**Dissertation Interview - Participant A – 23 February 2024**

Fanie Mordaunt: I'm going to jot down your demographics, white female working in financial services as the head of actuarial and product. You manage teams that work virtually. Am I correct?

Participant A: Full time and part time.

Fanie Mordaunt: So how does it describe your model? So how would you describe that a hybrid model?

Participant A: Hybrid model.

Fanie Mordaunt: So how does the team work currently, if you could just explain?

Participant A: So currently we've got a roster.

Participant A: Everyone has the option to work from home two days a week and those two days vary, so they're not fixed, but try and alternate just so that we don't always have people either off on Monday or on a Friday, and then we try and have one day a week when everyone is in the office in order to connect.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay.

Fanie Mordaunt: So just describe the organisation that you work for. You don't have to say the name of the company, but what kind of company is it?

Participant A: So it’s an investment management company, so financial industry, back-office support. So that's not a sales company and my team would then fit into more the Technical Support and the data analytics support.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay, perfect. And how would you describe the culture within the organisation?

Participant A: Strive for excellent, very fast paced and performance rewarding company, yeah.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay, so how many people are you managing currently?

Participant A: I'm currently managing a team of nine people.

Fanie Mordaunt: Nine.

Fanie Mordaunt: And how long have you been managing people? Just not now. Beyond this role, your whole career.

Participant A: Just think people management.

Fanie Mordaunt: Twelve years, Okay.

Participant A: The last 11-12 years and prior to that it would have been in a in a project capacity and not as a people manager capacity.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay, so how would you describe your leadership style?

Participant A: I think. Aiming for a smooth middle ground I think inclusive, so not very exciting way, but it also fits in with the kind of teams that are lead, so they usually very self-motivated high performance.

Participant A: Leadership follows more, I think, guiding, then necessarily enforcing.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay. So obviously when the pandemic started in 2020, we all had to change the way that we do things. If you have to think back pre pandemic post Pandemic leader, how would you say that you adapted your leadership style to suit a virtual setting managing virtually?

Participant A: I think. Translate pre. It was easier to you had visuals on people and you saw people every day. I think what I had to change then is more and what's the word intentionally connect?

Participant A: So I think that was the one is to intentionally connect. Which I think moved more into the territory of having formal meetings. So intentionally with me and I need to set the time for you to call you and we'll check in, which also then. And it meant getting people used to that. There's a meeting you need to be ready for it. Where’s normally would have a like informal check in.

Participant A: I think that's the one thing I think the other thing was just to be very clear in deliverables and expectations, which before I think was easier because you saw the other day to day within the same room conversation. No, not in the same room, so not in the same conversation. So, I think those are the two biggest things is to have intentional contact and be very deliberate and clear in terms of communication.

Fanie Mordaunt: Communication. You've used the word clear quite a few times as well. So do you work remotely yourself? On occasion?

Participant A: On occasion, yeah.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay.

Participant A: They're not fixed two days.

Fanie Mordaunt: So your staff members work on a hybrid model which is two times a week then at home and you also on occasioned work from home.

Participant A: Yeah.

Fanie Mordaunt: So they are quite a few days where you are either away from them or they are away from you. Okay. So, have you encountered any challenges? Since you know you started managing people remotely, then maybe you can share and maybe something that you personally struggled with that you feel maybe was a consequent, a direct consequence of this virtual setting.

Participant A: Okay, so maybe let's start with a second one. I think that's easy to what I struggled with.

Participant A: I actually started a new job in the middle of COVID. And for me, the biggest challenge was the networking, the relationships. There's no face to a name that you hear and new people versus old people. That was definitely a big gap in there and so that my biggest challenge that was to get myself in, embedded in their company within my own team, but also within the larger company. And you know, just little things like please copy me in on a meeting. Invite that would be forgotten for the third time, just simply because they don't know me. So, although you know, I think in a in a face-to-face environment that that would be an easier thing to do, I think then also just picking up on information and getting to know the job actually took longer in the virtual environment. I think because of that way of you used to just people in the room. So, you have the same discussion now. Somebody has to intentionally sit with you and think what information do you need? And I'm share that and I don't think everyone's used to that. I think some people are just you pick up, by you know, having a water cooler conversation. And I actually have to go and think what it is that I want to. Knowledge that I need to share or what is needed for somebody in a different position. So, I think that's that was my biggest challenge is that picking up the work, getting to know the people and they informed me network.

Fanie Mordaunt: And how did you overcome it?

Participant A: Yeah, that it was tough. I think that intentionality, so I had to instead of just saying, Okay, I'll meet you for lunch. I would then have to it was in the middle of COVID.I would then have to set up a coffee time with you. I want a meeting with you, and there's actually a barrier to that. There's it's nice to say. Let's go have a coffee together versus saying can I have time with you? It's not a formal meeting, but I need you to sit behind your computer and chat to me about, you know, what is your teams doing?

Participant A: So I did a lot of that. Which I suppose you would do in a normal environment as well, but it is.

Participant A: It's I think it's more of a relaxed environment, that is, it is actually quite difficult when you're not in the same room. So, I think it did help when we started going back to the office and partially to actually think.

Fanie Mordaunt: And being able to connect, yeah.

Participant A: Just yeah, just have those finish the spoke to before and then just on the fact of not being copied in on things or nothing interested in things, I just have to be very vigilant in listening too and somebody would say in the meeting that it had checking was I in that meeting was invited to that been there. So, it was just really being a little bit more maybe paranoid about these things, but I had to be very and to listen very carefully to interactions to make sure that that I'm in there and then just reinforce it and keep on asking, keep on asking. So, I had to be. So, I'm not like I said, I'm not a very forceful person, but I had to be a lot more.

Fanie Mordaunt: A little bit more detail, little closer to the details, yeah.

Participant A: Closer to the detail, but also push myself into the conversation and when needed.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay. And then I mean obviously you do you managing nine people. How do you personally deal with situations where the staff member says, Okay, I can't come into the office, I'm having a power cut or not. Sorry, let me say water cut or they're working from home and they have load shedding for an extended amount of time and they maybe lose signal connectivity.

Participant A: In that sense. I think the environment that I usually work in. Makes it easier to just manage on get the lights on. But no. It is really awkward, but so it it's not you can you can just. You can clearly measure an output and so it doesn't matter too much, and unless there's deadlines.

Participant A: So with that, I think it is. And again, I think it's easier in my environment. I work with, you know, people that are a high-performance people and that's what generally motivate themselves. The difficulty is when people come with these, these honestly excuses. I think it is real life and it is things that are in South Africa that is maybe not as much in other countries, you know also for somebody let's in living in Soweto, working in Midrand to just quickly come into the office is not possible. Also, they definitely will not have probably additional money to spend on buying additional data or to go circling the coffee shop with any spend month. Maybe the opportunity is to be very clear in terms of expectation in terms of if your power is gonna be open, it leaves some responsibility with people and I think we need to leave that responsibility with people. But also, be very clear with what the consequences of you have extended load shedding. Then you have to make alternative arrangements and the office needs to always be open to from an employer side. You need to make that availability. We did for instance, for a while, give them extra travel allowances to ensure that there is that there's no excuse to. Say I don't have money to come into the office, and when there's extra load shedding so that they can make that arrangement, but I think it is. You need to be very clear and people need to sign up to that. Agreement that if they if they all these things, then these are your resources you can otherwise your own data can come into the office. We need to take a daily or whatever, and because otherwise the, the burden shifts to the team. Not to say that you shouldn't allow the team to take on a bed, and I think sometimes there is there is crisis moments that you could not have foreseen, and it did actually create a bit of team work around that to make sure that that happens. But I think that is a struggle that you might not necessarily have in other countries.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah.

Participant A: We really sitting with the constraint where workforce and so we tried that I think at one point what I would also do is then just allow for people to then if they have to work at night.

Participant A: Are you working tonight? But I managed very carefully on clarity and what the expectation is if it's there, but also clarity on this is the date. This is the deadline and if you are going to run into issues then you need to put in the effort or otherwise, you're the one that you know it's basically gets thrown under the bus side. You really have to just make that clear and allow people to be adults in that as well.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah.

Participant A: Some people can. Some people cannot. And I also look, I also did take into account personalities, but some people would be bit more hesitant to say that they have an issue because I want to show that they can do the job, but also dependent on our secure people felt in their jobs. So, I did make allowance for that, but I always had the follow up conversation and the result of that would be that you either get a higher rating or a lower rating when dream renumeration time comes, and for that it's also just good to have constant discussions on that.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah. Okay.

Participant A: And it's not just once a year, but you know, once every three or four months, just so that people are clear and, in my environment, it means, yeah, you can treat them like adults and that the consequences are clear. But the communication and the expectation must be clear up front, otherwise no.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah. So it's linking back to that high performance environment because those are and then you know in your opinion, how do you try to develop trust with your team, especially when you're not working in the same place all the time. So, what have you done to just develop that trust relationship?

Participant A: I think to be that open thing. If we're all going to be a team and we have to support each other and when openness in terms of, Okay, well, actually working from home today because of somebody fixing your roof or your Internet or whatever it is. They open about it because we're going to tell him I'm looking for him. And expecting you to finish something. You can't finish it because actually there's people in and out of their house. Then we're all going to miss each other. But I created very open environments that people could tell me. Look, I'm actually, you know, I have some personal stuff on the side. That's fine. Then I know that you're going to be partially available and that you will do the work when and people were usually very forthcoming with Okay, they will do it over the weekend or of the night. If you are open in that expectation, that's it. There must be limits to it, because otherwise people do go to the extremes and I did have those cases even in my high-performance people, because life is actually quite it is quite difficult to manage.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah.

Participant A: In South Africa, you can't just leave your door open for somebody to come and fix your geyser, which is what would happen in other countries. So, with that in mind, I did have had to have a few discussions with people to say the first and foremost, your responsibilities towards your job. And in most cases, people would then then take the advice and change their behaviour. I think just opportunity and that and that I think is also where I got challenged. I needed to be on top of it, so if it happens once, Okay, let's seconds long happens. You need to you need to be on it.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah.

Participant A: So it really did mean having some conversations, but it helped to not let it let it run for long, I think in the beginning I trusted people I like. We'll get the work done, but you know, I think it's also good for people to have clear guidelines, and this is the boundary because otherwise it will get out of hand and then you've got the issues to solve.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah.

Participant A: So I've got challenged quite on that to have those quick conversations before it starts becoming an issue.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah. And then how do you integrate new joiners in the team? Do you? Especially with this hybrid working model.

Participant A: I think that is the biggest challenge. So, in my current environment we have the new joiners come to the office five days a week.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay, in the beginning.

Participant A: I don't have an option to it from home in yeah, in a prior environment, we actually did a lot into work from home. But what would they had to do was to make sure that on the days that they were in the opposite, there was overlap with a with a leader, so that there's no use you in the office. It's not just to be seen, you know, you needed to be able to hand over, I think just with new joiners it also depends maybe on maturity. If it is somebody who's been in the job market for a few years, it is easier, although like I mentioned before, I really struggled in the job that I've joined, which was fully virtual at that point in time. I do also think that if the if the whole team is used to working in a hybrid environment and that is fine if there are some people that don't and some people that do, I think that's when you get it is really difficult to combine the two because if all our working hybrid then you start developing a certain way of working and you can allow you know all like for instance like in neutral in the you need to plan ahead a little bit make sure that that person knows what they're doing with the, got the you know the equipment or the software or whatever it is that they need, so that if they're all working from home, that's. You know that they're able to be to be efficient. And so, I think you're with new joiners, just my experience is that you actually do need to give full time attention to them in the beginning until that up and running, which I suppose to get anything from 3 months to six months, I think shorter is just too short. I think that that the experience that you're going to get but fully just being offline when you're at first in the first run it like a graduate joining is going to be. Not as effective if you're not in the office, but the more experienced people could become.

Participant A: I think there's definitely room to know to transition for call for quicker into avoid environment.

Fanie Mordaunt: And have you ever experienced a conflict situation with within a virtual team setting, and if so, how? How did you deal manage that conflict?

Participant A: Yes you do. Sometimes because. Yeah, in advance how people handle that conflict. Somewhere will have the conflict over the virtual environments. Other small just basically exit from the meeting and.

Fanie Mordaunt: It has that happened.

Participant A: Yeah, yes. So, I think. What happens there is then to revert back to old school, speak to the person individually. Yeah. So, it has happened. Sometimes you have to tell people more easily. They just disengage. They put off their screens or their mute. Away status or I need to leave it's an easy exit and. Yeah, I think I think that is difficult because you do have a different form of engagement when you when you disagree or when there's conflict and I actually did during the covered period one day there was a massive one day and not basically also ignore the rules that run into the office and said they were mosques and we had to sort it out face to face. So, we had to at that point ditch the virtual one. I think its proximity is an issue. Somebody sitting in Cape Town and the others are in Joburg, I think. Then the phone call. Well fashioned phone. So, then you have to engage in a different way. It is really difficult to do conflict just because simply people have the option to shut down the screens, mute themselves, and they will generally just exit and not and not have the conversation. Or when in fact sometimes you do need the conflict to resolve.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah, that's very interesting. And then last, my last question is around you know performance, but you said that you're more of the manager that allows people, you're more outputs driven, so you allow people to just do their work and obviously you allow the performance or the output to guide and do you believe that in your mind what would you say are the key things that you believe in E-leader must possess in order to be effective in their role to manage a team virtually. You have spoken about clarity connecting?

Participant A: Yeah, I think I'll, I'll go back to communication. If the communication is set from the start and people are clear as to what is expected of them, and then leader must make sure that you are addressing the right people, then it is far easier to manage. I think clarity and communication, by far gets you the furthest? I think to make sure that the expectations are understood. I think that's the other thing. When you're in a room, you can read facial expressions. You can read body language far better than you can over screen and so you need to ask a lot more or you clear on this. Do you understand? You know, in a face-to-face environment, if you ask somebody to do something and they know they don't have capacity, that they could speak with their manager. In a virtual environment, they will just be ASL to when the points and then in the end, expectations are not made. So, it you need to be very, very clear and quite Are you sure? And sometimes it needs a few more conversations on the side virtually with people to check in on them. I think what I had done in previous roles, so I worked virtually with international teams is longer lead times, but don't jump something on somebody last minute. Say you needed to plan a lot more upfront. And again, communicate and send out reminders. Have check-in meetings so that yeah, so definitely longer lead times. But you need to, so I suppose the skill set of planning and a little bit of project management in this full-on project. You do need to think of lead times about other deliverables and things.

Fanie Mordaunt: Very interesting. Linda, thank you.

Participant A: Yeah, I think those would be the placement itself.

Fanie Mordaunt: Is there anything I didn't touch on that you thought maybe you would have wanted to share or say?

Participant A: I think in the virtual environment still face-to-face is sometimes needed, maybe just in a different environment or for a different reason. Obviously less often. I think that's one thing. I think another thing that I'm missing, so in in in the virtual world is virtual meeting etiquette. And I know is sometimes speak about it, but we I think we're don’t trained people. So, you know in in a normal meeting, we've all been umm, you know, told you your picture up on time, your dress neatly, you have your things prepared. I don't know. You ask this the chair. If you can speak through them, these little things, we have to just relearn how to do it online.

Fanie Mordaunt: The camera.

Participant A: And I think it would be good to actually have some, like almost like global guidelines on what is it and really put on put on put on the cameras especially in in smaller meetings in larger meetings actually realise then it becomes a bit too disruptive. What I've seen helps is if you do have the technology.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yes.

Participant A: I think we recently had it in one of our bigger business meetings is with the technology switches between people and slides that actually keeps it a little bit impact being much looking at the screen or you're not just looking at on the talking stick to keep that, but also just how you engage with somebody wants to speak but up your hand as somebody needs to keep track of that and that brown paper presented because there are things that I think we need to actually upscale people of a bit on that on how to get that. Right.

Fanie Mordaunt: That's very valuable insight. Thank you so much. I really appreciate this. You've given me so much information. What I'll do is obviously I'll transcribe this and then I'm going to do sort of like a thematic analysis. I'm going to listen to this again and just see what are the key themes. I'm speaking to other people as well, and then I want to see if there's parity, the OR alignment and what are the key things that come out and then sort of then build sort of a competency framework or E-leadership. Thank you so much. I appreciate your time and have a good day.

Participant A: Thanks.

Fanie Mordaunt: Bye.