BEP 360 – Virtual Teams 2: Managing Remotely

Hello and welcome back to Business English Pod. My name's Edwin, and I'll be your host for today's lesson on managing remotely by video conference.

Managers today have to juggle lots of different communication channels, even more so with the rise of remote teams and virtual meetings. It's not all face-to-face anymore, with so many teams working remotely and videoconferencing with apps like Zoom becoming a daily occurrence. And this means managers need a new set of approaches and skills to manage their teams. One situation where we see these skills come into play is in virtual meetings and one-on-one chats with your team members.

When you're holding a video conference with a team member, you'll typically start with a bit of small talk before switching to the main topic. With remote work, people may have more anxiety, and as a manager part of your job is to relieve that anxiety. Emotional leadership and building trust may also require you to show vulnerability.

At the same time, supporting your staff will involve outlining very clearly your expectations about communication. After all, we have so many more options in today's business world. For example, if you're using Zoom or another video conferencing tool, you'll find yourself sending resources through the chat function, rather than handing someone a document or sending a link through email. And as people adapt to new ways of communicating, you will have to give solid technical or logistical advice.

In today's dialog, we'll listen to a conversation between Heather, a manager in a consulting firm, and her employee Adam. Adam is a junior consultant preparing for a meeting with an important client. Heather is demonstrating her skills in managing her team remotely.

As you listen to the dialog, try to answer the following questions:

1. What does Heather say to show her vulnerability?
2. What expectations does Heather emphasize about communicating with clients?
3. What bit of technical advice does Heather give Adam?

Vocabulary

To touch base: to contact someone that you haven't talked to in some time; "Thanks so much for the chat Kris, and let's touch base again in the fall."

To gear up for: to get ready for something; "I'm so busy gearing up for my big presentation Dan, so could we meet next week instead?"

Walk-through: a slow practice or explanation of a presentation or process; "Okay everyone, I just want to start by walking you through the different stages of website development here."

Weekly check-in: a regular meeting to find out how people are doing; "I do a weekly check-in with my staff every Monday afternoon over Microsoft Teams."

Game: any activity or competition involving several people; "I knew that sales was a pretty tough game, but I didn't expect people to be quite so competitive."

To engage: to communicate or interact with; "Social media has allowed companies to engage with their customers on a regular basis."

Face to face: in person, as opposed to on the phone or online; "Sure, we could talk on the phone if you like, but I'd much prefer to meet face to face in a coffee shop or restaurant."

Zoom / Zoom meeting: Zoom is a web-based video and audio conferencing service used to host meetings for personal or work purposes; "Sorry guys but I'm going to have to say goodbye soon because I've got another Zoom meeting starting in 5 minutes."

To have someone's back: to always be prepared to help or support someone; "I feel much more confident in my work now that I have a manager who I know has my back."

To throw someone off: to make someone confused or distracted; "The presentation was going really well until one angry executive totally threw me off."

To cut in and out: to start and stop functioning repeatedly, for a connection; "Um, it looks like your audio is cutting in and out, so could you try leaving and joining the meeting again?"

To run: to manage or organize something; "Brad really knew how to run a meeting, but this new guy just can't stick to the agenda."

Teleconference: a meeting of people in different locations using technology, often phone; "I'm hosting a teleconference with a few of our leaders from across the country and I'd love for you to join us."

Glitchy: having frequent technical problems; "We tried using BizVid but found it too glitchy, so we switched to Zoom and we haven't had any problems with video connections."

The chat: the function in an online platform that allows users to type messages to each other in real time; "If anyone has any questions could you please just type them into the chat and my co-host will read them out."

One-pager: a one page summary of information; "Instead of sending the staff the full strategic plan, how about just creating a simple one-pager for them?"

To optimize: to make something as good or effective as possible; "We've installed better, more efficient heating systems to optimize our energy use."

Clean connection: a good, reliable phone or Internet connection; "To make sure you have a clean video connection, turn off all other devices on your wifi network."

To pass on to: to give something you have received to someone else; "I'll send you the new policy manual Nick, and I'd like it if you passed it on to your entire team."

To nix: to eliminate or cancel; "To shorten your report, I suggest nixing some of the photographs because they're not really necessary."

Virtual background: a picture displayed behind you during an online video meeting or photograph; "Hey Maria, are you really in a café or is that just your virtual background?"

Distracting: stopping you from concentrating on or giving your attention to something; "I'm sorry, but do you mind if I close the door? The sounds from the rest of the office are really distracting."

To suffice: to be enough or good enough; "Do you really think we need six weeks for these website revisions or would four weeks suffice?"

Dialog

Heather: All right Adam, just going to close my window here… raining pretty hard where I am. Again. How about there?

Adam: Yeah, we had a bit this morning but looks clear now.

Heather: Nice. We kinda needed it, so I probably shouldn't complain. Anyway… yeah, I just wanted to **touch base**. I know you're **gearing up for** the meeting with Healthwise, right?

Adam: Yes, we're scheduled for Thursday morning at 10. Did a bit of a **walk-through** with Cathy after the **weekly check-in**, and… I think we know what we need to do to get ready. It's just…

Heather: Just what?

Adam: Just feeling pretty nervous I guess. These virtual meetings are a different **game**. It's not like walking into a room and **engaging** people **face to face**.

Heather: True enough. I remember my first **Zoom** meeting… I didn't know how to mute myself. And my kids were going crazy the whole time. Really embarrassing.

Adam: Yeah, well, I guess I'm lucky I don't have that to deal with.

Heather: No, and you're way better with this stuff than the rest of us - I think you've adapted better than most. And you're always really prepared, which is the most important thing. You're going to do great. And Cathy will **have your back**.

Adam: Sure. It's just the tech I worry about. Really **throws** me **off** when there are connection issues… people **cutting in and out** and all that. You don't think we could just **run** this as a **teleconference**?

Heather: I know that might seem easier, but we need to be able to do these things over Zoom. The video component is important. Really helps with the relationship building…

Adam: Right. I get that. Just wish it wasn't so **glitchy**.

Heather: Well, there are ways to reduce that. In fact… let me just send something through **the chat** here… It's a **one-pager** on "**Optimizing** your Virtual Meetings." There's some tips there for ensuring a **clean connection**. And might not be a bad idea to send it to the people at Healthwise as well.

Adam: All right… yeah… got it. I'll give it a read and **pass it on to** them.

Heather: Okay, great. We can only control what we can control, right? One more thing I'd suggest, if you don't mind, is **nixing** that **virtual background**. To be honest, it can be a bit **distracting**. Just a blank wall would **suffice**.

Adam: Yeah I was kind of thinking that. I put it up there and never bothered changing it, but you're right. I actually find it distracting when other people use them too.

Debrief

Now let's go through the dialog again and look at the language and techniques Heather used in her meeting with Adam.

Heather: All right Adam, just going to close my window here… raining pretty hard where I am. Again. How about there?

Adam: Yeah, we had a bit this morning but looks clear now.

Heather: Nice. We kinda needed it, so I probably shouldn't complain. Anyway… yeah, I just wanted to **touch base**. I know you're **gearing up for** the meeting with Healthwise, right?

At the start of their conversation, Heather makes a bit of small talk about the weather. Small talk is just conversation about things that aren't very important. It's purpose is to make people feel socially comfortable.

You don't need a lot of small talk before switching to the main topic. To do this, Heather uses the word "anyway." "Anyway" is just a word that says "let's talk about something else." And she then states the purpose of the call, which is to check in with Adam about his upcoming meeting with Healthwise.

When we switch to the main topic, we often use a transition word like "anyway," and then simply state the topic we'd like to discuss. Let's run through some more examples of this approach.

- That's what I heard too, but we'd better move on to look at the schedule.
- In any case, how about having a look at the budget?
- I know, right? But anyway, I wanted to talk with you about next week.
- Interesting you mentioned sales, because that's what I'd really like to discuss.

So how is Adam feeling about the upcoming meeting with Healthwise?

Adam: Yes, we're scheduled for Thursday morning at 10. Did a bit of a **walk-through** with Cathy after the **weekly check-in**, and… I think we know what we need to do to get ready. It's just…

Heather: Just what?

Adam: Just feeling pretty nervous I guess. These virtual meetings are a different **game**. It's not like walking into a room and **engaging** people **face to face**.

As you can hear, Adam is feeling uncertain about the meeting. He knows how to prepare for it, but he doesn't feel 100% comfortable doing a virtual meeting, which is much different from "face to face" – or in-person – interaction. How does Heather respond?

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Heather: True enough. I remember my first **Zoom** meeting… I didn't know how to mute myself. And my kids were going crazy the whole time. Really embarrassing.

What do you do when an employee expresses a lack of confidence or uncertainty? Well, if you want the person to take your advice, you need to build trust. And one great way to do that is to show vulnerability. That is, to share your own weaknesses and challenges.

Heather shows vulnerability by talking about a time when she didn't know how to use the meeting software properly. And she mentions how embarrassing it was that her children were interrupting. Many 21st century business leaders talk about how important it is to show vulnerability in this way, so let's practice some more examples.

- I have to admit, I was really scared when I first started working here too.
- I've made some pretty stupid mistakes in my time.
- I know I'm not a perfect leader, and I've still got a lot to learn.
- You know, I don't think I know half as much about this as my staff.

Now that she has shown vulnerability, what does Heather do next?

Adam: Yeah, well, I guess I'm lucky I don't have that to deal with.

Heather: No, and you're way better with this stuff than the rest of us - I think you've adapted better than most. And you're always really prepared, which is the most important thing. You're going to do great. And Cathy will **have your back**.

When we work remotely, we don't always get ongoing feedback on our work. And for that reason, managers find themselves spending time reassuring their staff and building their confidence. How does Heather do this with Adam?

Heather tries to reduce Adam's anxiety by telling him how good he is at his job, and reassuring him that his colleague Cathy "has his back," or will support him. In this way, Heather is building Adam's confidence prior to his big meeting.

What are other ways we can reduce staff anxiety? Let's try some more examples.

- I think you're doing really great work in these difficult circumstances.
- Your job is 100% safe. Please don't forget that.
- This isn't all up to you. You've got a whole team of people behind you.
- I'm sure you'll give a great presentation, just as you always do.

So does Adam now feel confident about his presentation?

Adam: Sure. It's just the tech I worry about. Really **throws** me **off** when there are connection issues… people **cutting in and out** and all that. You don't think we could just **run** this as a **teleconference**?

Heather: I know that might seem easier, but we need to be able to do these things over Zoom. The video component is important. Really helps with the relationship building…

In fact, Adam still isn't 100% confident. His biggest concern is the video conferencing technology, which suffers connection problems from time to time.

But when Adam wonders whether they could do a phone meeting, or a "teleconference," Heather insists on Zoom. As a manager, you need to set clear expectations about communication in this way. Some people will want to do what is easiest, or most comfortable, even when it's not the ideal mode of communication.

Setting expectations for communication on virtual teams is especially important. With the distance between people, failures in communication can lead to isolation, misunderstanding, or worse. Let's practice some more ways of outlining expectations about communication.

- I'd really like to see regular email updates about this project.
- We need to include the whole team on any communication about this issue.
- I expect you and Amanda to be honest and upfront with each other.
- It's absolutely necessary to attend these weekly video check-ins.

Now let's get back to the dialog, as Heather offers further support.

Adam: Right. I get that. Just wish it wasn't so **glitchy**.

Heather: Well, there are ways to reduce that. In fact… let me just send something through **the chat** here… It's a **one-pager** on "**Optimizing** your Virtual Meetings." There's some tips there for ensuring a **clean connection**. And might not be a bad idea to send it to the people at Healthwise as well.

Part of your job as a manager is to support your staff in learning new skills and knowledge. You don't have to know how to do everything yourself, but you can always provide them with useful resources. And in a video conference, it's easy enough to send documents through the chat – or instant messaging – function of the software you use.

Adam is concerned about the technology being "glitchy," or having repeated small problems. So Heather sends him a document through the chat that will help him and the clients avoid those problems.

How else can we let someone know we're passing resources on during a video conference? Let's run through some examples.

- I'm just going to send the draft budget through the chat to everyone.
- If you look in the chat, you'll see I've passed on the new policy.
- Let me just post a link to a blog post about this little issue for you.
- Have a look at the document I just sent through the chat, which I think will help.

Heather has one more bit of advice for Adam. Let's listen.

Adam: All right… yeah… got it. I'll give it a read and **pass it on to** them.

Heather: Okay, great. We can only control what we can control, right? One more thing I'd suggest, if you don't mind, is **nixing** that **virtual background**. To be honest, it can be a bit **distracting**. Just a blank wall would **suffice**.

The last bit of advice is about Adam's "virtual background." Many video conferencing apps allow you to put a background image behind you. You've probably seen people appear with a beach behind them, or a famous building. Heather advises against this because it's "distracting," or pulls people's attention away from what you're saying.

If you tuned in to our last lesson, you practiced examples of giving simple, direct, instructions on using technology. Now we hear Heather taking the same approach to giving *advice*. Let's practice more ways of giving direct suggestions to an employee.

- I suggest you get another person to co-host, so they can monitor the chat.
- To improve your connection, remove other devices from the wifi network.
- If you have more than 10 people, get them to turn off their video unless they're talking.
- During your presentation, just click "mute all" to make sure it's quiet.

How does Adam respond to Heather's advice about "nixing," or removing, his virtual background?

Adam: Yeah I was kind of thinking that. I put it up there and never bothered changing it, but you're right. I actually find it distracting when other people use them too.

As you can hear, Adam agrees with Heather's suggestion. And with that, she has successfully coached him both emotionally and on the technical aspects of his upcoming meeting. It sounds like Heather has learned how to manage a remote team with confidence.

Now let's practice some of the language we learned in today's lesson. Imagine you work as a manager with a software development company. You're talking by video conference with one of your employees who's about to lead a project for the first time. You'll hear a cue from the employee, then I'll give you a suggestion for what you can say in response. We'll guide you through each step in the practice and provide an example answer for each response.

Ready? Let's give it a go.

Cue 1: So it's my first time to lead a project, and I'm feeling a little nervous.

Start by showing vulnerability and say you understand and still get nervous at the start of big projects too.

Answer: _____

Cue 2: Really!? But you've got lots of experience leading teams. I don't.

Next, say you think he'll be fine because he's got good leadership skills.

Answer: _____

Cue 3: Appreciate that. But I am a bit worried Dan might cause problems.

Now state that leading the project will involve solving problems with people one on one.

Answer: _____

Cue 4: Yes, of course, it's just sometimes hard to have those types of conversations.

Finally, say that you're sending through a guide about having difficult work conversations.

Answer: _____

Answer 1: That's understandable. Actually, I still get nervous at the start of a big project too.

Answer 2: Oh, I think you'll be fine. You've got good leadership skills.

Answer 3: Well, leading the project will involve solving problems with people one on one.

Answer 4: For sure. So let me just send through a guide on handling difficult work conversations.

Now let's practice some of the vocabulary we've covered in this lesson. In a moment, you'll hear a series of sentences with a word replaced with a beep. Repeat each sentence, *including* the missing word.

For example, if you hear:
Example Cue: If you can't meet face to **<beep>,** then set up a video conference.

You can say:
Example Answer: If you can't meet face to **face,** then set up a video conference.

After each response, we'll provide the correct answer. Let's begin.

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Cue 1: Don't worry what others think, I've always got your **<beep>.**

Answer: _____

Cue 2: I'd like to move our weekly **<beep>** to Tuesday morning at 10:00.

Answer: _____

Cue 3: It's hard to understand because your sound keeps **<beep>** in and out.

Answer: _____

Cue 4: Thanks for the update Jenny, and let's touch **<beep>** again next week.

Answer: _____

Answer 1: Don't worry what others think, I've always got your **back.**

Answer 2: I'd like to move our weekly **check-in** to Tuesday morning at 10:00.

Answer 3: It's hard to understand because your sound keeps **cutting** in and out.

Answer 4: Thanks for the update Jenny, and let's touch **base** again next week.

We've reached the end of this lesson, the second in our series on virtual teams. We've learned how to steer the conversation to the main topic, show vulnerability, and reduce an employee's anxiety. We've also looked at how to outline expectations about communication, send resources using the chat function, and give clear technical or logistical advice.

Thanks for listening and see you again soon!

Language Review

A. Review Quiz

For each question, you must choose the sentence that best fulfills the given language function or purpose.

1. What is a good way to switch to the main topic in a conversation?

a) Well, that's certainly possible. Any other options?
b) I'd like to talk about something now.
c) That's true. Anyway, we should really talk about the staffing issue.

2. Which of the following demonstrates showing vulnerability?

a) Well, I also had huge difficulties when I first joined this company.
b) That's a pretty common experience you know?
c) I'm so sorry you feel that way.

3. What could you say to reduce someone's worries or anxieties?

a) You really have no reason to feel that way.
b) Is there something I can do to change the way you feel?
c) I really think you're doing fantastic work.

4. How can you outline expectations about communications?

a) I'm sorry but I am not really a phone person.
b) It's really important that we update each other by email every week.
c) I was hoping that you'd let me know if there was a problem.

5. What could you say when you send resources through the chat function?

a) I'm just going to post a link in the chat to the website I mentioned.
b) After our meeting, let me send you a great summary document.
c) Would you mind just passing on that report through the chat?

6. How might you give direct technical or logistical advice to an employee?

a) Maybe if you ask Gwen, she might have a few tips on this.
b) Have you ever considered asking for people's feedback?
c) I suggest you resend everyone the meeting link an hour before you start.

B. Vocabulary and Idioms

Fill in the blanks with words from the box below. Be sure to put any verbs in the right tense.

| check-in | clean | pass |
| suffice | throw | back |

1. The meeting was going really well until the connection problems really _____ me off.

2. It's hard to have a _____ connection when you have so many devices on the same wifi network.

3. Don't worry Hannah, I've got your _____ even if some of the others don't agree with your ideas.

4. Would you mind _____ this proposal on to the rest of the team for some input?

5. I'd like to move our weekly _____ from Monday morning to Monday afternoon starting next week.

6. I thought $10,000 would _____ for these upgrades but they tell me it's going to cost $30,000.

Study Strategy

Managing, leading, and helping people requires a trusting relationship. Trust is especially important when you have to coach an employee through difficult emotions. For example, you may have to deal with an employee's anxiety and lack of confidence before a big meeting or presentation.

One way to build trust with the people you manage or work with is by showing vulnerability. By showing our own weakness, fears, or anxieties, our employees and colleagues will respond better to our advice and guidance.

What are some worries or anxieties that the people you manage or work with feel? What could you say to reduce these worries? Write down a list of worries, and things you could say that you think might help someone deal with each worry. Next, write down a time when *you* felt this worry or had a similar problem.

Now, with a colleague or friend, imagine you talking to an employee or co-worker about their worries or anxieties. Your partner can start by stating the worry. Then you can talk about your own experience to show vulnerability. Finally, you can say something to reduce the person's worries. When you're finished, switch roles and let your partner try.

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Answers

Listening Questions

1. Heather shows her vulnerability by talking about an embarrassing Zoom meeting experience.
2. Heather emphasizes the importance of video for building relationships.
3. Heather suggests that Adam get rid of his virtual background.

A. Review Quiz

1. c; 2. a; 3. c; 4. b; 5. a; 6. c

B. Vocabulary and Idioms

1. The meeting was going really well until the connection problems really **threw** me off.

2. It's hard to have a **clean** connection when you have so many devices on the same wifi network.

3. Don't worry Hannah, I've got your **back** even if some of the others don't agree with your ideas.

4. Would you mind **passing** this proposal on to the rest of the team for some input?

5. I'd like to move our weekly **check-in** from Monday morning to Monday afternoon starting next week.

6. I thought $10,000 would **suffice** for these upgrades but they tell me it's going to cost $30,000.