**Dissertation Interview – Participant I – 19 April 2024**

Fanie Mordaunt: So we will refer to you as Participant and for the transcript, but just as an introduction, do you want to just maybe describe the organisation that you work in? So, like what kind of business is it? And then just describe your role in the organisation.

Participant I: I am in the financial services sector. I'm currently an HR manager and I'm responsible for in HR team in the financial services sector which I work. We are responsible for about 2000 employees.

Fanie Mordaunt: How would you describe the culture of the organisation?

Participant I: So, we have varying degrees of employees, we have some, I won't say temps, but we have certain people that are on different payrolls. So, we have different categories of employees spread across the country. So, I think the reason why I'm sharing that is because from a culture perspective, we relatively young compared to other industries. I think 25 years in the making, but that being said, in the expansion and the growth, what I've been able to see is that it has grown from a kind of family business to something that's a little bit more sizable. And in that growth, we've had to expand. We've had to formalise a culture. We've also have people who have very passionate about their jobs and passionate about customer service. So, for me it's more delighting our customer comes first. I've seen it's a very fast paced industry, but I've also seen a lot of dedicated and committed employees. That's around the culture is also such that we come together. It's quite a flat organisation, which means that we come together as a management team quite regularly, if not like we meet two times a week to discuss business challenges and then also people challenge so fairly that structure. But communication is critical and communication flows quite regularly, not on a weekly basis.

Fanie Mordaunt: Excellent. And just how many people do you manage currently in your team?

Participant I: Okay, so in my team I've got six people that report to me.

Fanie Mordaunt: And you know, in terms of your leadership, how would you describe your leadership style?

Participant I: Okay, good question. I think I would like to say that I offer a very authentic and then also collaborative leadership style. I often like to say that we all have a say in terms of decision making. I tried to provide direction to the team as far as possible. The team is also fairly new team, so we are still figuring out a lot. There's a lot of people who've just joined in the last 6 to 8 months. Which has also created, so we are in the forming stages, but I think my leadership style is cooperative, collaborative, authentic, definitely not in any way kind of autocratic.

Fanie Mordaunt: And then, you know have you always been leading in a virtual setting or was there how many years have you been managing people? Was it before the pandemic or after?

Participant I: I think virtual was after the pandemic. I have to say before the pandemic it was very much, I would say, virtual in the fact that I travelled a lot in previous teams so often. I had to still manage with my team being in a set structure, but me being on the road so that also gave me an element of trust and virtuality. But this is probably one of the first roles post pandemic where I've had to manage people who work from home.

Fanie Mordaunt: So your team work from home. Do you work from home?

Participant I: No, I don't.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay, so how did you adapt your leadership style for this virtual setting? Because I'm assuming that you need to correspond with them through technology when they're at home.

Participant I: Yes, so luckily, I do see the benefit of collaboration and seeing people face to face as mentioned, I think because it is a relatively new team that I am seeing them being here physically does help when we actually do set team meetings. So how I've structured it is that we have two check-ins a week, and those two check-ins is on two different days. And on those days, you know, it's more preferred that on those days they actually come into the office. So, we can actually have team meetings when we have the one-on-one settings that I'm less prescriptive on. So, the one-on-one settings we have virtual. So, what happens is in teams’ format just from a structure perspective, I have two meetings a week with the whole team and then I have every two weeks, I have one on one sessions with each team member and that can be virtually or face to face.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay

Participant I: It depends on if they are working on that day, but the two days where we have a team setting, you know, unless there's real issues, I really prefer that team meetings are done face to face.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay. And in terms of your, development as a leader, what do you believe was some of the challenges that you encountered when you first started managing people remotely and you can even refer back to the other role where you said you travelled often. What did you personally struggle with and how do you feel that you overcame that challenge?

Participant I: Yeah, I think as a leader as a whole and thanks for saying that I can even refer back because I think as a leader, as a whole, especially because I was on the road a lot, I often felt it was quite difficult, I have to say delegating to people virtually or even just, you know, calling them and saying, you know I need XY and Z. So, I needed to actually overcome that. I felt it was easier to say it face to face than it was to do it over the phone, but I also felt that, you know, I had my team there, so I need to actually rely on them so that I've actually grown towards because I think I think there is some difficulty when you are a leader and when you have to virtually delegate tasks. So, I would prefer to do it in my own or rather to, just from a sense of like what the structure, but from a sense off formality. I would say, okay know, I need to wait for the meeting. And then I realise that actually that is I'm not becoming productive there because now I meet them only a certain time. Then I delegate when we have a formal structure and wherever. So, I think I lead with how I want to be lead and I think in that, that being said, I like structures I like also, if you know you give me tasks in my meeting, then I know I have a week to do it in or whatever time and I know I'm structured. But I've realised that post COVID you know the fast paces of work. We cannot wait for meetings to be able to dish out work, and I've had to be a little bit more agile to say, you know, I'm giving it to people. So, I think another part of my not even my leadership style, but a part of who I am is quite an empath. So, for me it's like, you know, sit telling it to you and I know you already have this, big pile of work that you're doing, and I'm coming on the side asking for something to be urgently done. So, for me, that's why I've now changed even our meetings to say our meetings is around, getting to know you. Our meetings are around just understanding and having that sounding board for my team and it just helps in terms of seeing if people are going through burnout etc. So, I try and say that you know I can't give tasks other times and in the one-and-one times is where I can really have that one-to-one check in because I feel if you virtual it's very difficult. You know, as in when to actually assess the mood of the team, etcetera. So that's, I have done it, because I've really you know you kind of wait for the meeting and I've realised that did not help my leadership style at all because it was it was too far between and you know, as I say fast paced environment, I need things to move quickly. I also need answers to be done a little bit better. So now you know, even if it is a Teams et cetera. And what I do is I just check in with them to say you know, I know I sent you several messages in the day or whatever it is. How are you coping? I think we as leaders post COVID. We've really had to become a little bit more aware of other peoples’ emotions. It's actually pushed us to be aware of other people's emotions and also in terms of what they're doing so often. It's a I mean, just this morning, one of my team members had to take family responsibility. And then I checked in because I knew I knew I needed another thing to be done. And I checked in with one of my other colleagues to say my team members to say I know so and so, I've taken leave and I don't know what's on your plate. Please let me know what's in your plate because I actually need this thing quite urgently and so that that's kind of how I operated.

Fanie Mordaunt: And, you know, we living in a in a very different country to the rest of the world in the sense that we've got quite a lot of other things that disrupt us as leaders such as water cuts, you know load shedding and these things do impact productivity. I mean the terrible weather in Cape Town, just for arguments sake, the other week how do you manage around these things like let's use that storm as an example and when one says you know I can't come into the office or I'm struggling with connectivity because of the rain or something. How do you manage productivity and given those circumstances?

Participant I: I mean they real example that you've just shared and I had three members who said, you know, I've really cannot come in. So, what happened was I had one person message me on WhatsApp and then I was a little bit. I actually did not know how. How serious the things were, especially in the different areas in Cape Town. So immediately when that came in, I messaged the whole team and I asked him, you know, what is your circumstance? And I'd really like you know if, please take it as if you cannot come to work. Your safety comes first. You can actually stay at home and then work from home if that is necessary or as long as there's connectivity, because for me, if it's load shedding and if we are on stage six, you're coming into work cause clearly your laptop is not going to last, but for me, if it's those things and there's real safety issues, I don't have a problem with someone working from home in that instance, I've seen that in COVID we did it. My role is such that many a time with it, it's a matter of preference that I'd like everyone to be face to face, but to be honest, I've seen that my team works just as well, if not better from home. So, we still keep our meetings, we still have our check-ins. But I allowed them to? Well, not allowed, but I mean I allowed them to actually use their own discretion. And if it's unsafe to do so, that is important. I mean then, then they shouldn't, because for me it's harder replacing them never mind, from a workplace perspective, but even their lives. So, for me it comes first and similarly if people are on leave etcetera. I know one of my colleagues, one of my team members is taking out their wisdoms on Saturday and she already told me Monday. I don't know how she did, she said I'm not booked off. We don't know how is it going to be, but look, my doctor has said my mouth is going to be quite swollen on the day, so I'm worried. So, she already programmed that she's going to do interviews only on Tuesday, just in case her voice or her mouth or whatever. She won't be approachable, but I told her you know what you can work from home on Monday, so I think I think communication is critical. Yeah, I don't think I'm doing anything different to anyone else, and I think the second thing is trust. Because I don't need to see someone to know that they are working, I can see it in their outputs. And if like if there's real concerns, then we can come, we can come back and especially we are a regional team that's supporting a national base. So, the national based in any case, don't see us. My main thing is I don't want a manager to know where you're working from. I want them to know to, to not it should be business continuity, so I don't want to manage it to know if you're working from home. If you're working from a coffee shop, if you're working from the office.

Fanie Mordaunt: It should feel exactly the same.

Participant I: You should get to a stage where if you have to go to, you know you find the space that is conducive to you. And yeah, because for me it's still about an engaged and a happy employee will give off and will translate into a happy and engaged client. And that's why I want to go, and if it's and if you are unhappy because you are literally spending an hour in traffic every single day, that that's also a bit of a concern. But I can see in terms of the people that I could just maybe one thing to notice is we do have a three-month probation period in our workplace and in the first three months and I think it's something that's really nice that's not instituted in other areas. I think it's a good recommendation, but I've seen it in the space where in the first three months you require to come into the office every day. I think it does help because it does help you embody the culture and embrace the culture and you know, figure out the culture and also to be able to form relationships easier. So, I've seen that work and after the three months I've seen the transfer of knowledge, transfer of skill happened so much easier. And then of course, then people take their two days working from home. So, I just want to just share that because I think that that's really helped. It's helped me orientate myself because you actually seeing all cycles of people, so at some stage you're going to meet with one of the people and it's something that a hybrid workplace without going solution mode. I think it's a good stance for the first three months because it takes a while to onboard a person and I think onboarding can. Well, again, I haven't been in a fully digital workplace, but I think on boarding for the first three months, it is quite critical for it to happen with a face-to-face element.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah. And how do you develop trust? You know when you're working in a virtual setting and you know some people, maybe they haven't gotten a long time to spend with you and they they're working from home and you don't see them all the time. So how do you build that trust?

Participant I: And then so for me it's that dedicated time. So, what I've been and I haven't been good at it, but it is something that I am working towards is honouring that those 30 minutes so, the 30 minutes when we do speak one and one it's how are you doing? You know tell me what's your challenges, what's your highlights, how are you experiencing your job, any obstacles so it's not it's not too much of a thing but it's really just how are you doing where you are aligned it's been four months now. As I said, it's a new team. It's been six months. What are your challenges? And we keep on keep on talking about that. So, I think it's honouring dedicated one on one time with the individual and sometimes it's not only about you, sometimes the individual like stands you up. So, it's about you also making it clear to the individual that, you might think that this is not important. It is important, so I've realised that while we do have the Monday morning check-ins with the team, I don't think it's enough. I don't think that that check-ins are because it's with a group and its six people and you know we can talk about our weekend’s etcetera. But it's so surface level, so the one in one time is something that is critical to be able to develop and also, I think you need to as a manager you also need to be open to feedback. And I think once you open to feedback, then they will be open then they will realise the benefit of you giving feedback to them as well. Because I think feedback wills trust and it shows that you genuinely care. Because I think you could get into the stage where you become this happy manager and say, Okay if you want to work from home, you can work from home etcetera and you think that automatically this person is going to be working from home and then it just doesn't happen. So, for me, it's more yeah, the trust element. I mean, I tell you what, even when people work from home, you know, they message me and then they say, Okay I'm going full lunch now, etcetera. And I mean I haven't told him to do it and I usually send them a thumbs up or, someone just says, you know, I'm stepping out. I don't actually have food, so please note that this and then I was and then I'm like, you know, fine. Just make sure that your clients are not aware if there's anything urgent, so I appreciate that they do tell me, because I mean, I wouldn't have known that otherwise. I do make sure and certain instances also try to set the boundary because I think as a manager sometimes you look at people and then it's like 6:00 o'clock at night and people are working et cetera. I acknowledge those things and I acknowledge that certain times people might take the full hour which we are entitled to have lunch. But you know what? They're working outside of working hours etcetera. So, I think if you don't add up busy manage and if you allow non-performance to happen then it can get it's out of hand. But I think as a manager, you yourself need to just you yourself need to have seen managers, you know, look at green status on Microsoft. I've just have been in a meeting now because it's HRV, we have those meetings where someone is literally micromanaging just by seeing if someone screens status is on. And for me, I just feel like you should be able to I mean, life happens to individuals and clearly that's not the issue. There's something underlying so clearly that person is either not adequately resourced, or rather, you know, has adequately tasked, or that person just doesn't need to. Oh, that person is shirking and then speak about what he or she is shrinking on not really that this person's not at their desk every day. Cause there's enough work to get around, I promise you. So yeah, so that's kind of how it is. I think you need to have a trusting personality and also feel that it shouldn't be what you want. It should be also what your team wants, because I've seen different generations approach it differently.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah, absolutely. you spoke about how you integrate new joiners. You mentioned that they come into the office for the first three months, so I guess from that perspective it is fairly straightforward, but have you been in a situation where there's been a conflict and you've had to manage a conflict virtually?

Participant I: Well, not in my team per say. I don't think I would have personally actually handled it. I actually am one of those people who would prefer to have a face to face. I'm thinking conflict because I didn't even go through a cycle on increase cycles etcetera. So, I would like to do it face to face, although I handle it with a client perspective, not personally with my team now.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay. And then, you know, you spoke a bit about it, but how do you just track performance when people are working from home. You spoke about the micro managing, but from your perspective, because I mean that was with reference with someone else, how do you make sure people are doing what they need to be doing when they're not in front of you?

Participant I: I have 3 recruiters reporting to me and a recruitment administrator. So, I think while I do rely on client feedback, the other thing is just a tracker so, we have a weekly tracker. I make sure that from a recruitment perspective that positions are moved and activities are actually done. So that is going quite well with my HRBP's. We also come together in terms of tracking our ill health cases in terms of tracking our reports. We report on a weekly basis in terms of the appointments, the terminations, how many exit interviews we've done. As mentioned, the IR cases. From an activity perspective, I think it's just important that your team knows that because as a manager you are between your extended or your senior management team and it's important that your team knows and it pushes me to know what's happening in their space. So, it's important that you need to have a solid, even if it's not a tracker, so the micromanaging is I don't want to add more admin. I think we have a lot admin going on already, but I think it's important that you as a manager pays attention to what people are busy on. So, when you are having those meetings, it's not only about you just listening and being there for the 30 minutes, but it's about you as a manager taking accountability to if that's happened next week, you say, okay I know you have those two IR cases you know, have you managed to secure a chairperson? Do you need any help? Do you need any support? So, it's also about not only pushing your agenda, but also just understanding what are they doing and where do they have bottlenecks from. But I also have meetings with their because we are in a service function and so it's also important for me to know that their clients are happy. So, I regularly have meetings with the clients with them also present, like the regional managers and the sales managers, to be able to see, hey, you know, how are you supported, supported how what can we do better et cetera. So, it's like, so it's almost like another check because I think for me it's about holding them accountable. We have lots of trackers and measurements that go in on a weekly basis, but I think holding them accountable is something that they need to see to be able to act upon it.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah, agreed. And just closing, you’ve spoken quite a bit about your leadership and two things you mentioned at just took notes was heightened emotional intelligence. And I think you also touched quite a lot on communication, but if you had to think about a few other competencies, what would you believe is really important competencies if you're going to be managing a virtual team effectively?

Participant I: Yeah, another good question so, I think with the communication. I think also your availability without you being available all the time, but like availability, because I think sometimes you know and I am guilty of it. I know one of my one of my team members who's working from home. They messaged at 9:00 o'clock and then they said hi, you know, do you have a few minutes to chat? And I and I noticed that only messaged him back at 11 and he messaged me on online and then he also messaged me. He sent me a message on WhatsApp and I was in a meeting straight like literally for those two hours. So, I didn't want to be distracted and I think he understood but I think I needed to be. You know that awareness, as you say, emotional intelligence to be able to say if I was in the office, number one, he would have seen that I was in a meeting, number 2 if I was in the office, he could have maybe grabbed me when I was running to the bathroom or whatever. I don't think it was urgent and I did get back to him and it was fine, but then there I think for me it's making sure that you are kind of available, or if you're not like so now what I've told the team is, you know, check my diary, like if I'm in a call, you know, I will get back to you at least by the end of the day. So, I think it's a quite or being open to the constant feedback, because I think they some people send emails or trying to get any attention. So, for me, it's being attentive not in a way that they will always need you. And I don't believe in that type of leadership, I think but if there's a crisis just to say, this is where it's at. So, I think for me it's available, it’s having the attention for your staff because and also, I think it’s the whole thing that certain instances certain people's lives are different. So, for an example, I mean there might be someone who comes into the office every single day just because of their circumstance is different. Understand that the difference, understand your bias, because sometimes you can be more biased to someone who's just in your face the whole time versus someone who is who actually has, you know, children to see or who is living 40 kms away, who takes like an hour away to get to work. So, I think it's also about having a leadership style that involves a lot of flexibility or like situational, I think it was at some stage we call it situational leadership, but I think it's really understanding your situation and realising that while you can be authentic and you can be connected, different people are going to need different things from you at different times. And so, you can’t I’m always thinking, you know, I cannot favour because remember, I said I work from the office all the time. Now let's say there's someone else that works from the office four days. I need to be aware that I shouldn't favour them, but opposed to someone else who I've allowed to work from home two days in a week. So, I think for me it's testing my bias testing in my favourites and acknowledging that this person who works from home two days a week is contributing more if not all and I really and maybe my last comment is we should not have this. This mindset and it's something that's big in the industry not only in in my business, but we shouldn't have a mindset that working from home is something that is someone is lazy for or someone is off. You know people like, you're off. People who work from home work more and they work harder.

Fanie Mordaunt: You know. No, that's true.

Participant I: That's my mindset is they are always on. When I've worked from home, I am always on like, you know, when I'm in the office, it comes to 6:00 o'clock and I see it being getting dark and I go home when I'm working from home often it would go to 7:00 o'clock and then I'd realise because my family is waiting for me, that shucks, we don't have dinner tonight. So, I just feel setting boundaries is important for people who are working from home, but I feel that got the you just need to set a boundary which whichever way.

Fanie Mordaunt: Agree. Thank you so much for all the feedback. I really, really appreciate it, and I think you've contributed quite a lot. So, I think we just to give you wholistic feedback where I'm in my process is I'm just gathering data. I'm speaking to people from financial services companies and different roles, different years of experience in leadership. Just give gathering the details and what we're hoping to do is to develop, a better understanding of virtual leadership. So, I’m focusing more on the competencies whereas you get other researchers who are focusing on, for example, which tools are most effective for communicating virtually, there's different ways that people are looking at this and there's some PhD students who are actually looking at tools, psychometric tools and screening tools for fully remote and virtual leadership. So, it's going to help advance human resources in terms of recruitment and selection, but it's also going to help us to understand or broaden our understanding when we are actually recruiting and selecting virtual leaders just because it's not the same as every day in the office face to face leadership. So, I really appreciate your insights. Thank you so much. And yeah, there's anything else that pops up you welcome to reach out.

Participant I: No problem. Thanks.

Fanie Mordaunt: Thank you. Have a wonderful day.

Participant I: Awesome bye.