Building **Trust** Remotely: A Counter-Intuitive Idea

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Ever since the business world has moved to the current work-from-home (WFH) environment, trust has become a hot topic. In fact, a search on Google for trust in remote teams returned 79 million entries.

How to build trust now that everyone is working remotely?

How do I know my employees are actually "working" while at home during office hours?

If you have recently wondered about either or both questions, you are hardly alone because most people managers are doing so in these locked down times. With due respect, I explain in the following 7 points why I believe these may be the wrong questions to begin with:

1. We worry too much about building trust in a remote WFH environment. In a poll I recently conducted, over 90% of respondents agreed that it was harder to build trust in a remote working environment. This implies that trust is easier to build in an environment where face-to-face communication is possible. Research points to the contrary.

2. In his book, Talking to Strangers, Malcolm Gladwell recounts a study conducted by a team comprising a Harvard Economist, 3 computer scientists, and a bail expert from the University of Chicago. They created
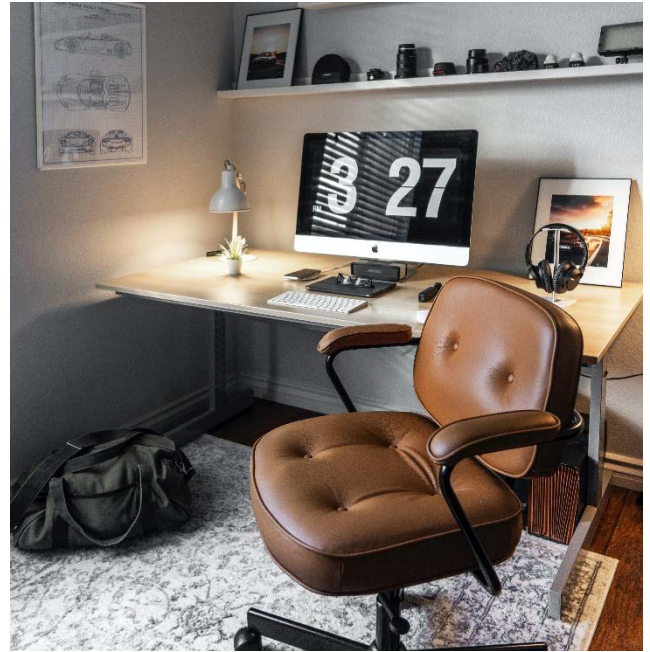

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an artificial intelligence (AI) system to decide if defendants arrested for criminal behavior should be granted bail. They fed the AI system all the information pertaining to 550,000 arraignment hearings that had already taken place in live courtroom sessions where human judges had already made decisions. The only thing the AI system did not have was the benefit of face-to-face interaction with the defendants in the courtroom. On average, the AI system was 25% more accurate than human judges. And what's more – human judges had released 48.5% of all defendants the AI system flagged had as very high risk (most of whom turned out to be so).

3. Gladwell tells similar stories of CIA operatives and other trained experts failing to accurately judge a person's intentions through face-to-face interactions. One notable story he cites is of U.K. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlin's interactions with Adolf Hitler. After meeting him several times, Chamberlin concluded that Hitler's word could be trusted. Two other prominent people - Lord Halifax and Neville Henderson - who had spent significant in-person time with Hitler were similarly misled. In fact, barring only a few exceptions, the people who spent the most time with Hitler read him wrong, and those who never met him, like Winston Churchill and Duff Cooper, read him right.

4. Research by Professor Timothy Levine at the university of Alabama and others also points to the counter-intuitive fact that face-to-face interaction does not provide any significant advantage when it comes to judging people's intentions correctly. Therefore, when it comes to building trust in a WFH environment, we should not lament too much about our inability to meet and interact with colleagues in person.

5. How then can one create trust and trustworthiness in today's environment? Begin with understanding what trust is made up of; and reflecting on how strong you are at each component. As I explained in my Forbes article Trust, the Currency of Leadership, trust is made up of 5 Cs: Character, Commitment, Competence, Consistency and Centricity.

6. For the remote working environment we find ourselves in today, let us add a 6th C – **Communication**. When you cannot meet in person, stepping up on communication is the thing to do. But communicate with your actions as much, if not more than, your words. Working extra hard at keeping your commitments in one way to do so.

Trust and Working Remotely
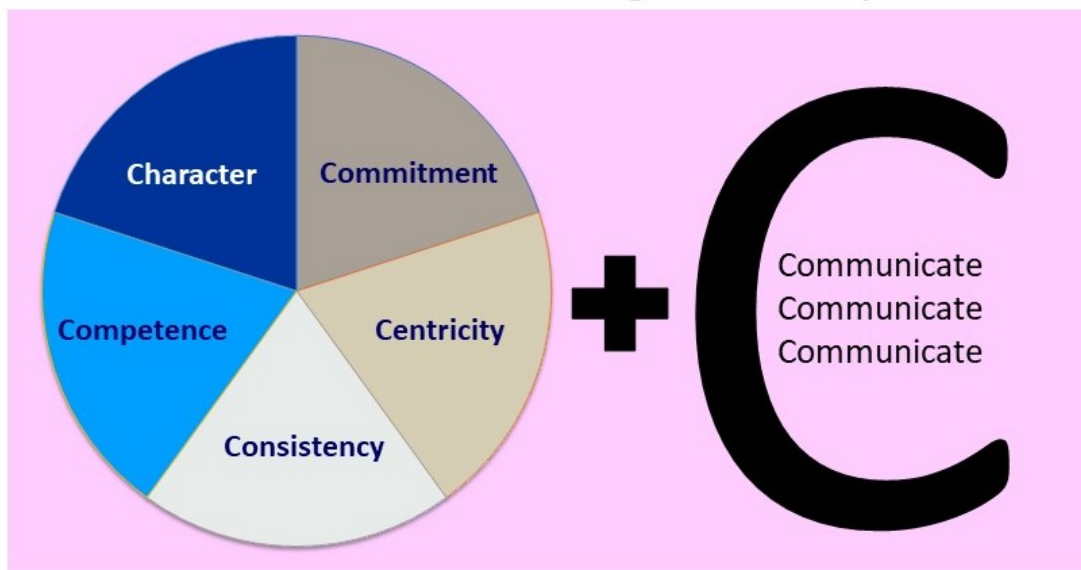
7. Finally, when it comes to the question of whether your team members are actually "working" while at home, my simple advice is to not worry about it. Set performance expectations as objectively as possible, clarify a small core that is non-negotiable, and set them free to work as they see fit. The best leaders never micro-manage, but they are no easy pushovers either. They are autocratic about their framework of values and purpose; but provide full freedom to their people to operate as they wish within that framework. In another recent Forbes article called Performance Management in the Age of Social Distancing, I explain why setting employees free is a good strategy for overall performance and productivity.

Bottom line: While many others may be momentarily frozen like a deer in the headlights, these difficult times could be an opportunity for you to a) showcase your trustworthiness by demonstrating and communicating your strength in the 5 Cs of trust, and b) enhance trust within your team by giving them freedom within a framework.