4 Ways to Effectively Manage and Lead Teams Virtually

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Over the last few months, many businesses have been forced to work remotely. Other businesses are choosing remote work over in-office – particularly when team members are all across the country and globe. The trend has resulted in many managers facing steep learning curves to become effective virtual leaders.

“Beyond the pain and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, this window of time has altered my management style and perspective on the intersection of sports, media and technology in some significant ways,” says GlobalVC Sports co-founder Jeff Volk. “We work with the same tools at our disposal: a computer, mobile devices, our relationships and our ability to drive value through them. While the tools are the same, our surroundings are different, which has led to the implementation of new, smart virtual working conditions that enable us to reimagine what being ‘present’ really means.”

“This includes far more frequent recurring check-ins via remote tools, with colleagues, partners and industry peers,” Volk says. “Most importantly, every ‘meeting’ begins with a personal conversation about families and how people are managing through the new work-life balance. I know our teams are more plugged-in to innovation and more super-connected as a result.”

Whether you’re managing a team virtually short-term in

response to the COVID-19 crisis or are choosing to make work virtual long-term, it’s important to be proactive about identifying and addressing some of the unique challenges that come with virtual management. The hardest part of working remotely is developing and keeping the strong culture that each great team has. With that in mind, here are four proven methods for effective management and leadership of virtual teams.

1. Standardize and prioritize communication systems

Communication is a central aspect of ensuring that your team is working together, on the same page and fully engaged. It’s easier to communicate in-person, where you can see body language, better read nonverbal communication and more naturally conduct formal and informal conversations. As a result, effective communication is one of the most challenging aspects of virtually managing a team and something that effective leaders prioritize.

An important first step is creating systems for communications. These would include guidelines about the specific communication channel to use, e.g., when to respond with an email, when to have a phone call, when to have a video call and when to create a more formal document.

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Additionally, it’s helpful to create some communication norms. Set expectations for meetings such that meeting organizers are providing agendas and necessary materials ahead of time, and everyone attending is fully engaged, minimizing background noise, and respecting start and end times. Creating some norms about communication channels and communication habits is an important first step towards building a healthy and strong culture for virtual teams.

2. Create a workday routine with overlapping work times

One of the benefits of managing a team virtually is that team members have flexibility about when they work. Whether your team members are in different time zones or balancing family and work responsibilities, the ability to set their own schedule can help to make your team members more productive and satisfied with their work. While this is an important benefit and one to keep in mind, it’s also helpful to ensure that there is some team-wide overlap in worktimes.

For overlap, create at least three-to-four hours every day during which all team members are online, working and accessible. Even if team members don’t need to communicate directly, having this time will help with team cohesiveness and increase efficiency should problems or questions arise.

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Further, scheduling a daily check-in during this overlapping work time will also help to improve communication and team culture. A video call at the same time every day will help to bring the team together, create some routine and rhythm to the day and provide a team-wide outlet for regular check-ins and updates.

Have clearly defined work systems

The risks of miscommunication and ineffective communication are heightened when you’re managing a team virtually. To help minimize these risks, it’s helpful to have clearly defined work systems. These should include how tasks are assigned, how projects are tracked and how work is shared and presented.

Coordination is inherently more difficult when working remotely, making it all the more important for leaders to have

effective processes and systems for workflow. While it’s important to avoid micromanagement, having some clearly defined work systems will help to make sure your team is on track and on the same page.

Prioritize one-on-one communication

One of the most important aspects of being a good leader is effective performance management. But coaching happens less naturally and less frequently when done virtually. Avoid this common mistake by prioritizing coaching interactions and making them a part of your team’s weekly, even daily, routine.

Having regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings with each of your team members is key not only for performance management and coaching but for checking the status of projects and offering feedback. They also allow leaders to help keep team members focused on the bigger organizational vision, ensure that all team members are invested and engaged, and check that all team members feel connected to the team and organizational goals.

In the next year, it’s going to be more important than ever to be an effective virtual leader. Learning to manage a team virtually helps you to stay flexible, to meet all employees’ needs and to recruit and retain the most talented employees. While it can be challenging to create the kind of strong culture that all great teams have, there are discrete actions you can take to virtually build cohesive and effective teams. Start with these four proven methods to become a more effective manager and leader.

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