Practical leadership guidelines for remote teamwork, decisions and culture

Sharing the lessons which have shaped Entelect's thinking and approach towards
operating remote teams, promoting fluid communication,
staying productive, and keeping team culture alive.

possibilities

Remote conversations

Working from home (WFH) comes with its own challenges, and is another skill that we all should endeavour to learn and master. This chapter shares some experience and insights into how we keep our teams talking and engaging as efficiently as possible in a remote world.
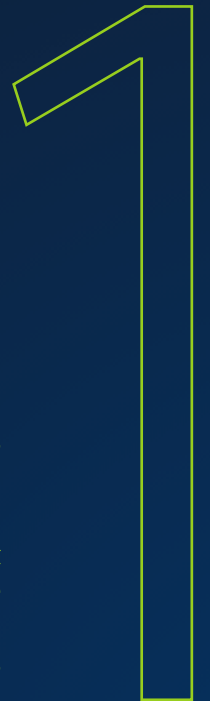
How to run productive remote meetings and eliminate the time overhead

How to prevent encroachment of your team's work-day into personal time

Why you need to focus on supporting non-technical roles

How to run productive remote meetings and eliminate the time overhead

Embracing the best-practices and setting the right example for remote meeting culture will ensure that all meetings are productive.

Make sure you are WFH-ready

In order to work from home, you first need to be prepared for work from home. Ensure you have the following prepped at your remote workstation:

— Decent battery life and backup power

— VPN access to your email, servers, tools and systems

— A stable internet connection (and mobile backup for emergencies)

— A functional audio-visual setup

— Headphones/earphones

— A comfortable workspace which is quiet enough for remote calls

Establish a remote operating procedure

We recommend that every team takes the time to define their remote operating procedure, which outlines the following:

— When teams meet and what they meet for

— Notifications and availability standards

— How to get help and from who

— How to hold each other accountable

— Who takes ownership of traditional team rituals and tasks
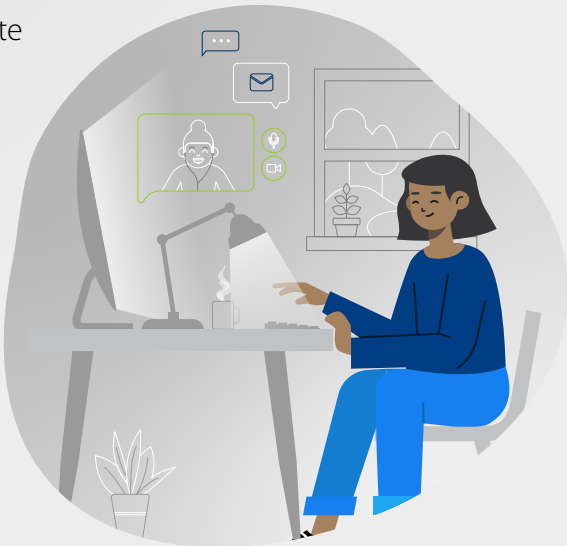
Choose the right communication medium

The hallway-conversations we're used to can't become diarised meetings. We've learned to prevent calendars being filled with excessive meetings by selecting the most appropriate communication tool for the purpose.

Video calls	*Voice chat rooms*	*Phone calls*	*Instant messaging*	*Email*
Scheduled meetings	Daily stand-ups	Urgent matters requiring escalation or instant feedback	Work coordination	Formal communication
Conversations which require screen sharing or collaboration	Ad hoc team discussions		Asynchronous team chats	Communication for reference
	'Hallway' conversations and quick questions		Fun and off-topic chatter	

When there is something urgent, use whichever communication mechanism you know the person or team prefers.

Remote meeting etiquette

We recognise team meetings are beneficial to keep everyone aligned but it's easy to stray off topic. To help you keep your meetings productive and professional, here are some guidelines for virtual meeting etiquette:

Preparation	*Ground rules*	*Administration*
Reduce any unnecessary meetings before optimising how to run crucial ones. If you can make any non-critical executive decision yourself, then do so	Have one nominated person chair and control the meeting	Consider having a minute-taker present, and circulate action points afterwards
Make sure your home equipment is set up before the meeting	Start on time. Avoid starting early to help those who are in back-to-back meetings	Don't allow too many side-quests. Stay focussed on the purpose of the meeting
If bandwidth allows, keep cameras on during the meeting to aid with body language	Give everybody a turn to speak. Remote meetings make it easier for participants to be side-lined	Figure out when to make a decision and move on, or when to allow debate
Have a prepared agenda for the *few* key decisions that need to be made	Have an agreed upon way of taking turns speaking if there are many people on the call, such as "raising hand" feature on Zoom	Try to avoid large consensus decision-making meetings
	Everybody should remain muted other than the person speaking	

How to prevent encroachment of your team's work-day into personal time

WFH can blur the lines between work and home life, and so we need to establish a responsible daily routine to help the people in our teams continue to be productive in a sustainable way:

Set working hours

Decide on a clear start and end to your workday (and try to align this with the rest of your team)

Down time is important. Take time off, even if you're not going away

Take breaks

Plan how many breaks you need and when you will take them

Align breaks for sections of the team and schedule no meetings for then, e.g. have lunch between 12pm and 1pm

Manage a to-do list

Start each day by planning your feasible must-do tasks and get them done!

If you foresee that you won't meet a deadline, keep your team informed

Set boundaries

Put boundaries in place regarding when and how you deal with personal matters during the work day

Set practical rules for team comms after hours and over weekends

Why you need to focus on supporting non-technical roles

*The developers, technologists and tinkerers in our teams are usually content with working in isolation. On the other hand, the analysts, scrum masters, product owners, subject-matter specialists and others in our teams who may be in less technical roles have a disproportionately **harder time being as effective as they're used to.***

Those who are comfortable in the remote work style should make the effort to **proactively support and engage** with the rest of the team who are in unfamiliar territory.

This means as IT teams, **we need to be extra available and responsive**. We need to be sharing frequent status updates, using the status indicator in our tools diligently, and **responding quickly to queries with positive language.**

Useful tools

We've put together a selection of tools and ideas we've successfully used across our various teams at Entelect. If you're looking for ideas to help solve specific frustrations, experiment with these and adopt what works.

Team alignment

Other useful tools:

Real-time communication —
Collaborating —
Company meetings —
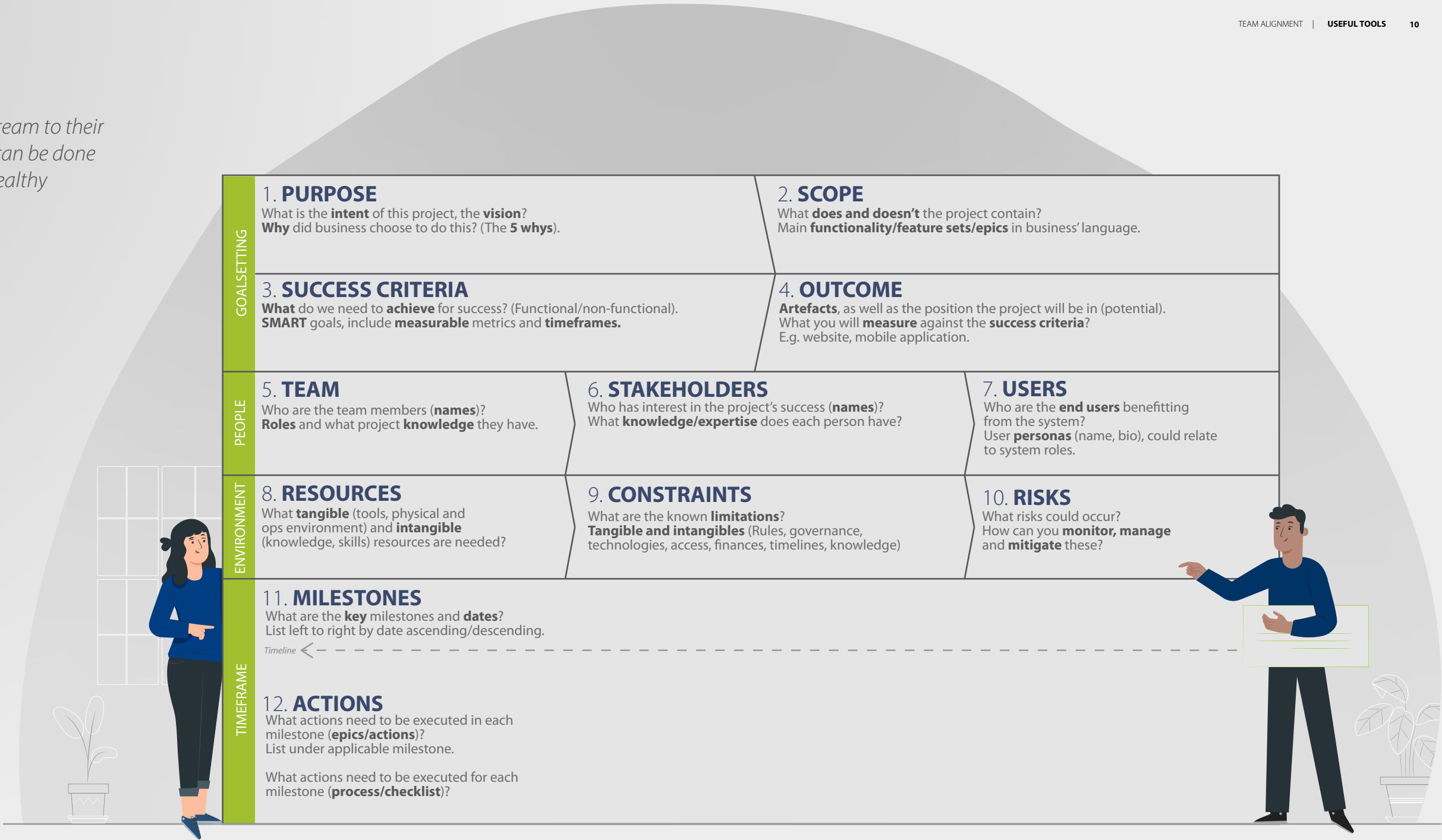Social and culture —
Training —

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Team alignment

A Project Canvas is a great way to reconnect a team to their purpose, business drivers, actions and ideas. It can be done remotely with great success, and promotes a healthy conversation about priorities.

You can download our template here.

Let us help you

Get in touch if you'd like some guidance in creating a Project Canvas for your team.

GOALSETTING

1. PURPOSE
What is the **intent** of this project, the **vision**?
Why did business choose to do this? (The **5 whys**).

2. SCOPE
What **does and doesn't** the project contain?
Main **functionality/feature sets/epics** in business' language.

3. SUCCESS CRITERIA
What do we need to **achieve** for success? (Functional/non-functional).
SMART goals, include **measurable** metrics and **timeframes.**

4. OUTCOME
Artefacts, as well as the position the project will be in (potential).
What you will **measure** against the **success criteria**?
E.g. website, mobile application.

PEOPLE

5. TEAM
Who are the team members (**names**)?
Roles and what project **knowledge** they have.

6. STAKEHOLDERS
Who has interest in the project's success (**names**)?
What **knowledge/expertise** does each person have?

7. USERS
Who are the **end users** benefitting from the system?
User **personas** (name, bio), could relate to system roles.

ENVIRONMENT

8. RESOURCES
What **tangible** (tools, physical and ops environment) and **intangible** (knowledge, skills) resources are needed?

9. CONSTRAINTS
What are the known **limitations**?
Tangible and intangibles (Rules, governance, technologies, access, finances, timelines, knowledge)

10. RISKS
What risks could occur?
How can you **monitor, manage** and **mitigate** these?

TIMEFRAME

11. MILESTONES
What are the **key** milestones and **dates**?
List left to right by date ascending/descending.

Timeline ← –

12. ACTIONS
What actions need to be executed in each milestone (**epics/actions**)?
List under applicable milestone.

What actions need to be executed for each milestone (**process/checklist**)?

Other useful tools

Finding the best technology and tools for working remotely can make all the difference. No matter where you work, communication is key. These are the tools we've been using to collaborate, communicate and keep our culture strong.

★ *We've marked the tools we believe are the best in each category, and which Entelect has had the most success with.*

Real-time communication

There are a variety of tools available for the daily synchronous to-and-fro communication. We have been using the below across the different modes of communication.

Video calling
Select the tool that fits your business based on existing access, costs and use cases.

- ★ Zoom
- Microsoft Teams
- Skype for Business
- Google Hangouts

Voice chat
Use this as a replacement for the feeling of an open plan office.

- ★ Discord
- TeamSpeak

Instant messaging
Use these for more relaxed conversations or when you need short, instant replies.

- ★ Slack
- WhatsApp
- Telegram

Collaborating

Integration is key, and team members working remotely need the right online collaboration tools that bring together features such as instant messaging, video calls, screen sharing, and time tracking to help them get the job done.

Project collaboration and management

- ★ Microsoft Teams
- ★ Microsoft OneNote
- Trello
- Google G Suite (Google Docs, Sheets and Slides)

Whiteboarding

- ★ Miro
- Apple Pencil + screen sharing
- Excalidraw
- Awwapp
- Invision

Company meetings

- ★ Zoom Webinar
- ★ Slido
- GoTo Meeting

Issue tracking and pull-requests

Individuals in engineering teams use source code repositories throughout their day. Beyond managing code, repository platforms also offer features for voting on code commits, issues and ideas. This can accelerate decisions and allow for consensus to be formed remotely.

- Azure DevOps
- Jira
- Bitbucket
- Github
- Gitlab

Social and culture

Keeping the culture alive throughout the business and teams is crucial for employees' morale. These tools are a bit more informal, and should be used for socialising and team building.

- ★ Workplace
- Playing Cards
- Jack Box Party Pack
- Houseparty
- Donut
- Skribbl.io

Training

Many of the major online learning institutes are having sales on their courses during these social distancing periods. Our teams at Entelect have been using their downtime to upskill using the below platforms.

- ★ Pluralsight
- ★ Udemy
- Udacity
- Coursera
- Khan Academy
- LinkedIn Learning: Lynda
- edX
- Stanford Online

Leadership decision-making during a crisis

Leadership roles and responsibilities have drastically changed and will most likely continue to do so. This chapter focuses on making decisions, remaining transparent, and facing challenges while having spontaneous conversations.

Decisions made quickly

Buy-in via transparency

Adapt towards opportunity

Spontaneous conversation

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A Decision-Making Manifesto

While there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more.

Decisions made quickly / over decisions made with precision

The swiftness of your decision-making will make a difference in the results, as will the quality of them.

Limit consensus seeking to get best results. Trust your gut, and when you need to correct, do so quickly.

Buy-in via transparency / over buy-in via consultation

Wherever possible, short-circuit discussions to only relevant people, those affected or those who should be consulted.

Right now, the best way to get buy-in from people you've excluded in decision-making in order to act quickly is to be more transparent than ever about how the decision was made and why.

Adapt towards opportunity / over only mitigating risk

Every crisis represents both challenge and opportunity. Mitigate the challenges, but capitalise on the opportunities too.

If you're not finding opportunity in the crisis, you're not doing your job.

Spontaneous conversation / over scheduled calls and meetings

It needs to be okay to be interrupted. Stop treating video calls as "big meetings" and associating it with a formal event.

Sometimes, all it takes is a 30 second, 5 minute or 15 minute discussion to solve a business problem.

Decisions made quickly / over decisions made with precision

Use the triangulation principle of getting input from the 2-3 most credible people, and taking the middle point of the agreement, as fast as possible. Roll these decisions out to the rest of the teams.

Waiting to decide is a decision itself and you should try to avoid unnecessary decision-making delays.

Own problems. Don't waste time on trying to figure out who is 'technically responsible' for issues. Everyone in leadership should pick up and take ownership of whatever they can help with. Encourage this behaviour in your senior team.

Buy-in via transparency / over buy-in via consultation

Employees will need assurance that leadership is being proactive and transparent.

The best way to get buy-in from people excluded from decision-making processes is to give frequent updates to your teams on decisions that are made.

Explain to those who are not involved *why and how* decisions are being made and agreements are reached.

Adapt towards opportunity / over only mitigating risk

You suddenly have to make high-impact decisions that will have both short- and long-term consequences.
Go with your gut.

Environments will change rapidly and so will the impact on your organisation. Set frequent checkpoints to review your plans and measures appropriately.

Understand your standard rulebook may need to change, even dramatically, to achieve the best results for your organisation. Challenge the entrenched mindset, strategy and tactics.

Spontaneous conversation / over scheduled calls and meetings

Promote a flexible schedule and become interactive

— Leadership gets into the habit of scheduling their days, weeks in a particular way. Scheduling needs to be more flexible to allow on-the-spot conversations.

— Use the freed up time from having less meetings to reserve calendar time for these spontaneous conversations.

— Be responsive and available by checking your channels regularly. Executives need to role model this behaviour.

— Schedules that previously relied on "corridor" or "desk time" for quick decisions now have to be replaced by calls or IM conversations for spontaneous input.

Individual decision-making is now more important than ever

— Right now, the fastest way to save time in meetings is to make decisions yourself.

— Don't shy away from your responsibility to make a judgement call by hiding behind consensus.

— Delegate authority and encourage independent thinking within a provided framework.

A decision-making scale

As importance of decision-making increases, fewer people, a single channel and more synchronous communication is required to make quicker decisions.

Synchronous communication channels lend themselves better to spontaneous conversation.
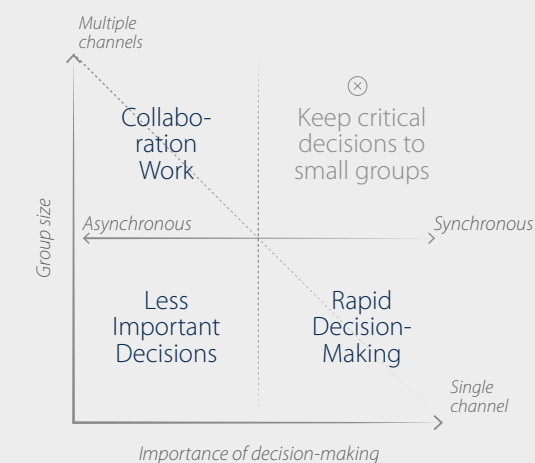
Staying productive

When projects and capex are reigned in during a crisis, how do you keep your people productive and adding value amidst uncertainty? How do you keep teams motivated, inspired and growing while ensuring you continue to create value.

Accelerate and over-deliver

Encourage cross-skilling

Innovate and create opportunities

Learn and upskill

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Capitalise on spare capacity and time

Numbered in order of importance and value, a combination of these tactics can be used to build a strategy to ensure you can adapt and build value despite a slow-down in project work and budget

01 Accelerate and over-deliver

Accelerate initiatives by adding spare capacity to projects that are under way. You could finish projects early, but ride out the crisis enough that there is little or no efficiency lost by running projects over capacity for several months. This takes proportionally extra care and energy from leadership on these projects, but is also the most effective use of capacity if done correctly.

Over-deliver - use extra hands to add an added layer of quality to your projects. This can be achieved through polish, features or performance. A long-term investment that will be recognised by your customers and pay dividends in the future.

A **roadmap** could also be partially accelerated in this way, if spare capacity was able to pull planned future projects out of sequence and start working on them earlier.

04 Learn and upskill

Maximise on otherwise lost time by allowing teams to **grow themselves in preparation for future projects**. There are many options available for short-term and high impact skills development courses.

This doesn't work well for protracted time periods, but can be an effective addition to a **combined strategy**.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, many major online learning institutes are having sales on their courses during these social distancing periods.
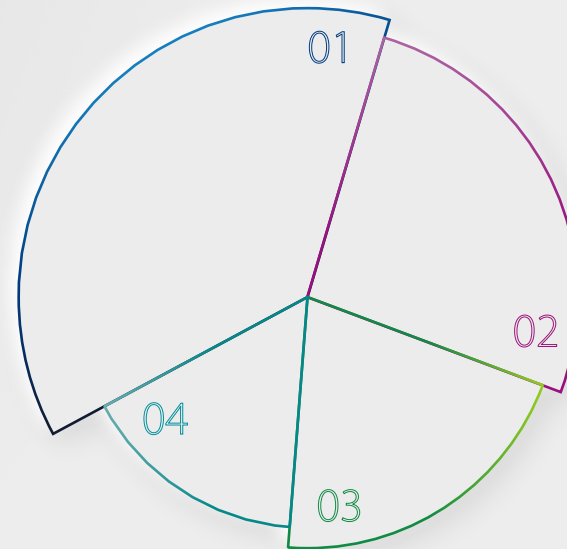
02 Innovate and create opportunities

Now is a great time to innovate, change and **make your environment more resilient**, more modern and more stable. Fix the glaring technical issues that have been deprioritised to your "if we have time" backlog.

Consider offering your team's expertise to other business units to **build relationship capital**, and help other areas of the business which may be under more pressure to deliver.

You should be encouraging teams to **focus on experiments** that couldn't get priority, test different methodologies, team setups, practices and culture innovation, or small product ideas which need to be taken to a minimum viable product stage to test the market.

Create business opportunities by using the sunk cost of capacity to try **secure longer term relationships**, or close sales opportunities by taking the short-term impact (which would be borne anyway) to build relationships.

03 Encourage cross-skilling

When under market pressure, the businesses that are able to adapt are usually the ones that survive and succeed. Most **people's talents reach outside of their current role**, and most businesses will have a shifting demand picture which could benefit from a versatile workforce.

You might be surprised at the willingness of individuals and teams to support the business by **rapidly learning** and stepping into different roles for the organisation.

Redirect your **most versatile resources** to areas with the most demand.

Recognise them and **reward them**. This is life-saving behaviour for the company.

For many people, this is an exciting **opportunity to learn new skills** and spend some time diversifying experience, and doesn't take much convincing.