody doesn't seem to be pulling their weight… If we were in a physical space we would probably know whether or not they were generally having a bit of a bad day and that would give us an opportunity to give them a bit of slack. We need similar… to pay attention in a similar way, when we're working remotely. Not just to expect us all to be robotic computer-like. You know we expect you to focus on 100% and work exactly the same every day, no matter what else is going on in our lives. If nothing else we need to acknowledge the other stuff that's going on in our lives. Something that's quite useful to do at the beginning of a meeting is simply to have that emotional check in from everybody. You know, and just a minute or so what we've been up to? What's the business on your mind? you park it at the door, and then you can come back and pick it up again later. But as you're parking at the door metaphorically, that gives you the... a sort of a calming effect so that you can become present and focus 100% on the meeting that we're having at the moment. That’s useful technique there to help manage that emotional state when we're working remotely.

And lastly, we’ve been making these during the covert situation. This is a time of a lot of sudden changes, a lot of uncertainty, possibly crisis, possibly not. The research on emotional intelligence shows that people are looking to their manager for cues on how do we respond in situations of sudden change or uncertainty. So if you communicate stress and helplessness, that is the state that your people will be feeling as well. So really think, how do you, as manager, really create a sense of positivity?

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And not this fake positivity that ignores the situation. We’re looking for a grounded positivity. So first, and to be effective, acknowledge the stress and anxiety that you may be feeling and that your people may be feeling, And... just acknowledge these are difficult circumstances. And then the second thing to do is to affirm your confidence in your people. So, some, some leaders for example will say “Look, I know this is tough. And I know we can handle it.”

18:07

Or, “how could we, you know, let's look for ways we can work to our strengths. There are things we know that we can do, and we can support each other to come through this at this time.”

So thinking about how you support your people in this way, and they're much more likely then to embrace the challenge and find a sense of purpose and focus. so that is a real way that you can help to support your people emotionally and reduce the cost of the affinity distance as well, and help to build that sense of trust.

So I'll invite you now to pick up on any ideas that have come to you, as you've been going through this video and think about some of the things that you would like to do with your people that could help to build a sense of trust and connection.