



whitepaper

A Covid way of working

by Gijs Blijdenstein



in this whitepaper

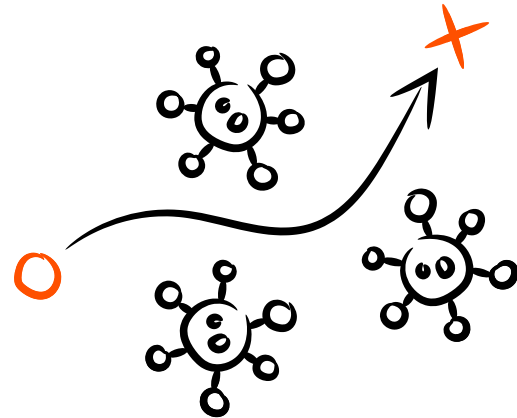
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our vision



Let's Embrace Change.



This timeless phrase is the vision Incentro has been promoting for years. But with Covid-19 and its impact on our way of working, it has become a necessity. With a 1.5 metre-distance society becoming the reality at work and with projects that are being postponed, how do you start? What do you need to consider?

Moving existing workplace processes online won't suffice. You need to think about how you're going to adapt a remote culture and shape your processes around this. We would like to share with you some of the insights we have gained while working together remotely and will explain to you some of our tried and tested solutions.



A few weeks remote-working situation is quickly turning into a couple of months. All indications are that we will be working in a 1.5 metre-distance society for the next couple of years, which means that remote working will be common for the time being.

Everyone is experimenting in new ways of working to accommodate this, and so are we. In the past, the Agile Community within Incentro has facilitated thousands of stand-ups, refinements, retro's, workshops, ideation sessions, courses, program increment events and scrum-of-scrums... to name a few. We always preferred face-to-face meetings, whether they were with a team or one-on-one. So, working remotely has been a tough challenge, but we've done it. Trust us when we say:

"It starts with trust."

Gijs Blijdestein agile expert & delivery manager



Trust in peers should be priority number one for all stakeholders, product owners and team members. Trust is a vital, defining principle in teamwork and it will be tested on many fronts in a remote situation. Normally you could walk up to your coworkers and check up on their process or peer-program on screens side-by-side. These methods were quick and easy. But no longer possible. This crisis requires even more faith that everybody is doing their best. Everybody is pushing towards a common goal.

From that trust you can start building your new way of working. We've broken down the essentials into three topics to help you achieve the way of working remotely:

people
tooling
process



people



Going remote is a culture shift

The most important thing about going remote with a team, is the people you work with. Tooling and processes are only important in service of you, me and the team. Going remote is a culture shift. This means that you cannot take your offline processes, rituals and culture and go online. You need to pivot. Accepting this is a vital part of working remotely, for you, and the people you work with.

You could successfully guide this culture shift focussing on the following:

Be human
Over communicate
Mention emotions

Be practical
Personal time
Have fun



○ Be human

The obvious one, but it is extra important in a remote setting since it needs extra attention. As a quick 'how are you' at the coffee machine isn't available, try to digitally check in with people more often. For instance by doing some 1-on-1 follow-ups after meetings. Find out if people are really doing okay. And listen to what is being said or written down and what is not.

○ Over communicate

Over communicate and do it regularly. Make sure the person you're communicating with is actually listening, and check for triggers on when and how to use your leadership and whether the right tone is being struck. Don't underestimate the value of people connecting with each other. Open a channel and let people banter and make jokes while doing work that requires low focus.

○ Mention emotions

If you register emotions, speak them out. Feelings are very much present in these times, and they're ever-evolving. Mentioning them will help your team feel heard and understood. It will strengthen the bond.

○ Personal time

Give room for personal time, encourage it actively. When private life and work collide at home you and your team will need some space to take care of themselves. Let everybody plan their own days and give yourself room to exercise or be creative if that is what you need. Remember trust your team that they will fulfill their role and complete their tasks.

○ Have fun

Host digital lunch sessions and host a virtual happy hour and provide the drinks. Spend time away from work together with your colleagues. Cook a meal together-apart by sending everybody a recipe beforehand. Play a online game or host a Black Stories slack channel. Make it low key and optional but keep doing it!

○ Be practical

Yes, it's important to be honest, optimistic and vulnerable. But you also have the responsibility to focus on sustaining the business.



tooling



Tooling has improved dramatically in the last couple of years. Digital alternatives to office spaces are the reason we can work from home. But be aware of tunnel vision when it comes to tooling. As mentioned before, people come first, and the tools to make working remotely possible are simply a means to an end. Now that we've gotten that out of the way, here are some of our tried and tested suggestions.

**Instant Messaging: Slack**

Slack is hands down the best option.

**Video Conferencing: Google Meet**

We use [Google Meet](#) and it works wonders. The only bottleneck is your own network speed.

**Digital Whiteboard: Miro or Jamboard**

A digital whiteboard makes all the difference. It is a great communication tool and helps with keeping focus when working remotely. We have used Miro for Program Increment Planning sessions with over 60 people! Jamboard is great success for quick brainstorming sessions with teams.

be aware of
tunnel vision



Collaboration: Google Docs, Screen.so or Notion

Google Drive! The best way to collaborate in documents, presentations and spreadsheets. Notion is also a great way to share information across teams. We are only starting to use it but it has great potential. The same counts for Screen.so, some of our developers have been using it for peer programming and the reactions are great.



Retrospective: Retrium / reetro.io

These are just two tools that we have used and from which we are getting really good responses from our development teams. They work perfectly, check them out!

Setting up a right stack for your organization is key here! Experiment with our suggestions, search for different tools and see what fits you. There are so many options, and we know just a fraction of them.

The only other tooling tip we have is: don't forget your hardware. Think about a good desk setup: chair, laptop stand and an extra monitor really helps. For a facilitator two good monitors are a must have: Hangouts open on one screen, Miro on the other and use the last monitor to write down your notes or to share a presentation. And don't forget them good old Post It's and Pens! Even at your home office they are a must have.



process

In the middle is where the hard work gets done

Let's not fool ourselves, things are going to get messy. That's alright though. Kanter's Law states that: "Everybody loves great beginnings and happy endings, but in the middle, everything looks like a failure." And you know why that is? Because in the middle is where the hard work gets done. So, regarding the process, think about the following...



Schedule everything
Rituals
Keep it small
Keep it simple
Plan smart
Move
Facilitate



Schedule everything

Plan at least a week ahead, and stick to the schedule. This is a general tip for working effectively, but the current situation demands effective use of your time. Your schedule is holy, so take your time to create it and then be disciplined in following it.

Rituals

Establish them fast. This is part of textbook scrum and it is incredibly valuable. When working remotely you don't have a common space. Rituals help to keep you and your colleagues in touch with each other. This could be a stand-up with your team every morning, or maybe a weekly 'Ask Me Anything' session with the management team. Determine what is needed per team and plan it!

Keep it small

Large meetings are sometimes a necessity, but generally also a waste... Even more so when working remotely. We'd rather keep it small: small teams, small meetup's, small focus groups.

Keep it simple

Simplicity--the art of estimating a maximum amount of work that's finished at the end of the day--is essential. You are NOT in a 'business as usual' mode. Be critical about what you can and cannot accomplish at the moment (and communicate about it). Maybe even take advantage of the situation and push through some of those things you've wanted to do for ages.

Plan smart

When planning rituals or meetings you need to keep two things in mind. First of all leave space between meetings, as this gives some breathing room and allows people to walk around for a bit before diving back in. Secondly, pick one day a week during which no meetings are held: a meeting-free day. This is the day that people can do some uninterrupted focus work.

Move

When you're in an office with other people you automatically move around more: you walk to somebody to ask a question, you do a walking meeting when the sun is out or grab that cup of coffee around the corner with somebody. When working remotely you do this less. So take the time to move about. Even better, plan it into your schedule (remember the first bullet?). Go for a bikeride or a run, do yoga, meditate or work in your garden.



Facilitate

I can't stress this enough: it's critical to have someone who's only goal in a (virtual) meeting is to track non-verbal cues, to notice who is talking and who is not, to guide the meeting process so that goals are achieved in an efficiently and effective manner. A couple of good practices for when facilitating or participating in virtual meetings are:

- Define two agenda's: one for the participants and one more detailed agenda for the facilitator. Take the time to do this. Good workshops are the results of good preparation and good preparation takes time.
- Be self-aware in the meetings. How much 'virtual space' are you taking? Are you dominating the group or are you not involved? Adjust so that everybody can participate.
- Pause to ask if everybody understands what you are saying. Ask this explicitly.
- Give people time to process information that is being given. When organizing long meetings schedule in breathers so people can process and move about.
- Divide into pairs rather than teams. This just works better in an online environment.
- Introduce Ground Rules for how to act in the meeting. Using Hand signals is especially great (see next page). Not only do they facilitate the flow of the meeting, they keep people focussed and alert, and seeing a whole team doing number 10 is just plain fantastic.

When you are finished for the day, 'leave work'. Be explicit to your teammates that you're signing off and that you will talk to them tomorrow. This psychological leaving helps loads in transitioning, especially when working from home.



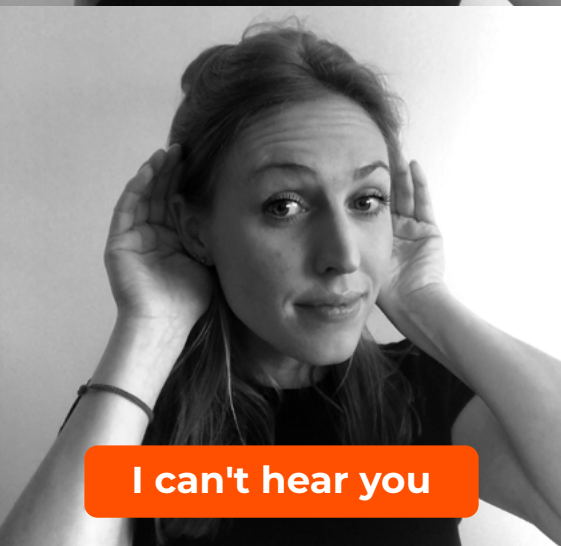
No, not me



I quit



I really like this idea



I can't hear you

We successfully use hand signals it with our client Winc Academy. Their entire business model is about working and learning remotely.

1. **Raising a finger:** I want to go next. If someone else has their finger raised already, raise two, etc.
2. **Raise your pinky:** I have a technical remark/ constraint about this discussion
3. **Make a cross with your two index fingers:** No, not me
4. **Make an "O" with your hand:** I have an opinion that I need to share now
5. **A flat hand full in front of the camera:** I quit
6. **Make a scissor movement with your fingers:** we're going off topic / let's cut this discussion
7. **Two hands over your eyes:** I'm lost / I don't understand what we are on about
8. **Thumbs up:** I really like this idea
9. **Tap your forehead:** stupid idea
10. **Devil horns:** I'm having a good time/we are in the flow!!
11. **Grasp your own hands:** Agree
12. **Two hands behind your ears:** I can't hear you
13. **Make a gun with your hand and put it to your temple:** good idea, but...



conclusion



Get out of this stronger by embracing a new way of working.

The main conclusion is that, although there are some new challenges for working with teams and customers, they can be overcome. Provide good tooling that has been embraced by the whole team, and think about the proper processing and facilitation for your situation to make it possible.

However, the people you work with and especially the trust you put in them will make all the difference. It is time to experiment: shift some processes, try out different tooling and evaluate, and engage with your colleagues. Use this time for focus: take advantage of less distraction and increased freedom to do things your way. Who knows, you might just get out of this stronger by embracing a new Way of Working.

The people you work with and especially the trust you put in them will make all the difference.

These are just some of the insights that the Agile Community of Incentro has gained. If you have any questions about the suggestions being made, or would like some help in implementing these suggestions, don't hesitate to reach to our agile coach Gijs Blijdenstein at +31 20 409 04 44 or gijs.blijdenstein@incentro.com



References:

Big shout out to Nobl and their Change at Work webinar. They confirmed many of the insights we had. Do read their roundup [here](#) if you have the time.