3 Smart Tips for Successfully Managing Remote Teams

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Consider for a moment the current nine-to-five, butts-in-seats paradigm of American work life. Where did it come from?

The first wave of the Industrial Revolution took off in the textile factories of Great Britain in the 18th century. Workers were needed to operate looms that would spin cotton, linen or wool on a mass scale into yarn used to make garments, rugs, upholstery, and other products.

Productivity depended on human bodies congregating under one roof and attending to machinery. Human dexterity or decision-making was needed to help the machines generate maximum output while also overseeing quality control. This became the default arrangement for numerous sectors of industry.

Nowadays that script is flipped. Outside the manufacturing sector, most workers no longer need to congregate within the same four walls to attend to big, cumbersome machinery. In fact, today's digital tools, rather than demanding attendance, largely free employees of the need to be confined under one roof. Welcome to the dispersed workplace.

Prior to COVID-19, around 5 percent of employed Americans

worked from home or worked remotely. At the height of the pandemic's stay-at-home orders, that percentage jumped to 62 percent.

What's more, three in five said they want to keep working remotely, if possible.

If you're an entrepreneur who suddenly finds yourself in charge of managing a remote team of employees, here are three areas to focus on to set your team up for success.

1. Communicate, communicate, communicate.

Communication is more than 90 percent of managing remote teams. However, with team members working from outside a common workspace, numerous communication methods are suddenly off the table.

Sticky-note reminders, office doorway chats, phone intercom updates, ad hoc roundtables and dozens of other little in-person communication methods are no longer available options. Without all these options at your disposal, communication may get haphazard or careless at times, allowing assumptions to replace clear direction in your team members' minds and throwing projects off track.

As your team members shift to working remotely, your communication methods will have to adapt, too. Recognize the importance of streamlining your communications so that the transmission of important info is as efficient as possible, team members stay up-to-date on projects, and everyone feels accountable without becoming completely overwhelmed by a deluge of calls, emails, chats, and so on.

Relatedly, many managers often frustrate team members by choosing an inappropriate communication method. We've all heard the "meeting that could've been an email" complaint.

Avoid being that team leader by considering, is this mostly a passing-off of information that's self-explanatory? Go with email. Or is there important back and forth needed to generate ideas and build consensus? Better go with a conference call or video chat. One specific advantage of video chat is the ability for team members to pick up on the many non-verbal cues that are absent from written communication.

On the other hand, one advantage of email is the ability to archive important messages, search by keywords and retrieve when needed. However, free apps like Otter are bringing this functionality to conference calls as well. Otter can record your team's voice conversations and provide automated transcripts based on those recordings, giving your team members a searchable document for retrieving key info later when they need it.

2. Make sure your team is properly resourced.

At your company, how much of new employee's first day or week is typically spent introducing them to all the resources, equipment, and helpful personnel? From ergonomic office chairs to help-yourself snack bars, the first few workdays have the excited aura of an elementary school show-and-tell session.

Yet all that resource-thinking tends to go out the window with remote workers. Granted, part of the advantage of remote workers is cutting costs, including on office space and related resources. And, of course, this isn't to suggest you need to ship an expensive espresso machine to every one of your remote workers. But their obstacles to success are your obstacles. Part of your check-ins with team members should be making sure they have all the tools they need to facilitate workflow and achieve the best work they're capable of. Asking them to be reflective about their workflow and identify hangups to productivity may make it clear what resources may

be in order.

It’s also important to consider there may be a difference between your more seasoned remote workers and team members who have been thrown into remote work for the first time due to COVID-19. The latter may not be accustomed to thinking about structuring their own workspace for comfort, productivity, and workflow.

It may not be getting them set up with a standing desk of their own. It might just be as simple as setting their computer on top of a stack of books. Even small enhancements, like a WiFi booster, noise-cancelling headphones or a better camera if they’re presenting to clients on your behalf, may make a huge difference.

3. Foster team spirit.

Let’s face it: people want to belong. Particularly for Americans, work is one of the leading ways by which we choose to define ourselves and where we seek a sense of belonging. Many psychologists have pointed out that employees tend to keep working for companies when they have positive relationships with their coworkers, and productivity often increases as well.

That sense of belonging gets complicated when coworkers are dispersed and meaningful face-to-face interactions are minimized. Even the workplace’s cheesier moments—the obligatory birthday celebrations, watercooler pow-wows, the rush to snag free donuts in the breakroom, etc.—are powerful contributors to making people feel they belong.

Without these possibilities for connection, remote working adds to the likelihood that team members may feel isolated from one another and less aligned with the mission of the organization. In fact, according to Buffer’s “State of the Remote Report,” loneliness was the second most-cited answer

from respondents when asked about their struggles with working remotely.

To keep that sense of camaraderie alive that helps teams work well together, team leaders should create opportunities for team members to bring their fuller selves into remote workplace interactions. Remote workplace interactions often fail prey to being all work, all the time.

Team leaders should create channels where coworkers can interact on a more personal level, perhaps for sharing common interests, establishing helpful mentor-mentee relationships or celebrating milestones.

If the workforce is split between office and remote workers, keep in mind that remote workers might feel like second-class employees, only there to submit completed tasks. Consider giving them more leadership roles to balance out that perceived, even if inaccurate, sense of importance in the organization’s eyes.

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