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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 184: JEANNE WILSON – LEADING REMOTE TEAMS

Female Speaker

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Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight to help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Whether your organization has embraced remote work or a hybrid model, managing and leading a remote team can be challenging. For many managers, it's a real source of frustration. If it's causing you headaches, perhaps you're leading the way you did when everyone was in the office. If that's the case, our guest says your leadership style needs update in order to succeed in our new environment. Dr. Jeanne Wilson is a professor of organizational behavior at the William & Mary School of Business. She's an expert in teams. She researches and teaches co-located and distributed teams and teams that cross organizational boundaries. She says to be an effective leader in a remote setting, managers, and leaders have to let go of their old way of leading. Here's our conversation with Professor Jeanne Wilson.

Ken White

Well, Jeanne, thanks for being with us. I appreciate it. Welcome to the podcast.

Jeanne Wilson

Sure. Thank you.

Ken White

So this is something almost every manager I run into is talking about how do I lead my remote team? When you're working/talking with working professionals, what kind of things are you hearing about them leading remote teams today?

Jeanne Wilson

It is a big source of frustration and, I think, confusion. So as everybody's read about, companies have tried to pull employees back in. There's been a lot of resistance to it. And I think one of the primary problems is that organizations and managers, of course, are having a hard time articulating why they need people in the office. When they do attempt to send that message, they sort of wave the we need to build our culture or maintain our culture flag. And that doesn't make sense to employees. They don't understand that it's too amorphous. And so they're just not providing a coherent message about why people need to be in the office, and people are resisting.

Ken White

And can we build a culture with remote employees?

Jeanne Wilson

Absolutely. Of course. A culture is just accepted way of doing things, and it's just that managers aren't familiar with building a culture remotely or at a distance, so they're resisting it.

Ken White

I think what I hear mostly from managers and leaders is they're kind of confusing. Is someone busy at home, or are they productive? And when they're not busy, they get a little irritated. What are you hearing from that standpoint?

Jeanne Wilson

That's certainly the employee's perspective. So I think, unfortunately, over the years, managers have gotten in the habit of using proxies for performance. I see your butt in the seat. Therefore you must be productive. And they're familiar with that way of judging people, and they're having a hard time converting to managing strictly by results.

Ken White

So what can the manager do to make sure that they do, in fact, look at results as opposed to activity?

Jeanne Wilson

So obviously, the manager and the employee have to agree on what constitutes. How am I going to evaluate your performance? What constitutes results? The employees will have some perspective on that, but once there's clear agreement on how performance will be evaluated, then a lot of objections fall by the wayside.

Ken White

It doesn't seem like many people are having those conversations, though.

Jeanne Wilson

Sadly, they're not.

Ken White

That's sort of the problem here, right?

Jeanne Wilson

Exactly.

Ken White

Yeah. So what advice do you have for someone who's leading a remote team to make sure things are going the right way?

Jeanne Wilson

Well, there's a lot they can do and a lot of things they need to be on the lookout for things to avoid. So one of the concerns in managing a remote team, particularly if some of the team is remote and some of the team is not remote, one of the risks is that managers can inadvertently create a proximal in group and treat people who are in the office differently than they treat people who are not in the office. So I think if managers are self-aware about that, they can counteract that. But if they're not thinking about it, I think those dynamics can crop up. So that's one thing to be on the lookout for.

Ken White

And that could easily cause a divide in the team.

Jeanne Wilson

Absolutely. Completely.

Ken White

And then cause people to either be irritated or just flat out leave.

Jeanne Wilson

That's right.

Ken White

Yeah.

Jeanne Wilson

So one of the things from the employees perspective about this transition is equity and fairness. So we talked earlier about employees don't understand why decisions are being made the way that they are. So they may infer that things are unfair because they don't understand why some managers have to be clear about who gets to work remotely and why what are the boundaries. And just like with managing employees who are co-located, we like to encourage managers to set just a few limits and then give employees as much choice or voice as they possibly can, particularly in this climate where employees have more options than they ever have before. Obviously, managers want to keep employees satisfied. They want to avoid the phenomenon that everybody's talking about with quiet quitting. And one way to do that is to give employees as much choice in how they work as you possibly can to set as few rational limits and let employees make decisions beyond that.

Ken White

It seems mostly like a communication issue.

Jeanne Wilson

Doesn't everything boil down to that?

Ken White

I guess it does, yeah. But almost everything you're saying is we just need to talk. We need to talk.

Jeanne Wilson

Right. We need to come to agreement.

Ken White

What's the difference? What are some of the hurdles that you think people are running into today with hybrid teams or remote teams versus the old way of managing? What are some of the differences?

Jeanne Wilson

So one issue that managers need to be on the lookout for is something called fault lines. So fault lines occur when multiple demographic or work characteristics align to create subgroups. So if, for instance, all the accountants are in Atlanta and all the finance people are in New York, that has the potential to create a fault line. So, where accountants and finance people might have a level five conflict, ordinarily, if now they're separated by geography in addition to function, that creates a fault line, and the conflict gets boosted up to a ten. So one of the things managers should be on the lookout for are those kinds of

overlapping characteristics that create subgroups because that will just exacerbate conflict in their groups. And if you have a situation that's unavoidable where, for instance, because of historical factors, all the accountants are in Atlanta, and all the finance people are in New York, what you need to do is organize across the fault line. So if you're going to have people working on stuff, don't give the accountants part A and the finance people part B. Have an accountant work with a finance person on part A and organize across that fault line to keep lines of communication open.

Ken White

So that's great advice for the manager. What about the employee? What's some advice you have for the employee to make sure they're being recognized, they're getting work done, they feel good about all of this?

Jeanne Wilson

Actually, a lot of the burden for being successful on this system does fall on the employee, particularly now, because managers haven't quite figured it out yet. So if you're going to advocate for working remotely, you have to kind of work overtime to keep yourself salient in the eyes of the boss. So one thing that happens, psychological process that happens at a distance, is that it changes people, what's called their construal levels. So they think about distant people differently than they think about co-located people, and they think about their distant employees at a more abstract level of construal. So rather than thinking Ken is really good at communicating in front of executive audiences, but he needs to work on whatever, I'm just making stuff up is what communication skills. That's kind of a concrete level of construal about your skills. At a distance, managers are more likely to think Ken good or Ken bad.

Ken White

Woah.

Jeanne Wilson

They have kind of a global construal about you. And so, as an employee, what you need to do is counteract that by making your work more concrete. So rather than saying, oh, I had a really productive day today, you have to make your accomplishments concrete so you can help the manager and develop a more specific view about you to say whatever, I had a great meeting with one of our key clients, and they agreed to X, so the manager thinks more specifically about you. So that's one thing.

Ken White

So it sounds like communicating up is more important today.

Jeanne Wilson

And in a very specific way.

Ken White

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Ken White

So should employees reach out? Should they take the responsibility to find that way to reach out to the boss?

Jeanne Wilson

If the boss doesn't do it? Absolutely. So one of the things, of course, that's a problem managing at a distance is you don't have all the usual queues that you would ordinarily when employees are in the office. So I see Ken has a stack of stuff that's 2ft deep on his desk. He must be very busy. All of those queues are missing. So you have to make those queues explicit in regular meetings with your boss. So again, this comes back to a psychological process about how people attribute problem. So most people probably know the fundamental attribution error, which is if you see a problem employee, we are more likely to attribute that problem to the person rather than the situation. So we say Joe is lazy as opposed to Joe is swamped with work, which is a situational explanation. So when employees are working at a distance, it further obscures all those situational explanations for why they might be having problems at work. They are overloaded, or something else is going on. All of that is going to be invisible to their remote boss. So they have to learn to make that explicit with their boss.

Ken White

That's hard for some people to do. I was talking to one of our MBAs who interned this summer, fully remote. I said, how did it go? And he said, It ended up being wonderful. But at the beginning, it was so difficult. Nobody was reaching out to him. He sort of felt he was on that island and, especially as a younger professional new to the organization, wasn't sure how to communicate. Fortunately for him, the manager did eventually reach out, and then they got the relationship. But if that manager doesn't reach out, the employees got to figure out how to communicate.

Jeanne Wilson

A hundred percent, and that's a unique and particular problem for new employees. So if you're accustomed to working for Frank, and you've worked for him for three years, going remote is not going to be such a big issue because Frank already either trusts you or doesn't trust you. But if you're a new employee, then you have to work even harder to establish that relationship. And there are two communication skills in particular that are extra important in remote work for employees. One, you might not anticipate, and that's to disclose. So some people are you probably may have noticed that some people are natural disclosures. You talk to them for five minutes, and you know all about what's going on in their lives. Those are like velcro. Those are like hooks that you can attach to and form a relationship. Other people are not accustomed or not inclined to disclose. So there aren't those velcro hooks that other people can attach to. So they need to learn how to disclose things about themselves, so other people can build a relationship with them at a distance. And, of course, that's kind of a curve linear relationship. You can disclose too much, but you probably have to disclose more working remotely than you do when you're co-located because some things about you are just going to be obvious from observation when you're co-located. Now you're going to have to make some of those things explicit.

Ken White

I can just hear the introverts saying, oh no, you got to be.

Jeanne Wilson

Okay, here's the funny thing. It turns out that introverts, especially when they're working in groups, are actually more effective remotely than they are when they're co-located. Anyway, that's a fun fact.

Ken White

That's very interesting. Yes. Well, there seems to be a lot written about introverts, the power of introverts, and it's okay to be an introvert, and you can add a great deal to a team if you're that way.

Jeanne Wilson

In a remote team without a designated leader, introverts are more likely to become a leader in a remote team than they are to become a leader in a co-located team. For reasons that are kind of technical, we don't need to go into them.

Ken White

Yeah, interesting. Right before we started to record, I said it seems like a lot of managers and leaders who are struggling with the hybrid environment or the remote environment

are a little reluctant. And you shared sort of an analogy about an airplane. Can you share that? Because I think that just nails it.

Jeanne Wilson

Yeah, the way I envision it is sort of like those show by planes where you've got a wing walker out on the plane, and he's got a grasp of one span of the wing, and he is not going to let go of that until he has kind of a firm grasp on another span. And I think what's happening is managers are unwilling to give up this old way of working or evaluating people until they feel comfortable with this new way. So we've got to get them feeling comfortable with this new way of working. Otherwise, they're going to keep managing people by how often they see them working, which is kind of an unfortunate proxy for performance.

Ken White

They've got to let go of the one handle and grab the other one.

Jeanne Wilson

Yeah, they've got to get a handle on the new one, and then they'll let go of the old one.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Jeanne Wilson. And that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program, offered in four formats the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. If you're looking for a truly transformational experience, check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Professor Jeanne Wilson. And thanks to you for listening. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Speaker

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