Top 12 Tips
for Managing Remote Teams

In the past week, I heard from several former colleagues who contacted me for advice on managing remote workers. As companies around the globe grapple to address coronavirus and the workplace, managers who have never led distributed workforces before are facing the very real likelihood of an immediate crash-course in remote management. As for the colleagues who have contacted me, such an abrupt change is causing a fair amount of anxiety. As so many are seeking answers today, I wrote this blog, from someone who has managed distributed teams across my 20+ year career, to offer advice and suggestions to those of you who are mapping out your remote employee management game plan.

HOW DO YOU MANAGE REMOTE TEAMS?

First, take comfort in knowing that managers around the globe, in companies of all sizes, have successfully led entire teams of distributed groups and individuals. If you've only led teams who are physically located in the same office, the notion of extending to a distributed team environment can open a lot of new opportunities for you, as the manager. New resources are available if you're open to a broader geographic area. Lower cost locations become available, allowing you to allocate resources better. Business continuity is at hand when trusted employees announce a lifestyle change that includes residence in a new location.

What's different about remote management is the way you, as a manager, approach team culture, communications, and collaboration. If any of those three elements drop from your management recipe, then team productivity is at risk. When leading a remote team, none of the elements need to be left behind, but in keeping team effectiveness at its pinnacle, the manager must approach some aspects of leadership differently.

Below are 12 tips for managing remote workers:

1 | **HUMANIZE EACH TEAM-MEMBER** – Ensure all team members have their photos entered into your email, chat, and conferencing systems. It may sound trite but in a distributed environment, using every opportunity to humanize each team member is important.

2 | **USE VIDEO CONFERENCING** – Distributed teams tend to require a lot more meetings. That's because the impromptu water-cooler discussions and white-boarding sessions don't take place when the team isn't physically in the office. When you do meet, lead with a culture of video conferencing over voice only. Nothing matches facial expressions and eye contact, even if across a network environment, for understanding and connection. Not everyone is used to video conferencing but by leading by example, video will quickly becomes the norm.

3 | **HOST TEAM MEETINGS (VOICE OR VIDEO)** – In addition to individual conversations and group-based discussions, make it a priority to host regular audio and/or video meetings for your team. I host a one-hour meeting with my direct reports weekly and an all-hands every month.

4 | **SCHEDULE REGULAR CHECK-INS AT ALL LEVELS** – In a distributed environment, you'll notice that you interact with some employees a lot and a lot of employees a little. When you're not able to walk by a desk and stop for a quick chat, those who you don't have a lot of direct contact with may fade into the background for you. For them, it could mean a feeling of disconnectedness with the team. Make it your responsibility to check in with employees across the team at regular intervals and do so with a phone call. Text via email or chat applications may help to identify an action but voice or video is best for reconnecting. When you do so, be sure to compliment the individual on something accomplished at work and ask for feedback in general or on a specific topic. You may not see it, but doing this simple act is important for remote workers.

5 | **CREATE CASUAL TEAM BUILDING** – In several teams that I've been a part of, a creative individual has typically come up with a fun virtual team building idea. One employee featured a different team member every two weeks in a humorous write up that she called 'the blawg'. Another company had a full intranet area for pet owners to share stories and photos. One employee hosted a 'guess where I am' photo area that garnered a lot of conversation across the teams. Since you can't take your distributed team out to lunch or dinner for bonding, these casual team-building exercises, only if they are natural and authentic, tend to bring out personalities and provide more color to the virtual team.

6 | **DON'T FORGET, SIMPLE TOUCHES MATTER** – Nothing beats receiving a gift or a hand-written note in the mail. For those who worked hard to achieve something great, send them a gift card, and award or something else. Always include a hand-written note along with whatever you send. Over the holidays, get hand-written holiday cards out to everyone. Simple touches are often overlooked in distributed environments but if you want someone to feel appreciated, make the effort to appreciate them.

7| **DON'T MULTI-TASK** – When you have more meetings with your team-members and colleagues (because you will have more meetings in a distributed environment) it is tempting and easy to multi-task during your calls. Don't do it. If you've made the time to discuss a topic with your team or an individual – be present. When the conversation stops and your name is mentioned, the silence from lack of following the conversation sets a tone of irreverence and discourtesy. Treat virtual conversations the very same way you'd treat an in-person conversation.

8| **SET WORKING HOURS AND EXPECTATIONS** – Employees who are physically in the office have much more of a feeling that their presence or absence, is noticeable. Some remote employees, on the other hand, who are more self-managed, may begin exercising flexible or creative working hours. It is up to the manager to set expectations for business hours and availability. In the eventual case where an individual is consistently offline for several business hours, a 1:1 conversation to reinforce expectations may be needed.

9| **REQUIRE MEETING OBJECTIVES** – As humans naturally gravitate toward social interaction, a remote work environment often blossoms into far more meetings scheduled than a physical office environment. While interactions are good for teambuilding, too many meetings may drain the hours for acting rather than talking. One way to manage the meeting volume is to require meeting objectives. The most productive meetings are those focused on solving problems and making decisions. The meetings types that tend to proliferate coming with no objections, focusing on reporting out, exchanging information or data gathering. Drive to a culture where meetings are welcomed but must come with a clear objective that is action oriented.

10| **MODEL THE RIGHT MEETING BEHAVIOR** – As the most productive meetings begin with clear objectives and conclude with documented actions (owner, deliverable, and date), many meeting owners may not be aware of effective meeting management practices. As the manager or management team, conduct your meetings in this manner so that others can understand what effective meeting management looks like and then encourage them to do the same.

11| **TRACK ACTIONS** – Without the ability to check in on progress with a quick walk-by, tracking actions becomes much more important for the team leader in a distributed team. One way for everyone to stay aligned on actions and priorities is to maintain a shared project plan and action list. Always make sure the action list includes the action owner, deliverable, and due date. I like to include a simple green, yellow, red next to each action so everyone is clear where actions stand and push to get deliverables in by the due date. Another hint from years of doing this, watch for those who just keep changing the due date when they don't deliver on their initial date. If task owners agree on their deliverable and date, short of a discussion that changes expectations, individual accountability is important for an action-driven team.

12| **MAKE SURE YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TOOLS** – If the company is embracing a remote work environment, it is your responsibility to ensure they are set up with the right work environment. Aside from the chair and desk they'll provide, you need to arm them with a good PC, screen, video conferencing, chat, email, business phone system, file sharing, and collaboration tools. Employees without the right tools will not be able to put their best foot forward and will soon get frustrated with their work environment. They need the basics.

Questions? Contact Us Today

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