

[Dominic Price – Work Futurist, Atlassian] I think for business leaders thinking about employee experience, firstly: great! It's the right thing to be worried about. The balance is a tricky one, you've got to care deeply about your customers, right? They're your lifeblood. You've got to care deeply about your employees, because you need them to deliver to your customers. And so, the reality is, first of all, accepting that we are in a crisis, and just acknowledging that this is really hard times. In some ways, it's a great leveller because we're all in the same crisis. In other ways, it's a great differentiator because everyone experiences this differently.

I think the challenge here is not to be robotic. I think the best leaders that I'm seeing right now are tapping into that real empathy, the real vulnerability. The real humility of going: these are humans and this this desire to think that we're all working from home and everyone's productive – it's not real, right? We're not working from home, we're at home working. This is a forced situation, there's bizarre constraints in place. And so actually maybe the bar we've historically had – around thriving, around having an amazingness and awesome culture, maybe the bar's now surviving. And we have to have some honest conversations around what that means: to keep people employed, to keep people busy and working, and effective, but also to focus on the things that are really important like family, community, mental health, wellness, all the things that we sometimes take for granted.

I think you're going to get challenged in these times, and for any leader who can focus on those and do so authentically, I think they'll get outsized results for their customers and their employees.

HEADING: Sharing Atlassian's experience of working during the coronavirus lockdown

So, at Atlassian, we consider ourselves extremely fortunate, right? We were not prepared for a pandemic, but we've been prepared for distributed teams and remote work for a long time. And we've had a good percentage of our workforce be remote. We spread across many offices, and we've collaborated across those offices for years.

The interesting thing was that the tooling side of the change was seamless for us. We were so prepared for that. But the bit that's been harder for us, where we've had to put more effort, are the practices – the human-to-human connection. So, we've always had both the Atlassian toolset with JIRA and Confluence – great for distributed teams. We're big users of Zoom and Slack, perfect! So, you're like: "Oh, we're set up for remote work!"

Until you flick that switch and realize the behaviours on a human level, of being in a remote situation, are very different. You lose that human interaction; you lose that physical touch. And so, we've been focusing on: what are the remote practices, the ways of working that help amplify not just our teamwork, but our team cohesion and our team connection? So, what are the ways of not just finding ways of making people more productive – which is kind of cool – but also more creative, more empathetic? What are the communication channels and the frequency we need to use to keep people aware, and keep that openness and transparency? And then how do we get fun back into the workplace, because it's still important for people to enjoy what they do?

A few weeks ago, we did a painting class – 20 of our senior leaders together on Zoom: Pinot and Picasso. There was wine, there was painting, there was competition, there was banter. We're never going to take over any art studios (we were terrible at it) but for, like, two hours – we laughed, we bantered, we got overly competitive. We took the Micky out of each other. It was just a great reminder that even though we're in hard times, you still need that positivity to lift yourself up.

One of the things that I'm proud of that we've been doing, and I've seen other organizations do as well, is sharing. We're not perfect in everything that we do, but each time we do something we

share it out: this thing works, and this thing didn't. We tried this and here's what happened. And I think one of the level playing fields we're on right now is we're all going through the same struggle – whether different scenarios – the same struggle.

The more we can share as a community, laterally, the better we'll all come out of this. And so, it's not a time for hoarding IP and being secretive about what works. It's a time of working together and genuinely sharing and I'm seeing that across the economy in businesses of all shapes and sizes.

HEADING: An SME approach to new ways of working in a post-coronavirus world

I'm a firm believer that there's actually an advantage for small to medium businesses right now. They might not feel it in a lot of sectors. The advantage is nimbleness, right? That they are small, right? And so, they've got this ability to course correct and switch, like many large organizations can't. The challenge there is, is when you look at customer experience – a lot of those industries have had very static customers. Your job was: understand that customer and then just serve them, serve them, serve them.

The reality is, right now, the certainty of that has gone. The new currency for those people, I believe, is confidence because that customer they've been serving, they've had a change of circumstance. And so, you have to take a step back – which is going to be hard in these times, when you're just trying to survive and put meals on the table – take a deep breath and go: “okay, what skills have we got? What capabilities do we have? What kind of people do we have? What brand, what identity and strengths do we have? And what are the new needs that are coming about that we can surface, that we can serve, that we can delight?” Because the nimbleness is going to be in the people that are more aware of the changes that are happening in the market, and how to adapt to them.

That muscle of adaptability – I think small to medium businesses can grow. The ones that have been around a while, they've probably got that muscle already, so they just need to hone it. But if they can, I think that muscle will survive them for the next four, five, 10, 15, 20, 30 years. Because the power of adaptation is going to be the skill that businesses need to stay in business in the future.

I think that the first thing to realize with remote work is that it's not a technology solution. A lot of people go: Well you've got a Wi Fi, you've got a video, you've got a web cam, video conference – you're good. And that is one component. There's three other components that I think are really important for getting a congruent work from home environment.

One is the people, their mindset, how are you helping them? Most people have grown and worked and thrived in peacetime, and right now we're in what feels like wartime and that's a very different skill set. So how are we helping equip them to be good “people that work from home”. It's not a natural skill set for everyone.

The second one is practices that we've already alluded to, how do you get the mechanisms in place? If you copy, cut and paste your work environment into a work from home environment it's probably going to fail, it's going to feel a bit clunky. So, what are the things you add, what are the things that you drop and what do you change?

And then the third component, which is really important, is the physical environment. How do you help them have a space, whether it be an “at home”, “co-working” space – it could be a spare bedroom or home office that most people haven't got the luxury to have. But how do you get the right ergonomics – the right desk, the right internet, the right connectivity, so they can actually be free to focus their bandwidth, their mental load – on doing their work, rather than worrying about

the internet dropping out, having a monitor or having an arched back because they're sat at the dining table? And we've invested in all of those things across this, sort of, crisis.

First of all, to get a foundational baseline – to get it “okay”. And then the sharing, and the hacks enable you to find ways of making it a little bit better. Because I think that the first few weeks of any crisis is about survival, and then once you realize it might last a bit a little bit longer – how do we get this so it's actually an effective way of us working?

I think there's a great humility in the fact that we're all in this, right? It's not a subset of the population, it's kind of impacting everyone. And I think virtually everyone I know, knows someone who's impacted by this in some way: a loss of job, sadly suffering from the illness, difficulty in work – everyone's got a story to tell. And that's where there's openness. This willingness to share becomes the superpower that we have as humans. For years we've been trying to compete with robots in a workspace and we finally realized we have this unique skill set: compassion, creativity, curiosity – we care for each other. These are very humanistic skill sets that we should really embrace and use as superpowers. And the more I see people sharing them, and the more I see the gratitude being shared and people sort of standing up, the more I see vulnerability and just honest stories of people.

I had a conversation with someone the other day and I just turned around and said: “I am struggling”. I'm like: “I live by myself in the apartment, and this model of being on calls all day and then just shutting off and watching TV at night – it doesn't suit my skill set, my personality, my style.” And we had a very vulnerable conversation, and he's like: “Oh, but you seem so happy.” And I said: “don't confuse a smile for the fact that I'm lonely.” And I think these are the conversations we need to be having, and when we surface them, I've already seen a whole lot of things that were taboo topics, suddenly just become normal topics. People talking about loneliness, and mental health, and cognitive load, and family, and people saying: “Hey, I can't make that call – the kids, or my partner needs to work, or I've got an elderly parent.” And you're like: “Okay” - because life matters. And I'm like: “this is weird – life always mattered.” We just compartmentalized it as: there's this work bit and there's this life bit. And I think what we've realized now is, it's kind of more fluid than that and there's so much we could learn from this.

Now, I'm seeing empathy lift ... the one side effect that I am sort of nervous about is that something about this “work from home” and the distribution, that is creating a lot more broadcast. So, the empathy is kind of increasing: more vulnerability, but it's still broadcast, and true empathy needs that right to reply. And so some of the best leaders I'm working with at Atlassian, I'm seeing them open themselves up to open forums, to more conversations because broadcast empathy is going to lift the general expectation, but it doesn't necessarily solve the problem because you've not heard the other person. And so, we're trying to find ways of getting an open communication in there as well.

HEADING: How coronavirus might fundamentally change our ways of working in the future

I try and stray away from my predictions in crystal balls, mainly because instead I like to talk about hopes, right? They're hopes and beliefs at best. I have the hope that we learn from this experience to experiment and, if we do, we will genuinely get to build a better future for ourselves. So that's a real positive hope.

In doing that, my belief is that we end up in a hybrid world, right? It's not this binary: the whole world's going to be remote. And it's not this binary: everyone is going to return to work, and it'll all be the same as the old normal. Too many people in this experiment have gone: “I like this.” And just as many people have gone: “I really don't like this.” And you're like: “Cool. You're both right.” The

idea that we build one solution that works for everyone, takes everything about diversity and inclusion and flushes it down the toilet, so why would we do that?

Let's embrace the fact that we have a diverse workforce and build something that's inclusive for all of them. And so, I believe we'll have an approach where some people are wholly remote, some are wholly based in the office, but I believe the majority of people are in the middle. They'll work a little bit from home, when it suits to do deep work, to get those tasks and activities done, or for personal reasons: there'll be childcare, parents, personal injury. There could be people that just don't have access to working nine-to-five, Monday to Friday. If we can access that talent, and they've got a diversity of ideas that's valuable – that's where the innovation comes from. Take away the constraint of nine-to-five. Take away the constraint of Monday to Friday.

And so, that hybrid means that we'll be working both at home and in the office, and therefore the challenge is: how do we create a flexible environment? Flexibility has been a hot topic of mine for ages. People instead talk about innovation, creativity, remote work, and I'm like: "no, no, the thing you're solving for is flexibility." As humans we are naturally flexible. Businesses haven't historically been flexible.

One of the things I've enjoyed the most in my seven years at Atlassian: we change and evolve every day. So, we have to be flexible. By design we are flexible, because our world changes, our customers, our suppliers, their technology, our people, the locations we're in and our products. Every day something changes. And if we can embrace flexibility, we take that currency from: certainty, and plans, and "we'll deliver this in three years", and "here's the exact number in the exact day" – to confidence and saying: "you know what? I'm going to start today. I'm probably 20% confident these are the questions I need to ask. And when I get the answers, I'll be 40% confident. Then I'll ask some more questions, I'll get to 60, and I'll get to 80", and accept that you'll never get to 100% confidence. Because I believe the world we move into will have a constant rate of change – not as higher rate of change that we've just experienced, hopefully, but there will still be a constant rate of change of evolution. Some of that will be artificial intelligence, machine learning. A lot of the businesses will go: "you know what I learned from COVID was humans are unreliable. But every machine I employ carried on working during COVID." So, I think we'll see an acceleration of technology.

We hopefully will see an acceleration of leaders going: "There's a unique skill set my people have around compassion, and creativity, and curiosity. I want them to do more of that." And so, I think we can find this balance of how humans work and augment with robotics and technology. How we challenge the workday, but also how we accept this constant rate of evolution and change. And I think, again, any business – small/medium business or big can do this. It's actually harder for larger organizations, it's harder to steer those ships. But for small/medium businesses, I think we embrace the thing that looks like volatility and negativity, we embrace this ambiguity and opportunity. And when you do that – you smile instead, and you're like: "bring it on."

And I think that challenge is going to be that for us – for a long time. And as humans, if we can find a way of being uniquely human and adapting to that, which we have that skill set naturally: I think we'll build a very bright future and we'll continue to learn from every experience.

My deep hope is that we do the right reflection and genuinely look at what are the things we want to keep? What are the things we want to stop? And, when this crazy experiment is finished, what are the things we want to start? And if we do that reflection, I believe we'll build a better "new normal". The danger is that we just try to copy, cut and paste from the past and we don't take the opportunity to learn.

