

Managing teams remotely

The steps that governments around the world are taking to protect their citizens from the global COVID-19 outbreak are having a profound impact on the way we work. More people are being asked, where possible, to avoid coming to their workplace and instead to carry on their usual work duties from home.

For many teams, working apart from one another is part of their standard practice, and therefore the impact of the increasing restrictions on movement on their work performance will be minimal. But for some people who are being asked to work remotely for the first time, the change can pose challenges. However, with good forward planning, technology and effective communication, managers and leaders can continue to effectively coordinate their teams and support employees during this period of uncertainty.

Communication – the key to managing remote teams

Frequent, quality communication is critical when managing people remotely. It's easy to take for granted that people know what is expected of them in their role, but for many employees, touching base with their leader or manager is important to help them keep on track and feel supported.

Establishing good patterns of communication from the get-go is therefore essential in managing a team remotely. Start by letting your team know what the best way of getting in touch with you is and when; if you prefer phone calls to lengthy emails, then make that clear from the start. And if possible, share your calendar with your team so that they can easily check what times of the day you may be freer over others.

During this particular time of uncertainty, it's important to keep communication flowing; this means taking time to get in touch with your team **more often than you would normally** – it could be an email in the morning setting out expectations for the day, listing what the priorities are. Or depending on the size of the team, it could be a phone call to each one to check in on how they're doing; you're the best judge of how and when it should be done, but whatever it is, make sure that you're doing it frequently. This will help to reassure staff that you're across all the important issues that are arising and that they can still rely on you for help and support, even if you're not working under the same roof.

Take care to vary your means of communication – don't just stick to the one you're the most comfortable with. There is email, phone calls, instant messaging (such as Google Hangouts or Slack) and video calling (such as Skype, Zoom, Teams or WhatsApp) to choose from. If your schedules don't allow for everyone in your team to join a video conference together, record the meeting for sharing with those who had to miss it.

Don't feel obliged to only talk about work – given the current crisis, employees may appreciate you asking how they're doing personally, how they're coping with managing their workload, caring for loved ones, etc. This is an unprecedented situation, and – ironically – despite it causing people to have to stay apart from one another, everyone is going through this experience for the first time, together, and in many ways, it is a unifying force.

Useful tips for managing your team remotely

- ◆ Set expectations for each team member from the outset; make sure everyone knows that they need to be doing and when – the more details the better
- ◆ Find out from your team if there is anything that is blocking them from performing their role effectively and work out ways to manage that
- ◆ Ask your team regularly to share with the group the approaches and the techniques that they're finding useful to get through their work in isolation from the rest of the team
- ◆ Encourage your staff to set boundaries for themselves by scheduling breaks and keeping within normal working hours, if it makes sense to do so – when working from home, it's easy for people to work through lunchbreaks or work beyond their usual office hours
- ◆ Encourage people to stay active – for many people, their commute is the only exercise they get in their day. With the absence of a daily commute, many people will be losing out on their only exercise in the week. So, remind people of the importance of finding other ways to keep active
- ◆ Ask your team regularly for feedback on how you're doing – what's working and what's not? Is there something you could be doing differently to better support the team?
- ◆ Be patient with people – the current crisis is a new experience for everyone, and many of your staff may be already dealing with health anxieties along with the pressures of staying on top of work. For some people, it may be a battle to work efficiently and care for children in the home at the same time - small children don't always understand why adults have to work and balancing both responsibilities is a challenge. Understand that the transition to working from home will take time and make allowances for people.

Lean on technology to support you

If your workplace hasn't yet asked people to work from home, it is wise to start preparing yourself and your team for such an eventuality. Discuss ways in which you can support one another and begin planning what technology you may need to help stay connected. Be aware that maybe not everyone on your team is tech savvy and give extra support where necessary to such staff.

Finally, remember to thank your team and make them feel appreciated for all of their efforts. Look to the positives and remind them of the benefits of working from home. And look out for what works well during this time, because eventually this crisis will end, but new habits that are formed now don't necessarily have to.

Remember, restricting movement, while it is a major inconvenience in many ways, is a necessary step in controlling the spread of COVID-19. We all have a part to play in supporting our communities to successfully navigate this crisis and see it through.

If you need any assistance in managing your team – just call. Our leadership specialists are here to help.

We're here when you need us

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