How To Manage A Remote Team

As COVID-19 forces employers to embrace remote work, leaders have found themselves faced with a unique challenge: engaging employees from afar. Here's how to get started.

There's no question that coronavirus is going to accelerate companies' transition to remote work. The director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is already asking businesses in the U.S. to prepare for "social distancing," including canceling in-person meetings and having employees work from home. Major corporations are recommending that their people work from home to avoid the potentially devastating impact of ill employees infecting their colleagues.

Here are six tips to support managers.

TIP #1: Agreement on Work Cadence and Communication

The most important thing you need to do as a leader of a remote team is to set expectations and gain agreement from your team in three areas. Team members may feel distant from each other not because of the number of physical miles, but rather by the amount of time—the delay—it takes to get an answer from other members of the team. Team members work better together when communication is predictable—not necessarily fast, but predictable.

Set parameters around these 3 areas:

• What are the normal working hours for the team? When will the workday begin, and when will it end? Will there be periods in the day where everyone on the team will need to be available? Will there be flex time during the day for self-care?

• How long will it take to get back to each other? If we reach out with a question, should we expect an answer immediately? Within an hour? By the end of the day? And will this change be based on the communication channel? Is it acceptable to respond to internal emails by the end of the work day? Do phone calls from team members warrant a more immediate response?

• How will team members notify each other when they will be unavailable and unable to meet these expectations (e.g., out at a doctor's appointment)? Will only the supervisor be notified? Do we send a team email? Will the team use a shared calendar? #1: Get 3 Agreements

TIP #2: Schedule Time for Touching Base and Regular Meetings

Here are some suggestions for ways to stay linked to your team, but remember to choose a format that works best for your team dynamic.

• Daily 30 minute team meetings held in the morning to touch base and review current projects and tasks.

• Weekly one-on-one meetings. For example: "Mondays Are For Meetings" and every direct report has 30-minutes with their manager to maintain communication, ask questions, give ideas, and to review priorities.

• A Weekly Action Review with your direct reports should take no longer than 30 minutes. It's an opportunity for everyone to share and sync up on their weekly priorities, opportunities, and data.

• End-of-Day Check-in. At the end of each day, every team member shares a list of things they completed that day.

TIP #3: Establish a Video-First Culture

"Video-first" is an organizational communication strategy that places priority on video conferencing tools, as opposed to audio-only conference calls. Whether having a one-on-one meeting or a team meeting, the benefits of video-first practice include:

- Ability to use and observe non-verbal communication

- Encourages people to participate in meetings from a professional, quiet location (as opposed to just dialing-in-and-muting while driving in the car)

- Encourages people to get dressed in the morning!

TIP #4: Keep It Personal

Relationships at work are critical to a high performing team. The classic Gallup Q12 survey item, "I have a best friend at work" illustrates the power of workplace friendships on employee engagement. And personal relationships go a long way to building trust and reducing unproductive conflict. In a traditional office, water cooler chitchat and lunch time conversation happens naturally. Here are some practical tips for keeping remote teams fun and personal:

- Use the first few minutes of your Monday team meetings to ask about everyone's weekend, or similar personal interest. Have everyone spend 20-30 seconds sharing, "What was the best part of your weekend?" Or, "What's going in your world these days?"
- Create an online area (e.g., Slack channel, Basecamp chat, etc.) to discuss things like sports, movies, or even a monthly online book club.

- Create an online area, or group email, where people can share photos of their pets, or from recent vacations, holidays, or other events

- Don't forget to recognize team members for their effort and achievements. Share to the whole team positive feedback from customers, or internal customers.

TIP #5: Invest (a Little) In Tools & Tech

Any workplace can survive a one or two-week work-from-home experiment; it's not much different than an employee taking a vacation or sick time. But if you expect your team members to work for several months and keep their normal productivity, then you should be prepared to make at least a minimal investment in hardware and software. Consider:

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- The basics: high speed Wi-Fi, good ergonomic chair, external keyboard, mouse, and monitor for their laptop or tablet.

- For video-conferencing software consider many free or low-cost options to start: Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams.

- For teaming and project management software consider: Basecamp, Asana, Wrike, Monday.

TIP #6: Consider Personalities

Great leaders individualize their approach to leadership and take the time to truly understand what motivates and challenges each team member. Using any of the popular behavioral assessments you can understand who on your team might have an easier or harder time with a work from home situation.

- Everything DiSC—your team members who have primarily an Influence or Steadiness style are more social than others and may miss the daily interpersonal connections that happen in an office. Your Dominant team members, while needing less social interaction, might struggle with productivity without the structure of the office. Your Conscientious types will make the transition most easily.

- EQ-I 2.0—using the Emotional Quotient Inventory you may want to provide extra assistance to those who are lower on the scales of impulse control, flexibility, and stress tolerance.

- Clifton Strengths (formerly Clifton Strengths Finder)—those on your team who have strengths from the Relationship Building domain (e.g., connectedness, developer, includer, relator) may need extra support while working alone remotely. Your team members who have strengths primarily from the Executing domain (e.g., discipline, focus, responsibility, achiever) will likely make the transition with little trouble.

How to Keep Remote Employees Engaged & Productive

Don't make assumptions. Don't assume because you know how to use online video conferencing tools like Microsoft Teams, that everyone else in the office knows how to use these tools. If you have a new team member or someone that is not comfortable with the technology then ask a member of the IT team or someone in the office who is a pro at using remote collaboration tools to host a webinar and invite employees to attend. Record the webinar so that people can refer back to it, should they need to do so.

Be flexible. The caregivers that you're allowing to work from home have lives that may not be conducive to working remotely. They might have kids who've been sent home from daycare or school, or a spouse who works remotely. Be less concerned about the hours they work and more concerned about the results.

Check-in with your team regularly. Pick up the phone and ask your team members how they're doing and what you can do to support them. Offer to extend deadlines, if doing so will lessen the stress they're feeling trying to balance your needs and that of their family.

![Cleveland Clinic Wellness]

Be generous. Think out of the box to let your team know that you appreciate them. An example would be: after completing a large project, send your team food from Grub Hub or organize a virtual paint and sip event or virtual cooking class to say thank you.

Lead with transparency. No doubt, you'll be asked questions that you either don't know the answer to or are unable to answer. People expect leaders to lead with openness and not withhold information that could help further understanding of the issue. What they don't expect is for leaders to have all the answers. It's okay to say, "I don't know. But I will find the answer." or "I'm unable to provide you with an answer at this point."

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