

# Team Leadership in the time of remote silence

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## Abstract

In the last few years a huge change in our industry was observed - it was the enablement of Remote Work. It was accelerated during the pandemic and a lot of changes had to be rapidly implemented by IT organizations. Have they been done the right way? There was a huge impact on the way of working in IT project deliveries - office lockdowns later moved to office restrictions and post pandemic restrictions. It was a huge hit to many IT companies, most of the employees had been sent to work from home. Many team leaders had no time to prepare for new circumstances in an organized way. Some of the organizations in parallel with the restrictions found opportunities to evolve, remote work allowed searching for remote talent. Some companies just approved this way of working without any process or organizational changes. Hoping that their employees and team leaders will manage it themselves.

As a result of that, many leaders who were great in management “by walking” or kept pulse with chats in the kitchen over a cup of tea, faced a brand new world of remote relationships and remote conversations. They had to find a way to build teams and lead them in not remote first organizations, but keep connections sparkling with remote work delivery.

Let's have a look in a retrospective how a team leader could support the transition to remote work and changes it triggers. Let's look and analyze practices and lessons learned along the way. Discuss challenges and setbacks encountered while adjusting to remote leadership, including communication breakdowns, productivity dips, and team morale issues. Finally, let's try to search for the future of remote leadership, highlighting opportunities for growth, innovation, and collaboration in a post-pandemic but still remote world.

## Biography

*Michal is a Competence Lead for Software Quality Assurance at Viessmann where he is the advocate for focus on the Quality Processes of Deliveries. He is a fan of fast and efficient testing. Michal gives his insights in design of the test harness and solutions for industrialisation projects, the definition of the scope of testing and efficient test reporting. Michal feels responsible for sharing “new-fancy stuff” with others and helping people grow as individuals. He is involved in various activities including quality management, project consulting and requirements analysis. Now sharing his experience as a Quality Management Consultant. In his free time Michal spends time on archery, feeder fishing or enjoying a glass of rum.*

# 1. Introduction

The remote work enablement, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, marks a significant shift in the way we work, almost as big as the industrial revolution's transformation was in the past. As technology advanced and new tools grew in the 21st century, remote work slowly gained traction, but it wasn't until global lockdowns forced businesses to adapt that it became a norm. This paradigm shift has redefined work-life balance, productivity, and global collaboration, reshaping the future of work permanently.

## 1.1. Did leadership change?

In recent years the landscape of IT delivery related work has undergone a huge shift, with remote work impacting the modern workplace. The transition to remote work has forced organizations to rethink their way of interaction with employees. The companies had to adapt their policies, infrastructures, and cultures to accept distributed teams. Teams also have been reshaped by the remote work paradigm. There was a dynamic change of virtual teams to enable fostering innovation and ensuring productivity in the new situation. Teams had to rebuild the strategies to build trust, camaraderie, and a shared sense of purpose in a digital environment. The most significant transformation has been observed in leadership. The evolving role of leaders in a remote work context required leaders to have empathy, flexibility, and digital proficiency. Effective leaders had to navigate the complexities of managing distributed teams, ensuring employee well-being, and driving organizational success in a virtual world.

## 1.2. Context of the observed team and organization

Here we will present some of the challenges that have impacted software delivery work in recent years. It was possible for us to personally observe the change at Viessmann Climate Solutions organization, who works on building HVAC devices and IoT platforms for its customers. It had moved through a revolution in the last few years moving from 9 to 5 office focused work to a multi site, remote-enabled organization. This required not only the work shared across the offices but management silos in the HQ to be broken. Many roles were globally impacted from remote sites, not only decisions made inside the HQ. In addition each of the sites working across Europe had to implement enablement of remote work and remote teams of their own, requiring their leaders to build a new model of cooperation and managing distributed teams.

# 2. New way of working

The remote work revolution has not only changed where and how software delivery work is done, but has also reshaped the organizations, teams, and leadership models. Going through this new landscape, it is clear that adaptability, innovation, and a human-centric approach will be the keys to success in the remote digital age. Organizations, teams, and leaders have to utilize the power of remote work to drive progress and achieve new heights.

## 2.1. Switching on

One of the first challenges that is being faced by the leaders and team members is the “switching on” ritual. In the “old” office days, work time started in the office kitchen with the other employees in a small chat. Moving more towards project topics and with the cup of coffee we got our desks and felt ready for the work to start. In the new remote days everybody has their own routine. Some start the day with cameras off in pajamas, some with breakfast on their desk. It is not common to dress-up, eat breakfast and travel to the office anymore.

At the Viessmann Quality Team there was a practice where the team starts a day with a free to join meeting, where any team member can touch any topic they want. It is allowed to have a cup of coffee or eat breakfast while talking with others. This is the way to begin the morning together and switch on for a work day. The meeting is open for discussion about anything from world news, company questions, today's tasks, private life, today's mood or project gossip. The goal of the meeting is to get ready and leave the call once we want to start daily operations. It is important to not interfere with project teams' daily stand ups with such meetings, or have a clear priority here. The meeting is set as optional for all the invited members, due to being the lowest priority against other project activities. It is a good approach to have it before standups, if possible. From the leader's perspective this meeting is a good place to refresh with the team their plans and challenges for the day from both project and private perspective. It can be used to update priorities or answer any puzzles and questions the team has, regarding a recent event or just after over the night thinking on some issue. It can be used for a fast feedback loop, pulse check on team spirit or just be an insight to the mood barometer as it was with the start of the day coffee and chat in a kitchen. It can be also used to adjust the plan of the day with sudden unexpected meetings or changes.

## 2.2. Switching off

The “switch off” for remote work is almost as tricky as the start of work. In the office there was a point in time where people just stood up and left the office. Now the home is the office; it is easy to lose track of time and get focused and want just to finish this one more small task and sit by the desk till the late evening. It is the role of team leader to help the team to keep their balance. Some people take breaks during the day as they know they will work late, but others do not have to join them with hidden overtime hours.

One way of pushing the team to achieve their balance is mention their off work activities during afternoon calls and make sure they have the time to practice them. Leaders can complement team members' successes and achievements. Push the team to openly talk about their after work activities:

- Try to embrace their exercises and hobbies
- Support spending time with family and friends
- Talk about their goals and pursuits
- Ask them to speak about their achievements loud

It is important for the leader to show the team how important it is to have success not only in professional work but also in their private activities and try to join with the whole team to celebrate them. This makes it a lot easier for everyone to embrace their hobbies or sport activities and to remember about balance and other plans. The object is to create an atmosphere where everyone feels that it is okay to switch off and finish the day even if others are still working.

## 2.3. Building work related and off-work relationships

One of the most important aspects of daily work for the new remote leaders is to build trust and relationships with the teams. They are no longer inside the office and company inclusion and relation to the place of work is a lot more shallow. The only way to compensate for that is to have a team spirit inside the team and relationship with the leader or manager. It is the last space that can affect the team members' decisions and feelings about the company. To earn this trust, leaders do not only have to be open and proactive toward the team. The open communication has to be focused on building the relationship inside the working time and outside of the working time. Sometimes integration events or team building might happen in the evenings or on the weekends, often in remote locations. If the leader loses it, there might be no chance to build it back. Also allowing the team to schedule a meeting with the leader and the leader's availability to discuss any topics that are required. Leaders have to be ready to speak not only about projects and performance, but also feelings and fears that their teammates have inside the work and maybe also outside of work. Leaders have to be understanding and open to talk about private lives. Remote work blurs the lines between daily life and daily work and the more a leader becomes a part of the life of their team the better they know them and earn more of their trust.

## 3. New conflicts in remote world

This new age of remote work brings to the table a whole new scope of challenges and conflicts that both employees, teams and leaders need to tackle. Many of those are still being investigated and best practices are needed. We need to find the best way to resolve them and make our work space friendly again.

### 3.1. Balancing work and family

The first and possibly most important conflict is work and family imbalance. In the past we worked in the office and our family was separated from our work space and daily business. Now people work at home, they want to keep the professional approach to work, but at the same time many of their homes were planned for family time. For example in Europe small flats are common and there is no possibility to separate a work space for most of us. Team members often do not have a separate space or additional empty room where they can fully focus on work. Often they try to utilize shared rooms, and cope with home responsibilities and expectations from the family that they can fit in in the daily schedule. Many of our employees need to share the professional work we do for the rest of the day with family members who might be in the house at that time. The split between things that happen in the house impacts the work time. It requires an art of detachment at a high level to allow yourself to focus on work while kids play behind the door or

across the room. Some of us need to manage the time for family duties and work, so elastic work time can help us. We do not have to fully focus on 9 to 5 work. We can keep core hours available and choose the best time and possibilities for the rest of the day.

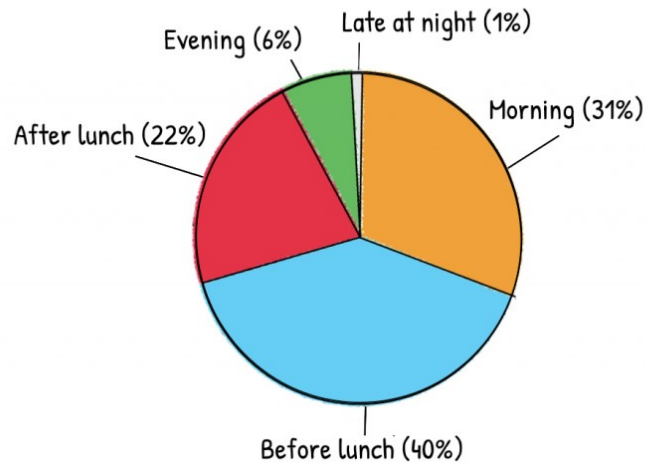
As a leader we need to be understanding and supportive for the team. It is not the lack of professionalism or bad will of team members that has the background noises of living home in the background. One of the practices that can help organize time and team workflow is to encourage team members to openly push their private appointments and duties to the calendar. It builds a clear image of the daily plan. It enables the possibility of not having to dial to a meeting from a car or shop, just because it overlaps personal responsibility. It creates a culture to share with other teams openly responsibilities and timeframe and move meetings that are planned in not perfect time.

Calendars from Gmail and Microsoft recently have the option to set office hours availability to give other coworkers insight to our work schedule, availability for meetings and ad hoc discussions. Remote work supports and thrives on giving team members the responsibility and freedom to define their own way on work planning and executions. Leaders have to be demanding on deadlines and goals being kept and achieved, but should not push for a strict working schedule or task micromanagement. Many of the employees have kids at home during summer interfering with work during the day and have more free time in evenings and late afternoons. The leader should encourage the team to build their best work schedule that would ensure work is being delivered and keep the availability visible for other teams in a transparent way.

### 3.2. Workdays and weekends

There were many studies made on people peak performance time, and as expected "it depends". Each of the employees is different, have different home work setups and family at home situations. Remote work allows the teams to adapt the time frame of the day for their own best. The leader pushes the team to evaluate each of them individually and share results inside the team. With that information, the team can choose the best way of work for them.

## During what time of the day do you reach your productivity peak?



Source: TalentLMS Remote Work Survey

As it was mentioned before, it is not the old days with 9 to 5 workday anymore, we have a whole new remote rule. We need to keep the core hours available and plan the day with the impact of work and family. The most crucial part of it is transparency and visibility. Give the team responsibility on the targets, communicate clear time frames and give freedom on execution. In some teams the weekdays and weekends became more fluid as the relics of the old office times. If anyone on the team has something urgent to take care of during one of the weekdays, we enable them to plan some time during Saturday or Sunday in exchange. This way until they keep the 40 hour work week they have the freedom of adjusting their work time to time slots when they can work without being interrupted. The main focus is to do it in a transparent way and make it invisible in their calendar.

The team leaders have to focus on the defined expected results, deadlines, and timeframe to achieve it, i.e. 40 hours working week in Poland. It requires them to give the team members freedom to use their time the best way they can. Remote work is based on trust, as long as the team is transparent and open about their absence and their work availability time. This way teams use the freedom to build engagement and better attitude and professionalism. Still if someone abuses this trust or does not behave professionally with the freedom, leaders have to have measures in place and be strict and consequent with repercussions.

### 3.3. From Face-to-Face to One-to-One meetings

In the old days the baseline of communication between the leader and the team members was a set of face to face meetings with each of the team members. The frequency was dependent on the size of the team. The current remote work times stopped the office meetings and the "leadership by walking" practices. One of the first changes was the full switch to remote and online

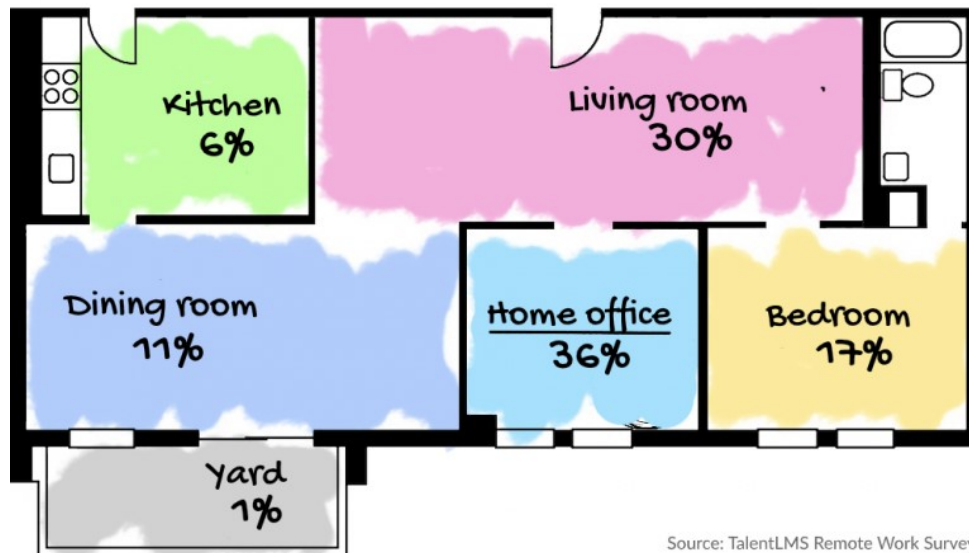
meetings. It also started the change in the naming convention and those syncs with peers are often called “One to ones” as they happen in the virtual world now. The goals of them also got extended, as they are not kitchen space or quiet room meetings for small talks. The one to ones are a lot wider, they are the main point of the relations and communication between leader and the team. A good practice, if possible, is to run them on a weekly basis and to allow your team member to be the owner of the topics discussed. As leaders, we have to be open to discuss their private and project related topics or just today's mood and personal feelings. If there is a need for feedback or performance review related discussion it should be moved outside of the weekly sync and delivered at a separate, dedicated meeting. It is a good practice to propose or be open to some alternative options of executing such a meeting. Both people do not have to spend the call sitting in front of the cameras, they can be run with alternatives like joined remote walk with being dialed on phones; another idea is to try to run a quarterly sync on lunch together in some remote location halfway between yourselves or meet each other over a dinner on a trip together. Please remember that this meeting is meant for building and maintaining a leader's relationship with the team, but also is the crucial connection between the employee and the company that leader represents, as most office related connections are not there anymore.

### 3.4. Home versus office - working space challenge

Another challenge for the employees that team leaders need to be supportive with is the work spaces for our teams. The remote switch was unexpected by many organizations and employees and the homes and especially the flats often do not have a dedicated room or even space for work. In addition the company's approach to remote work start was done in various ways. Some of them gave their employees some IT equipment or additional money to cover higher bills, less of them offered vouchers to order a desk or office chair for a home office, but most just waited and did nothing to support the employees. It is the leader's responsibility and challenge on a daily basis to be respectful and understanding if someone doesn't have a separate space for work at their home. Situations with family members and home pets will happen during meetings. Please remember that employees' home spaces were designed to fulfill their private life needs and remote work was often not considered. That is why work is just an additional not planned scope that needs to be handled there and not many of us have houses with backyards that could be extended by an additional room or studio for work.

Leaders have to remember that not all of us have the same home space capabilities and some turned off cameras are just triggered by surroundings. The leaders should not force the camera to be active, but build a space in which people feel safe on a call and will be willing to have them running even if working from the kitchen or children's rooms. The surveys on the remote work spaces give insights on the situation as no room is safe from not being used for work:

## What part of their home do remote workers work from?

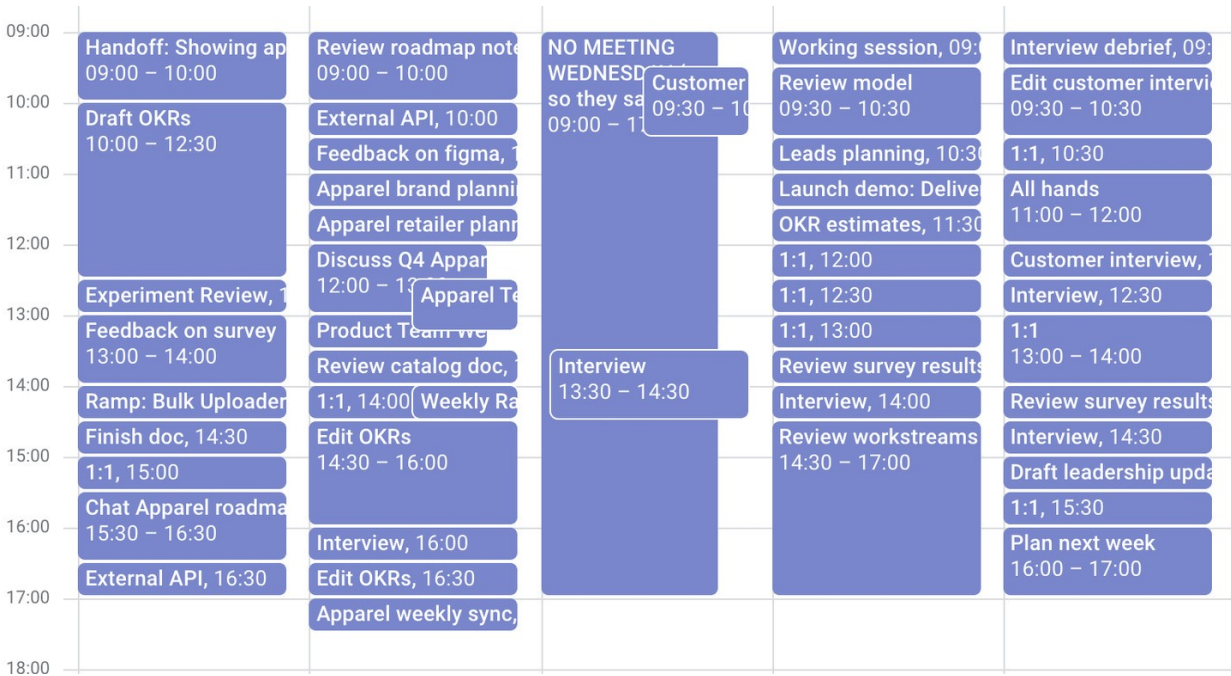


The team members have to share the flat or house with different numbers of people or have different family sizes. Sometimes some of them also work remotely. Sometimes children have off school holidays. Home is primary for the families and they use it every day. The remote leader role is to be respectful and supportive even if someone interrupts during the meeting. It can be used as a possibility to extend relationships and to know better the teammate's daily life and family. Please do not build unachievable expectations of strict professional work space and isolated working time in the middle of someone's house. This was never the goal for which this home was designed. If the leader recognizes that one of their peers struggle, they could try to use their voice inside the company and search for an opportunity to help that person, maybe with a voucher for co-working space or additional equipment for their home-office setup that could help.

### 4. Meeting overload

Meeting overload is another huge topic affecting the remote teams. In the office meetings were always limited to the work hours, availability of meeting rooms etc. In the remote and virtual world there are no limits. It is the leader's responsibility to ask the team to be very assertive in accepting invites that are needed for the business or work. Let them be restrictive in the topics selection, or to reject empty invitations looking like unprepared meetings. If those rules are not followed, there is a huge risk of ending up with an overbooked calendar full of overlapping meetings with no time to do the actual work. This problem is clearly illustrated in the example below:



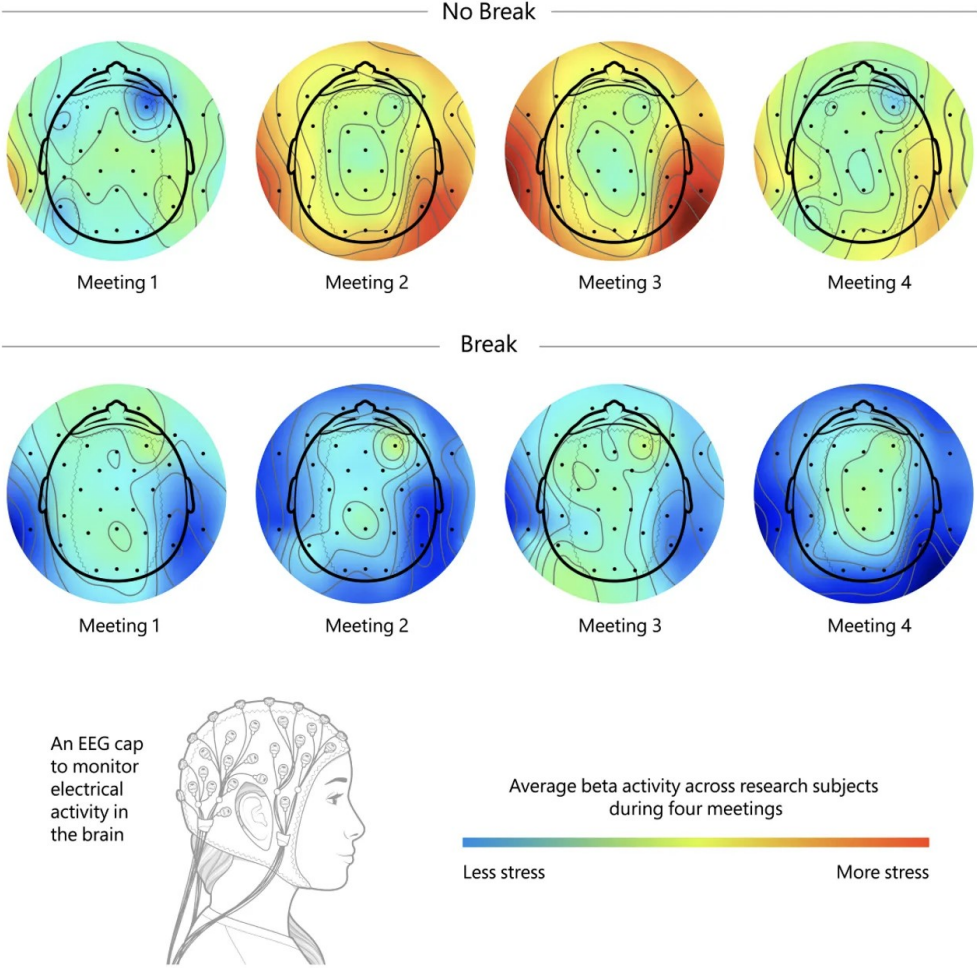


Try to use plugins for calendars and set up some ground rules for the calendars. Remember about breaks between meetings, coffee and eating slots, or have other duties come up, they need to be added to the daily plan. Employees can also show their time availability in the calendar to make it clear when he or she can join and help the team resolve the subject.

If someone requires a deep focus time to perform technical work, please put it inside the calendar. Make sure that transparency and visibility are the basics of the calendar management and share it with coworkers. Be restrictive on those focus breaks and not make exceptions on accepting and overlap meetings on those sessions. This should be the time to have a single thread focus and fully work on delivering it. Many of the currently existing calendar applications and time management tools have a lot more options than just the meeting scheduler. The leader and the team should invest the time to know the tool better and investigate features and use them, as they are a great help to organize remote work.

Sharing a calendar is a nice practice allowing others not only to see the free/busy slots but also the details of booked time slot goals and decide if the cause of the meeting has bigger or lower priority over that. There is also expectation on the part of the leader to be respectful of those “deep focus” sessions or be clear on priorities in planning overlapping meetings and asking the team to join. Transparency builds trust and leaders should not use it in a wrong way. It is also important to remember that “deep focus” sessions do not have to be spent by the computer or at the desk in the home office. Many people just take a walk to think about a subject and make a decision. They can record or make notes on a mobile device and later push it to the computer. The leader has to be respectful and give freedom and responsibility to the team of how they use those sessions and not always expect them to be in front of the monitor.

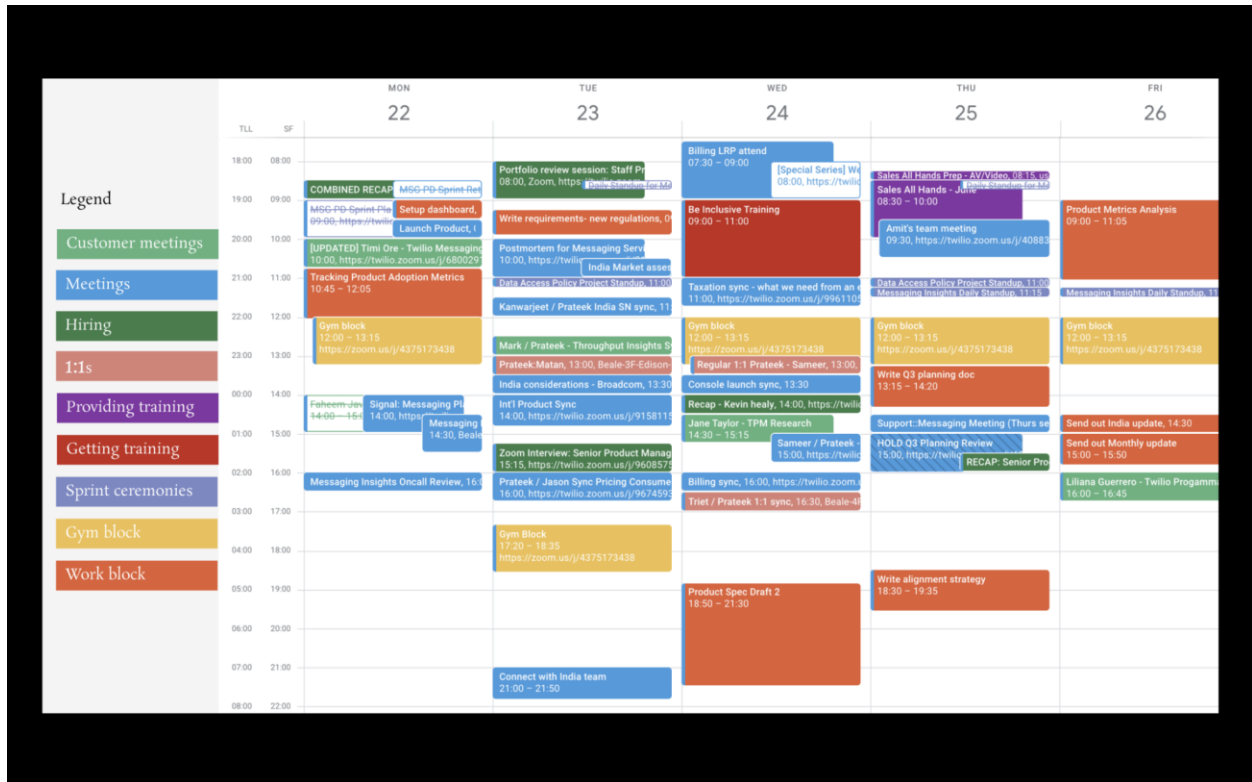
Another subject growing in recent remote times is “decompression time”. People in our workplaces love to push a meeting session right after another in the calendar. There were multiple studies to discover how a continuous meeting marathon affects the brain. Thanks to the monitoring of electrical activity of the brain it was discovered that people who managed to have a decompression slot between the meetings had a lot more focused and less stressed mind during those meetings. The results visible on graph below the results are stunning:



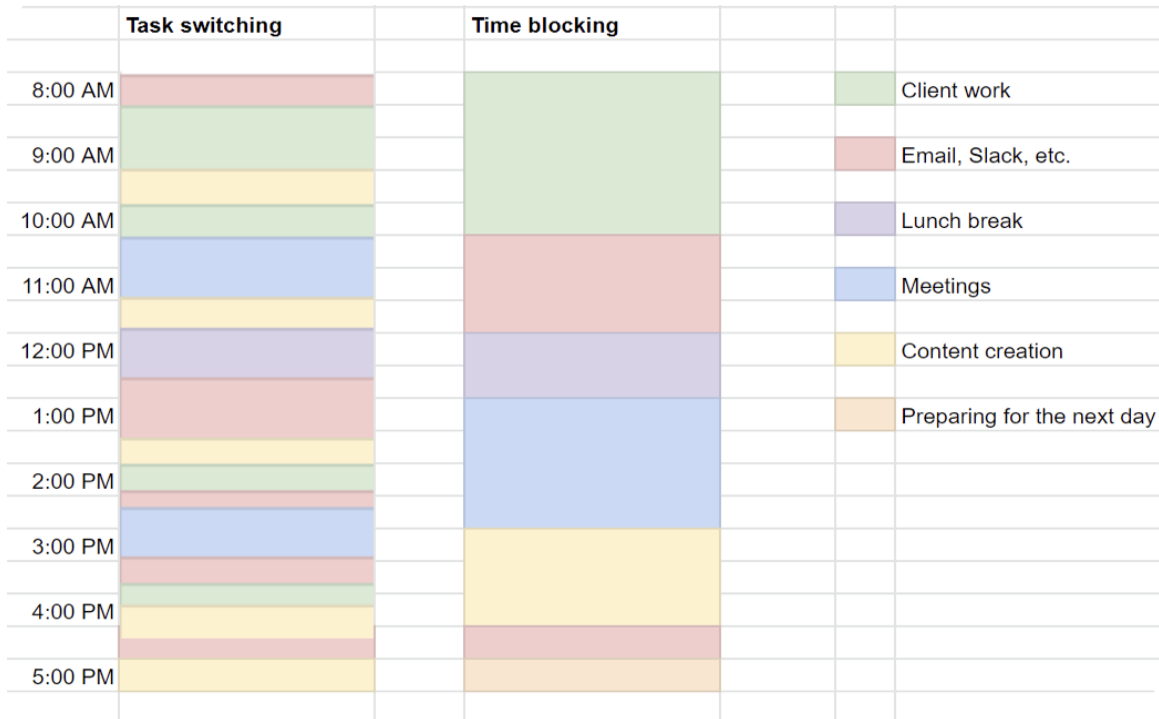
No breaks end up with huge stress and a fast path to work burnout. It takes much more time to switch off after such a day and it affects and even breaks the balance of our work/family life. That is why the leaders need to work with the team members to help them manage their time, avoid meeting overload and if the calendar extensions or additional tools support the “decompression time” capabilities in the calendar, ask the team to use it at least as 5-10 minutes slots for the hygiene of the body and the brain.

## 5. New way of remote teams working

All of the mentioned challenges and aspects forced the remote teams and their leaders to search for a new working model and practices that could enable better communication and efficiency of the work done. One of the first big changes is that the calendar became the main focus point for every plan we do: meetings, focus sessions, breaks, work time availability, private responsibilities, all of it should be there. Remote work requires strong trust and relationships inside and outside of the team. The best way to achieve that is transparency and openness in our daily routine. The work calendar is the best place to build it.



It gives the user many features and automated rules configuration options to make it more open and transparent, but also efficient and healthy. Later the calendar can be shared and its content visibility be managed. With the embrace of the decompress time and the switching on and switching off sessions it can help to build healthy work space space for remote work with full visibility. Here is an example of a transparent calendar day below, but it still lacks decompression sessions and would be seen as overloaded:



It is not just only the calendar management role that gets extended, there is also visible a large communication shift. In the old office times the rule was, if it's urgent just go to someone's desk, if the person is not there just write an email. That was the rule of communication, online communicators were used mostly for off topic discussions or urgent requests to someone sitting in a meeting room.

Nowadays it looks like nobody reads emails, they are used only for formal communication we want to have recorded or just as a method to push invites to someone's calendar. If someone wants to ask about something, but it can wait a while, they use communicators like Teams, Slack, Google Chat, but nowadays it is not expected to get immediate response there. Most urgent cases went back to fast mobile call, or online huddle or any other direct communication with voice or video. Most of A-sync tools are forgotten, the ones that were the immediate ones now are treated like a-sync. Nobody has the time to check emails, they wait for weeks and months for response or being read once someone is asked about them via communicators or during a meeting. In parallel lots of web based alternatives for Outlook Express that were a standard in the past don't have the same capabilities and mailboxes are not readjusted due to pain of the tools itself. Employees can review and respond to the invitation in the calendar without looking at the mailbox. A huge risk is being found during audits that most verbal agreements do not have a record in a form of document or action item, even if delivered, as no track record of it exists. Not all companies can operate in such a verbal and trust based way with, for example, ISO requirements fulfillment. The leader has to be aware and ask someone in the meeting to make at least a formal note of it and summarize all the decisions.

## **6. Team leadership in remote work**

The remote work ship not only affects the teams but also reframes the role and responsibilities of the leader. One of the main points is the “glue work” to keep the team together, focused on shared goals and a good atmosphere. In the past many of those integration and off work activities were managed and planned by the HR department with line management directly. Now many of those are shifted to the team formal and technical leadership. It is their task to plan, organize, budget and deliver those collaboration activities for the team inside or outside office hours. Company wide parties are symbols of the past. Now the integration needs to be team focused and the leaders have to be creative, with budget limits, distant locations of team members to organize in the middle of the distance activity, or some new online interactions that would help the team to build a positive team culture and atmosphere.

The new wave of remote leaders have to be also good advocates of their teams, showing their work and making it visible inside the organization. Both visibility and recognition in remote times is not so easy and leaders can use their direct access to management to build relationships and present the successes and work done. They can also make tighter feedback loops and collect both recognitions and suggestions on the work done to keep not only bottom up motivated improvements, but also help the team identify aspects that can make the work better and more visible organization-wide. It is the leader’s role to enable the visibility and continuous relationship between team and up the chain, making sure not only top individual achievements are being recognized, but that team effort and its fruits are also appreciated.

Another shift is the responsibilities of the leader role expected from both company and team sides. The leaders are seen by the organization as their voice at the team level, it is more and more dependent on them how the message from the company will be shown, received and understood by the team. It is them also who needs to collect the feelings and thoughts of the team after the change was announced.

## **7. Summary - Remote Leadership redesigned**

Remote work has shifted the team leadership model at both organization and team expectation levels. In the Company contexts, new remote age leaders have to be the voice of management to support the corporate message and clarify the scope required. It is also now the leader’s responsibility to collect the feelings from the team and decide what to push back to management as team feedback. The leaders should also build and keep the trust and open communication inside the team not only about team internal subjects but also topics outside of delivery scope focus like business situation, company news, and strategic shifts or departments reorganization.

In parallel also the team’s expectations of remote teams are a bit different as the leader is usually the only person between remote employees and the organization itself. Therefore the leader is a representation of the team. To make it a better atmosphere for remote work, support leaders have to keep the trust in the team, maintain open communication, and give the autonomy to the people.

They need to be more results oriented than company duties and work time focused. Teams need the responsibility and trust that they commit to the team goal and the a-sync work has to be embraced as part of remote scope. The leaders are solely responsible for keeping the trust with open and honest communication. They need to address all the appearing topics directly, bringing people together on offsite remote meetings or online appointments. As the company communication is not so direct anymore, all the building, supporting, and affecting of peoples' careers and expectations have to be driven by the leaders who know the employees best.

It is a shared responsibility of the leader and the team to build and support the team's shared identity and team spirit. Leaders must support their people by allowing them to express both professional and private matters with them. If an employee needs that, we should not try to redirect people to HR or a People organization too fast as now we know our remote team friends best and should be the first line of trust and discussion. The role of leadership has grown to be a company wide first level representative for all the employees from the team. For team leaders to grow in such a role, they have to embrace these remote team leadership and team-building tenets as critical components for success of their teams, their companies and themselves.