

In response to the uncertainties presented by Covid-19 working from home has become a necessity for companies across the globe. As a manager or team leader you maybe have suddenly found yourself managing a completely remote team. It can be scary, especially with the lack of time to prepare and if it's the first time you have experienced it.

The Covid-19 has caused disruption and rearrangement of the workplace with breathtaking speed. Without warning managers have been thrown into leading remote teams. It is challenging enough to manage yourself in quarantine without your usual workday and human interaction and adding the task of managing a team under those conditions can be very daunting. Set yourself and your team up for success by:

Have a Daily Check-In

Whenever possible this should be one-on-one if your employees work more independently from each other or a team check in if their work is highly collaborative. If possible, it should be conducted face-to-face via video. Phone conversations and email can only go so far and it is good for your team to see you and you need to see them. The important feature is that the calls are regular and predictable and that employees feel they can consult with you and their concerns and questions be heard. At first try to do this everyday in order to set an agenda, provide feedback and resources that your team members need.

Communicate a Lot

Regular communication with your team is vital. One of the hardest things about transitioning to a working from home environment, especially when you are used to an office environment is the sense of loneliness and isolation that can set in. In these circumstances it is especially difficult considering the need for social distancing.

Be open in order to maintain good lines of communication. It takes effort to be on the same page all the time so it is best to err on the side of over-communication and is why you should reinforce the message that you are always contactable.

Update your team even if you have no real update to alleviate anxiety. The more you communicate and share the less likely there will be a loss of information. Maintaining transparency through a crisis with frequent updates is the ultimate expression of good faith, empathy and genuine concern for your team.

And then establish 'rules of engagement'

work is more efficient and satisfying when managers set expectations for the frequency, means and ideal timing of communication for their teams eg we use videoconferencing for daily check-in meetings, but we use IM when something is urgent. Also let your employees know the best way of reaching you during the workday eg I will be more available late in the day for ad hoc phone calls but if there is an emergency earlier in the day send me a text.

Keep an eye on communication among team members to ensure that they are sharing information as needed.

Provide opportunities for remote social interaction

One essential step a manager can take is to structure a way for employees to interact socially (ie have informal conversations about non-work topics) while working remotely, especially for those who have abruptly been transitioned out of the office.

The easiest way is to leave some time at the beginning of team calls just for non-work items (eg first few minutes is a catch up with each other for example How was your weekend?). Other options include virtual office parties (in which party 'care packages' can be sent in advance to be opened and enjoyed simultaneously). While it may sound artificial or forced, experienced managers of remote workers (and the workers themselves) report that virtual events help reduce feelings of isolation, promoting a sense of belonging.

Offer encouragement and emotional support

It is important in this abrupt shift to remote work that managers acknowledge stress, listen to employees' anxieties and concerns and empathise with their struggles. As how they are doing especially if you notice an employee struggling but not communicating. Even asking 'how is this remote work situation going for you so far' can give you information you might not otherwise hear. Listen carefully to their response and allow it to be the focus of the conversation.

Research on emotional intelligence and emotional contagion tells us that employees look to their managers for cues about how to react to sudden changes or crisis situations. If a manager communicates stress and helplessness this will have a trickle-down effect on employees. Acknowledge the stress and anxiety employees may be feeling in difficult circumstances but also provide affirmation of their confidence in their team using

phrases such as 'we've got this' or 'we can handle this' or 'lets look for ways to use our strengths during this time'. With this type of support employees are more likely to take up the challenge with a sense of purpose and focus.

Manage Expectations

Be there for your team and help them work out what they should do with the creation of realistic expectations for their work. Set the team up for success by clearly stating the tasks and the reasons behind them and help them understand how you will measure success.

Focus on Outcomes not activity and Reset Expectations

It is not possible to manage every aspect of what your remote team is doing. Instead of focusing on activity or hours worked, focus on the outcomes and measure your team accordingly.

Most teams are used to working together in the same office, under the same working conditions with the same work schedule. In a quarantined environment, managers must help their teams shift and reset expectations for how work gets done. Letting go of when and how tasks are accomplished and allowing your team members to do so on their own terms. This means focusing on results and offering more flexibility.

Resource Your Team

Ensuring your team has the necessary technology for them to get their work done is essential. Its not reasonable to assume that everyone is equipped with laptops, software, mobile devices or even a high-speed internet connection. Its your responsibility as a manager that they are set up appropriately with what they need to do their job.

Be Flexible

Understand that in the current environment your team has a lot going on. While this isn't an excuse for not getting things done it is a reason to recognise what productivity means. Regular work hours are probably difficult for many people so instead trust your team, give them freedom and flexibility to get the work done on schedule and that will help them be the most productive.

Be Empathetic

Empathy, emotional intelligence, or basic human decency, the idea is the same and since remote team management is all about collaboration and working side-by-side the ability to place yourself in the shoes of another person play a major part in the success of the teams work.

Be Organised

The team manager is essentially a juggler. No matter what the size of the team it is up to the manager to keep everything in check and when it comes to working with remote teams the core idea is that you allow flexibility but maintain consistency. Having a concrete plan is a must but be open to adjusting strategies at the same time.

Be Trustful

Building trust with your team is essential for the management success. Employees need to trust that their managers are looking out for their best interest. Managers also need to trust that the employees are engaged and motivated at work.

Be Patient

Newly remote teams and their members need to adjust to the work from home and to each others styles of working from home. It is important to understand how others on your team behave and what you can expect from them. During the initial period the manager needs to be patient and accept that others are different and may make mistakes while things are put in place.

Be Appreciative

Working from home gives a certain degree of freedom workwise, however it can also breed negativity and loneliness. The importance of positive reinforcement is highlighted again and can't be stressed enough.

Recognising your employees is one of the most important tools at a manager's disposal. Employees who feel valued are significantly more likely to have high levels of energy and feel strongly involved in their work and happy in what they do. The frequency of this recognition also needs to be highlighted because infrequent feedback has less impact than more regular contact.

Gauge Stress and Engagement Levels

Make it clear to your team members that your main concern is their well-being. Take the time to monitor their engagement by periodically asking them on a scale of zero to 10 to rate their level of stress they are currently feeling. Do the same with their level of overall engagement. Your intuitive sense of the employee may be wrong, so it helps to get such responses.

It's harder to read the emotional cues of your people when they aren't in the same room. You are used to relying on non-verbal data and body language whereas now you must rely on other indicators such as text, voice and infrequent video communications. Pay close attention to patterns in the tone of written communication, rate, volume, pitch and inflexion of voice and any physical gestures in video communication. If you know your people well, changes in these patterns will help you identify early that a team member may need some additional support.

Be Optimistic

Remove fear from the team by modelling optimism. Optimism is contagious and leaders who demonstrate hopefulness and confidence in the future can better help team members find meaning and purpose in their work, especially under stressful conditions. Using humour is always good to bring about some relief as fear freezes initiative, ties up creativity and yields compliance instead of commitment. Consider that being constrained is often a factor that sparks innovation. Invite your team to use the quarantine conditions as a stimulus for new ideas.

COMMON CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORK

Lack of Face-to-Face Supervision

Manager and employees often have concerns regarding the lack of face-to-face interaction. Managers worry that employees will not work as hard or efficiently from home and employees struggle with reduced access to managerial support and communication. Employees sometimes feel that remote managers are out of touch with their needs and so in turn are not supportive or helpful in getting their own work done.

Lack of Access to Information

Employees new to remote work are often surprised by how much more time and effort it takes to locate information from co-workers. Getting answers to what seem like simple questions can feel difficult to a worker based at home. This extends beyond task-related work and relates to interpersonal challenges experienced by remote workers. The lack of mutual knowledge among remote workers translates to a lower willingness to give co-workers the benefit of the doubt in difficult situations. If you know that your workmate is having a bad day you will view a brusque email from them as a natural product of their stress. However, if it's received as a remote worker with no understanding of their co-workers current circumstances employees are more likely to take offense or to think poorly of the co-worker's professionalism.

Social isolation

Loneliness is a common issue with remote work, with employees missing the informal social interaction of an office setting. It is natural that extraverts may seem to suffer from isolation more in the short run, however over longer periods, isolation can cause any employee to feel less 'a part of' or 'belonging to' their organisation.

Distractions at home

Typically working from home employees are not encouraged to be holding their child and typing on their laptop and are encouraged to ensure their environment has both a dedicated workspace and they have adequate childcare prior. However, in the case of a sudden transition to remote work there is a much greater chance that employees will be dealing with suboptimal workspaces and in the case of school and day-care closures unexpected parenting responsibilities. Even in normal circumstances family and home demands can impinge on remote work. Manager should expect these distractions to be greater during this unplanned work-from-home transition.

Your employees are inherently social creatures who long to belong and when team members feel included, safe to contribute and safe to challenge the status quo without fear of being embarrassed, marginalised or punished is so important even under conditions of quarantine. Creating and sustaining such an environment will allow them to perform and contribute effectively and most importantly at a time like you, you are acknowledging their humanity.