Managing A
Developer Team
in Remote Times

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A pivotal paradox: 6 lessons learned managing a fully remote team

> Each employee is different and each of their needs varies from the other.

A mere few months ago the majority of the world was forced to change drastically, including the move into a 'fully remote' mode of office work. As reality was bearing down upon us, tech managers and CEOs everywhere were huddled together trying to figure out how to not only make it work, but work **well**. They had to figure out the best plan of action- ensuring their employees were up for the task and that they had everything required to work from home for a seemingly indefinite amount of time. Alas, this is a difficult task as each employee is different and each of their needs varies from the other.

The changes to becoming 'fully remote' that companies are still currently dealing with have affected each employee differently, especially in terms of their individual velocity. And of course, as is the way of the world, a dev's individual velocity ultimately affects the team's velocity. When looking at individual employees and their impact on the team's velocity, there is one type of employee that stands out in particular: the pivotal employee.

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Lesson 1: Providing the basics

When we were told at Rookout that we were to begin WFH (work from home), our first reaction was to make sure that our productivity wouldn't take a hit. Our goal was to make sure that our team's velocity wouldn't slow down.

Every company has had to prepare itself somehow. Some companies have previously practiced WFH methods, while other companies had to start from scratch. Throughout the process, we noticed that companies who previously didn't allow or practice WFH for their employees had the hardest time acclimating - to the point that they were starting from the most basic step of having to buy laptops for their employees. Yet, these companies weren't the only ones scrambling to figure it out. Even companies that had allowed their employees to WFH a day or two per week had to adapt and help their employees- such as helping them to create a home office by buying them office chairs, keyboards, or mouses (for example, companies such as Shopify, Google did just this).

Regardless of where your starting position was at the beginning of these turbulent times (unless you're a company like Gitlab or ArsTechnica), you probably handled it iteratively, much like , in what I have personally dubbed as 'Maslow's Hierarchy of WFH':

On the lowest rung is your employees Physiological Needs. You must make sure that they have all their physiological office needs met, even while not in the office. These are aspects such as having a working laptop, fast internet that won't kick them off Zoom calls, and coffee that will keep them alert enough to work properly.
The next rung on the pyramid is your team's Safety Needs, such as having the correct VPN.

Right after, their Social Belonging needs to be taken care of. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as with online happy hour zoom calls or zoom coffee breaks, for instance.

Then their Self-Esteem needs have to be met. This can be done ensuring each team member gets the proper recognition for their work, even if you're not physically around to make sure they get it.

Finally, you reach Self-Actualization- like writing this blog post on working from home.
As you move up Maslow's pyramid, you keep assessing how good your team's velocity is. Throughout each level, you look around and think of how you and your team coped with this sudden and major change to becoming 'fully remote'?
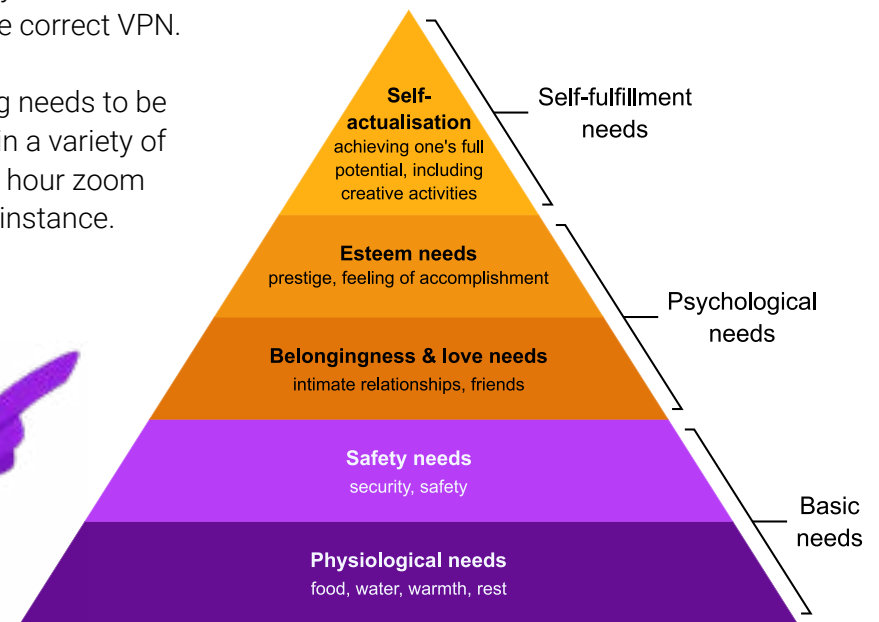
The changes to becoming 'fully remote' affected each employee differently, especially in terms of their individual velocity.

Lesson 2:
Managing to manage remotely

As VP of R&D at Rookout, managing my dev team during these distributed times was definitely a challenge. Everybody was working from home and scattered throughout different cities. As everyone was getting settled into the new fully remote routine, we underwent our own journey through Maslow's Hierarchy of WFH.

Managing remotely is difficult, especially if you're not used to it. When your job is to write code, it is mainly just you and your laptop. Sometimes, however, it is necessary to sync with your teammates and ask them questions, as well as of course syncing with your manager to understand what your tasks and goals are.

When you are managing your team, you need to make sure that no one falls by the wayside. At Rookout we believe in minimum status meetings and minimum time wasters. However, when you're not in the office, there's no more being able to casually ask your dev, "how's it going with your project?" while chit-chatting in the coffee corner, or being able to walk around to your team members and make yourself available for queries.

Some of your team will proactively pull on your coat by Slacking you or ask for a Zoom session. However, a more significant part of the team will be those devs that you'll need to Slack, call, poke, beep, fax or really do almost anything to make them talk to you (even if they desperately need your help). Basically, this means that while you're dealing with changing to a work from home workflow, you'll also have to learn how to fit your managing style differently to every employee.

Becoming a 'fully remote' company really tests your team in an extreme way.

Lesson 3:
Coping with the highs and the lows

The most frequently asked question that managers get asked by their own managers and colleagues in the last few months is "How is your team doing?" and not "How is that magic micro-service doing?" or "Where did you get that Zoom background?". They're simply trying to find out how your team is coping with their new distributed routine (or, to be exact, how you're coping with managing them).

About 10 years ago, I was talking to a friend who had just had his first baby. I asked him how things were going with the new baby and he replied with the best answer I have ever heard.
"Having a kid changes your peaks. In the past I had highs and lows- sometimes I was happy and sometimes sad. With a kid, though, everything is to the extreme - your lows are feeling like the world is crashing down and your highs are like you've conquered the world." For the past three years - since my daughter was born - I relate to this answer every day. Nowadays, when people ask me "How's your team doing?" I tell them that becoming a 'fully remote' company really tests your team in an extreme way. All the peaks change. You know that team member that you have difficulty keeping track of in normal times? Well, good luck doing that when he is WFH and has such bad Wifi to the point that you can't even see him on video. But hey, at least you're not interrupting him and he'll get some work done... right? And what about the team member that needed your help all the time and wasn't able to move forward without it? Well, let's be honest. He'll probably just live his best life watching Netflix until he manages to catch you in between your other Zoom sessions.

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Now is the time to start developing that much needed independence.

Lesson 4:
Finding your team's equilibrium

So, real talk, how is my team doing? Did the team's velocity change? Well, as Thanos says, "Everything is balanced as it should be". In an almost karmically balanced way that none of us could have foreseen, some of my team have reduced their velocity, while other team members' velocity has skyrocketed. However, the most interesting phenomenon that arose from this scenario is the pivotal devs.

You know that one dev that knows everything? I don't mean that they are the expert in everything, but rather that they know something about everything. This is the dev who knows all about the data flow in your system, why that piece of crap legacy code wasn't deleted yet, about that feature that nobody uses, how to use the CLI to everything and, if needed, they will even configure your Emacs and VIM (although they don't use them).

This is the dev that everybody turns to when they have a question. They are the Google personified of your company. Even if it will take your team 10 minutes to find an answer, they will prefer to ask this dev instead. They are the oracle, the chosen one. They are your pivot. Really, you'll sometimes even see a line forming near their desk.

How much work, though, can the pivot truly accomplish in the office? How is their velocity? Well, frankly, it's terrible. Everybody asks them questions all the time, making it so that they switch contexts like crazy. But what happens when everyone is out of the office? The pivot is at home and it isn't as easy to disturb them as it used to be.

Pivots flourish in these distributed times. They now have full focus and don't need to switch contexts non-stop. Unfortunately, this increase in productivity means that the others might start to stumble blindly in search for answers or in search of the pivot. All of a sudden you'll see a drop in the velocity of everybody else because the answers are simply more difficult to find when the pivot isn't around to give them to you.
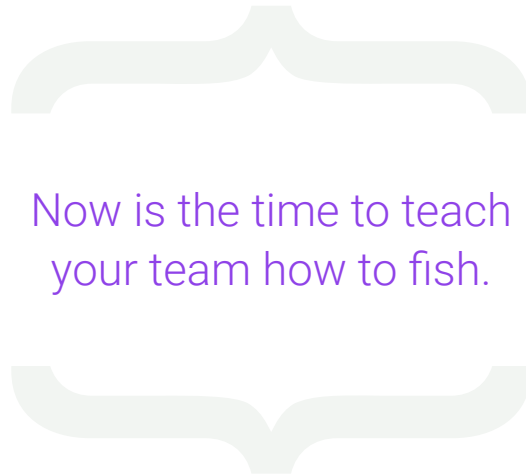
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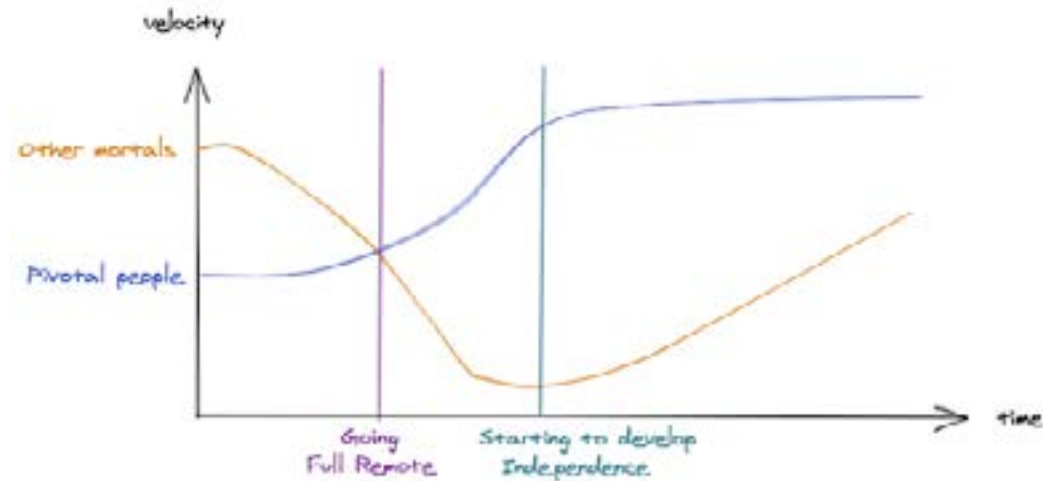
Lesson 5:
It's time for independence

The velocity drop around the pivot happened because some of the team members got too used to not being independent. Having the pivot around and available reduced the need to find the answers for themselves. Now is the time to start developing that much needed independence.

In order to reduce the impact on velocity, you must first make the pivot more available to your team and set your expectations with them. But,

you must make sure that the pivot's answers aren't "fish", but are rather "fishing rods". His answers should be links to documentations, links to tutorials, or explanations as to how he acquired his data. Now is the time to teach your team how to fish. Don't feed them. Let them feed themselves. Otherwise, when the next time the pivot isn't available they will starve. See the following (very scientific and accurate, I'll have you know) graph I doodled with the amazing Excalidraw:

But how do you teach your devs to fish? Apart from trying to have your pivot show them

where to get all the answers, of course. Well, it all boils down to ensuring that they have the right tools that help them properly understand their code. One of the major contributors to your team's reliance upon the pivot dev is their lack of understanding of the code and the software that they're working on. By giving them the ability to deep dive into the code and get the data they need to figure out what is happening in it, you'll ensure a rise in their independence. So don't worry, you and your pivot can sit back and relax at home in your pajamas, without having to worry that your devs aren't able to work properly.

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Lesson 6: Reap the fruits

Making everybody independent will increase your team's productivity and velocity. After becoming 'fully remote' I doubt you will ever go back to what it used to be. There are multiple indications in the industry that the way we work will change in the future. After you've seen what your pivotal people can achieve when your team is more independent, you will keep making sure that they have the right conditions, as well as the right tools, to flourish. And after you've seen what your team can achieve when they are focused on being independent, you will never allow any dependence to develop again. Either way, whether your company returns to business as usual or changes its day to day, you'll come back stronger than ever.

Onboarding In Full Remote

When taking a look at how we had to change the way we work, going from seeing everyone in the company almost everyday into a fully remote mode, several challenges are apparent. I've written about some of the lessons I learned in having to manage my team remotely. My main concern, and I believe the concern of most managers, is making sure we're staying on track. Our company is a train moving forward at high speed and we need to make sure it keeps going forward at the same speed without falling off the tracks. I've received several points of feedback about my previous blog post, mostly from other tech managers, and most of the feedback was centered on coping with new employees. My colleagues' concern was the fact that they know how to keep that train running at full speed but are hesitant in making sure that they can get new employees to jump on that train.

Growing in uncertain times

The first thing to note is that the hiring process has changed. It is different in two aspects: how you recruit and who you recruit. The good news here is that your pool of candidates is now bigger than ever. Since your team is now anyways fully remote, you are no longer confined by geographical limits. Since no one is physically working in the office, you can hire that talent from Australia or Brazil. You can interview and hire candidates who live far away from where you're based. In essence, the world is your oyster.

However, interviews have now become more of a challenge, as you won't be able to meet the candidate in person and everything will probably be via a video conference meeting. It takes time to get accustomed to skipping the face to face interview, though there are many advantages to conducting all the interviews by way of a video meeting. You'll be able to record all the interviews, get the next interviewers better prepared for the interview, and be able to rewatch the interview in case you want to revisit your thoughts.

With that being said, I believe the most important thing to note is properly preparing for the interview. Ask the candidate to use a front facing camera, make sure he/she uses a computer and not a phone, and prepare the tools you'll be using ahead of time (whiteboard tools, presentations, demos, etc).

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Surviving the onboarding

If you try to methodically define the employee's lifecycle, the first stage that they will experience is 'survival'. Survival is the part in which he/she starts working in a new company and needs to show his skills, pick up new skills, and learn how to 'get things done' in your company.

Surprise surprise though- learning how to get things done for a new employee in a fully remote setting isn't that different than in non-remote settings. Make sure the new employee has a buddy, a mentor, a go-to-guy- or whatever your company calls it. Have that mentor walk the new employee through the maze of his new position, shadowing him a lot at first, and gradually showing him the ropes. Things can get a bit tricky because communicating remotely isn't that easy, but setting a regularly timed meeting can make things easier. Or, try a "what we learned today", where they sum up everyday together. Not only is it practical, but guaranteed your employees will be super close by the end of it.

What is often forgotten in the 'survival' stage is where they learn 'how things work' in your new place of work. And that's not a part of 'getting things done'. This is the part that includes the "how and where do we eat lunch?", "can I talk to the CEO directly?", "how socially acceptable is it to drink 3 coffees before lunch?", and "who is supposed to give me permissions to this system?". Now, in fully remote settings, we get a whole new bucket of 'how things work'. And that bucket includes "how do I communicate with people?", "is it ok to Slack call out of nowhere without a proper warning?", "how available am I supposed to be when I'm working from home", and well...the list goes on.

If we miss out on the fully remote section of 'how things work', then that new hire will be lost. He will probably be in constant fear about whether he is communicating enough or over communicating with his managers and colleagues. I'm guessing that looking ahead, in a few months or maybe in a year, most new hires will have that 'fully remote muscle' already trained and ticking. But, by the time everybody knows what 'fully remote' means, we will need to invest a lot of time in teaching them how it is supposed to work.

It is time to make sure your team- and especially your new employees - understand the goal and vision.

When fun, games, and perks aren't enough

Remember the time that your employees stayed in the office for hours and didn't want to go home? They stayed because it was fun and they enjoyed being there. Most companies try to make their office the employee's second home (or sometimes it goes so well that it becomes their first home), from a fridge full of beers, endless food, to a gaming console. Some of the big ones even give laundry services and errand runners. The list of perks grows longer and always manages to surprise me.

Well, as of now, all of this doesn't matter. Those beers won't age well in the fridge and the gaming console might be obsolete with a newer version by the time you return to the office. But it's important to note that the dominant factor that caused your employees to stay longer in the office wasn't all of these. It's because your employees had a tight social bond with their teammates, which made everything tick. They (gasp!) actually enjoyed spending time with one another. Coffee in the morning, eating lunch and dinner together, drinking beer together when smashing bugs - that's all the fun for them. This bond helped your team work better. When everyone knows each other, and more importantly likes each other, they do the job not only for the company but for each other.

Getting the new hire into the company's vibe and making him socially accepted is another challenge. This is quite a tough one when you can't even eat lunch together (and eating lunch together via Zoom is quite lame, if we're all being honest here).

> In times of uncertainty it is imperative to have a clear vision for the company and the team.

Goal and Vision

How can we compensate for the loss of the office that brings everyone together? How can the new employees wiggle their way into that tight social bond that your veteran team has? Unfortunately, I don't think there is a magic recipe, though you can try to make it happen with always open Zoom rooms, online happy hours and the like. But let's be real- it's not the real thing.

I think this is the time to get back to basics and invest your time as manager into the roots of team (or company) motivators. Your new employees won't do the job 'for the team', because they don't know them and will probably have a hard time getting to know them. You want your employees to do the job 'for the company' and 'for the goal'. If, in the past, your company's goal or company's vision wasn't clear and the social bonds compensated for them, well, this time you can't get away with it. It is time to make sure your team- and especially your new employees - understand the goal and vision. Regardless of working fully remote, in times of uncertainty it is imperative to have a clear vision for the company and the team.

The "Why"

A good measure of success with setting goals and visions is to ask your employees 'Why'. Ask them why they are doing what they are doing. For your veteran employees, that answer might be 'because it's fun to work with all of my friends' and that might be enough for the short term. However, for the long term and for new employees, that answer should be aligned with your company's goal and vision. A good reference on the 'Why' and its importance is discussed in Simon Sinek's book Start With Why (or if you're short on time check out his TED talk).

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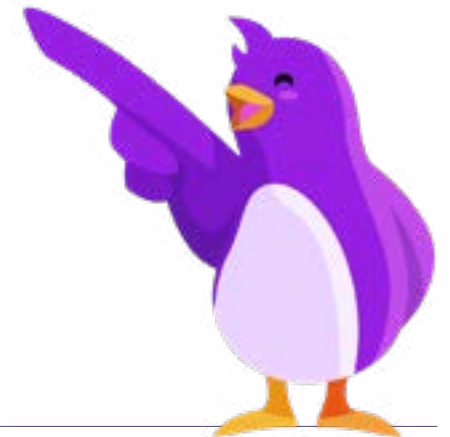
> Now, in times of great change, you must bring out and use the entire arsenal of your managing toolbox.

Talk Talk Talk

The last tip I wish to share is about talking. You probably already know your current employees to the point that you can identify a sad or a worried face on them or be able to identify a sarcastic tone when they write via chat. When it comes to your new guys, it will take time to get to know them as well as you know the rest of the team.

The only way to get to know them, is to talk with them as much as you can. However, when speaking with them, don't focus solely on their tasks. Instead, speak with them about how their weekend was or how they're dealing with the fact that their barbershop is closed. Talking with them about their personal life and engaging in as much small talk as you can will earn you two important things:

1. It gets them to open up and have them understand that they can talk to their manager about anything. By opening the floor to talk about their pet's medical issues, it can also open up the floor for them to talk about their challenges at work.

2. It helps you, as their manager, to better understand how they handle and react to challenges. By getting to know them, you're better equipped to be able to identify their bad mood when they get a task they hate or can't handle. Hiring new employees isn't just about having them to do their job. It's about being a part of the team, a part of the family. And that's what a family does - they talk about everything.

Nothing new under the sun

As you've been reading through this article so far, you might have found yourself saying "Well, duh, isn't all of this quite obvious?". Well, yeah. I didn't invent anything new. But regardless of this, all of these methods and tips should be practiced even when you're not fully remote. In the past, you might have neglected some of them because everything went smoothly. However it is now, in times of great change, that you must bring out and use the entire arsenal of your managing toolbox. Because as we know, the proper tools are key.

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