**Dissertation Interview – Participant J – 14 March 2024**

Fanie Mordaunt: Looking at how virtual leadership has changed the landscape for leadership as a whole. So how has this whole virtual setting changed what is now required from our leaders because it's different when you managing somebody who's right in front of you and you can see them versus somebody who's not near you at all. So, I'm going to just ask you a couple of questions and you can give as much or as little detail as you want per question and then you don't have to say your name and you don't have to say the name of the company that you work for cause it's not really relevant, but we are more focused on your leadership journey or your experiences as a leader.

Participant J: Okay, perfect.

Fanie Mordaunt: So you'll find even in the transcripts, we'll just call you participant. Okay.

Participant J: Okay, cool.

Fanie Mordaunt: So can you just describe the organisation that you work for?

Participant J: The current one or the one that I had exposure with loads of remote work.

Fanie Mordaunt: You can describe both.

Participant J: Okay, so the one that I work for about eight years, it was a remote company. So, IT as a global international, IT company, but basically provided IT solutions to the clients like your T systems, Telefonica, The Walt Disney, all those big corporations, European corporations as well that also had a footprint within Asia as well as USA and South America as well. And from a current perspective in the insurance space where it's a short-term insurance providing short term insurance to our clients, perspective clients as well. And there is a space that I'm currently basically working in.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay, and what is your role in the organisation?

Participant J: Okay, the HR manager.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay, and would you describe the culture in your current organisation?

Participant J: I think the culture in my current organisation differs because I've hubs in Cape Town it's different compared to the hub that we have in Centurion. So obviously it's a different dynamic of people that you have and it's a geographically you'll find that the guys in Centurion have a different way of doing things. So, the culture depends on the believe in the area that you work in, so you can't basically brush each business unit with the same paint because they are situated in geographically in different areas and that it comes with different dynamics, different cultures, etcetera. And people adapt to those that environments quite easily where they are in.

Fanie Mordaunt: And how many people are you managing at the moment?

Participant J: So at the moment, I'm managing three.

Fanie Mordaunt: Three people, how long in general have you been managing people like throughout your career?

Participant J: Nineteen years.

Fanie Mordaunt: Nineteen years and how would you describe your leadership style?

Participant J: Passive direct?

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay. I'm just thinking. And if you had to think back, could you, you've been managing for many years. If you have to think back to the reality before COVID and then now after COVID, so before COVID you were working in a virtual setting after COVID, you're still working in a virtual setting. If you think about how, you manage your team in Centurion, would you say one would have to adapt in order to adjust from in person to virtual leadership settings?

Participant J: I think the first thing that you will need to adapt to trust, you will need to build the trust relationship with your team members because what I've seen in the past. Look in eventually or initially, the team that I work for wasn't virtual it was all based in South Africa and then we embarked on the journey we broaden the footprint of the business up in into Europe, into Asia, into North America, into South America as well. And again, I think because of the professionalism of the individuals, it makes it much easier. It wasn't a group of youngsters that we took on, or a group of young individuals that wasn't managed before. They were pretty much self-managed as well that made it much easier for me as a manager to manage these individuals because they were self-managed. I think trust relationship is very important and the fact that the individual can be solved managed at the individual.

Fanie Mordaunt: So do you work remotely now?

Participant J: I work remotely with my team that I have in Centurion. So, my team has obviously I manage my team, that my team in Centurion from the Cape Town office.

Fanie Mordaunt: And do they work on a hybrid or are they in the office every day?

Participant J: They actually on a hybrid model, so they will be on four to three days a week in office.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay. But you are not physically with them all the time.

Participant J: No.

Fanie Mordaunt: And what are some of the challenges that you've encountered since you know, you embarked on your leadership journey, especially in the virtual space?

Participant J: I think the challenge is if I, if I look back from an international perspective, the challenges was communication, communication barriers could potentially be a challenge, especially if you if you work for an International Space and you work in various countries. So, you have staff members that sit in various countries that speak different languages. Those could be potential barriers in terms of communication because they understand a certain language, even though the medium is English, the mother tongue might be a different language. It might be German, it might be Spanish, it might be Indian or whatever the case may be. And that could potentially be the challenges that you face with, other than that I don't foresee or had any challenges. The only other challenge would be perhaps if its new people coming in, you not there physically, that you need to train the individual online. Virtually you do not sit with that individual 24/7 hence it comes back to the fact that a person needs to be self-managed. The person needs to be able to be able to think on their feet. Those are the type of individuals that you basically need to recruit for. If you recruit for yourself, for those individuals.

Fanie Mordaunt: And it's all in the South African context, specifically we dealing with water cuts? You know, water shedding, power cuts, load shedding, and just general political instability to these riots sometimes and protests that can prevent people from being able to come into the office. Or just also make them ineffective, even if they're at home with load shedding. How do you manage this?

Participant J: So that was that, when we embarked a work from home policy, basically policy was created whereby we gave guidance to the individuals and when they work from home, if there is political struggles or water shortages, or in our case, South Africa, load shedding for arguments sake, the responsibility lies on, the onus is on the employee to make sure that they are fully capable to sign on, to be available 24/7 irrespective of what's happening, so in most cases when we manage the people in South Africa previously we also had people in Johannesburg, people in Durban and we also when even the riots happened back then? The responsibility was to get to a safe location. That is, that has Internet. They need to get UPNs’ for argument’s sake, and sometimes we subsidised that from a company perspective to assist the employee and but we also need to then obviously make sure that they are the 100% and the onus it's on the employee to make sure that they are available and fulfilling their contractual obligation at end of the day.

Fanie Mordaunt: I'll just give you a moment to catch your breath. I see very early on that you said that trust is a very big thing for Virtual Leadership.

Participant J: Yes.

Fanie Mordaunt: So how do you develop trust?

Participant J: I give them the benefit of the doubt. That's important. Giving them the benefit that that then obviously if you and what you present to me at the end of the day, I trust you that when you present something to me that it's 100% you've checked it, you've gone through the information. If I go through it and I find it abnormalities or issues that when I do ask you that you have an answer for those questions. That is basically how I build that trust with the individuals. And how they build trust with me as well and also make sure that I'm the available for them as a manager. I'm the available so, when they need me that I'm there likewise. So, if I need them no matter when. Because they like my team know, I don't call upon them on nilly willy things. It’s only things that needs, that's only when it's urgent. And I found that I've built that relationship with them no matter what time. If I really need something, they will pick up the call and they will respond even if I send emails after working hours, they do them within a few hours or so, they would respond to that email as well. But that comes down to actually building that trust and allowing them to see that you have their back no matter what, even if they are working remotely. That's the important factor.

Fanie Mordaunt: That's very good. You also mentioned that you've had situations where new joiners have started and it's not easy to integrate them into the team. What do you do now to integrate new joiners in your team?

Participant J: So I think what I do to integrate them, is having my weekly meetings with them. And we have also knowledge sharing sessions on a Friday, so we have that on a Friday. We have our Wednesday meeting, so once we're done with our management meeting following that, we'll have our team meeting. And then, because we have different divisions within insure, each person has their own dynamic and challenges that they face with. And you always learn something new for short term admin happening for arguments sake, Western happening, the zenith team whatever is happening in that space and that is where the learn Friday that happen within our team and that is how we integrate these guys. So, they get exposure to the different challenges that we are facing with in the various business unit as well. And they get the opportunity to speak up. They get the opportunity to speak what the frustrations are within their hubs as well. And then we brainstorm and that is how we figure out these types of solutions to the problems that we might have. Okay. And you know, just two more questions from my side. How do you manage conflict when it occurs? I try to see what the situation is. Especially my team, I try to step back and look at it from both perspective and give the opportunity to the individual to state their case. Before I and I also want them to try and bring a solution to the table before I provide a solution to the table, or at least an option to the table, because it's important to seek that that that meaningful conciliation between the two parties. So yeah, so that's normally what I do is like I try to find, try to bring the two parties together. Depending on what is. But most important is to listen because when this conflict someone just wants to be listened to, that's the most important thing. And then I'll just stay back. I just listen and then that's when you try to figure out where the where the initial issue is coming from.

Fanie Mordaunt: Agreed to him.

Participant J: Yeah.

Fanie Mordaunt: And how do you track performance when you're not there virtually?

Participant J: Again a comes down to self-management. So, my performance that I currently, how I tracked these obviously on my weekly stats that are that the staff need to provide from a recruitment perspective, the stats that they need to present in terms of numbers of vacancies filled, from a higher perspective from like to from HRBPs’ I track that as well in terms of the performance. How effective their consultations were with the management? Those are the type of things. So obviously during the course of the week, even whilst I'm not there on a weekly basis, we cover all of those type of topics and that is where I also can pick up in terms of the performance of the individual.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay

Participant J: And then also I have my monthly sit downs with my management teams as well. And then that is where I also think asked them. How has the performance of the individual been towards your department? Have there been providing you support etcetera, etcetera and that how I get the insight in terms of how the team members are actually working?

Fanie Mordaunt: That's very good. And as an HR person, what competencies would you say are most required when, we recruiting for virtual leaders, if you have to just name two or three or four competencies in your view. What competency do you think virtual leaders need to possess to be effective in their roles?

Participant J: I think one is going to be patience. It's that's definitely be one of them. The other one would be articulation. They need to be able to articulate their challenges that they might face very easily and understand those type of challenges that they're going to face. I think that also need to be able to be self-managed as well because if they self-managed they will be able to teach the next person how to be self-managed as well. If they are not self-managed. Because sometimes, they adopt individuals that might not be solved, managed and they need to be able to manage those individuals. So I think those are the type of qualities that the virtual leader needs to have and comprehension, understanding, trying to understand that if you work with the remote individuals that they're going to have their own set of concerns as well and you need to be able to comprehend what those concerns are find a, you will sometimes you will need to be the one who's going to be able to need to find a solutions to those concerns that they have.

Fanie Mordaunt: It's very interesting. No, Fabio, thank you so much for braving the cough and chatting with me and you've helped me a lot. So basically, you know what we're going to do after this is I'm going to take all the feedback from all the leaders. I'm meeting with leaders from different industries within financial services and then we're going to basically develop a competency profile for virtual leadership. And I think that will assist us as talent management professionals moving forward when we work in organisations where we have hybrid or remote working models. When we're interviewing all selecting or developing leaders, we then can use this to guide us because leadership obviously now requires a different skill set when it's virtual.

Participant J: Yeah, definitely.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay Fabio, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Participant J: You're welcome.

Fanie Mordaunt: And you must enjoy the rest of your day.

Participant J: Fanie and good luck with your dissertation.

Fanie Mordaunt: Thank you so much. Okay, cheers.

Participant J: Okay see you.