6 Ways A Remote Manager Can Kill Your Workplace Culture

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Here’s the simple truth: the “new normal” is not new anymore. It’s just normal. According to a recent report from the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, the U.S. economy is now truly a work-from-home economy, with more than 60 percent of U.S. economic activity now coming from people clocking in from a home residence.

And although the best managers and corporate leaders have been able to keep the wheels on the bus and maintain productivity levels during the craziness of current times, sustaining a company’s workplace culture health has not always been as successful. Honestly, it can be easier in some cases to harm your company’s culture inadvertently than to promote it when you’re dealing with a workforce where so many are juggling kids, pets and myriad other household distractions with their jobs.

If you are a remote manager, what are the fastest ways to kill workforce morale and damage your company’s culture? In the spirit of learning from others’ mistakes, here are a few of the most common pitfalls to avoid.

1. Letting everyone turn the webcam off during meetings

When it comes to team meetings, ever notice that over time,

more and more of your colleagues start to turn the video off? Set a good example by leaving yours on – always if possible. And encourage the rest of your team to follow suit with few exceptions.

Sure, it can be extremely tempting to shut off the video when heading into the first (or last) Zoom meeting of the day. After all, you reason, no one really needs to see your ratty ponytail or messy living room, do they? And plus, why not get a little bit of email done while coworkers are droning on? Resist the urge. Face time – albeit through video – is more critical than ever these days.

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2. Being too hands-off in terms of check-ins with individuals and your teams

Remember the days of stopping by a colleague's office to say hello and casually check the progress on a project? Or the friendly banter in the hallway or lunch room when you learned that an employee was dealing with a stressful family situation at home or even a client matter that might be impacting their work? Yeah, those days are over, and the 30 seconds of chit-chat at the start of a Zoom meeting will not suffice.

That's why it's even more critical for remote managers to establish a regular routine that includes daily check-ins with team members. An early morning email and end-of-day wrap-up might seem like overkill, but it will go a long way toward reducing isolation and promoting open communication.

The communication should be two-way of course. Be sure to remind team members to share updates on their work and prompt them to ask for help on any roadblocks they might be

experiencing; set up one-on-one phone calls to go deeper with specific individuals. Not everyone communicates best on email or wants the formality of a video chat. It’s your responsibility to find the best channel and make it happen.

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3. Losing your patience over “at-home conditions” and challenges and not embracing flexibility for the long term

Back in March when schools and offices first closed, most managers and company leaders displayed high levels of compassion and empathy for their work-from-home employees who were – like them – suddenly dealing with the multiple stressors of the world and household responsibilities. However, in some cases, patience has started to wear thin. Don’t let it.

We may have all gotten more accustomed to juggling home schooling, childcare, meal preparation, lack of personal workspace and endless hours of daily screen time than we might have ever imagined. But that doesn’t mean it’s necessarily getting any easier. And if anything, as we set in for the long haul, it’s time to adjust your expectations that this is just a temporary situation.

Embracing flexibility is the alternative. Some employers are already embracing agile working: “A way of working in which an organization empowers its people to work where, when and how they choose – with maximum flexibility and minimum constraints – to optimize their performance and to do their best work.” This might be the best route to go, allowing for regularly scheduled check-in and meetings as needed, to truly support your company’s culture for the long term.

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4. Failing to create additional opportunities for collaboration among team members and coworkers

There are some obvious advantages of the new work-from-home lifestyle, especially for those who prefer to simply put their heads down and get to work without the distraction of conference room meetings and coworker birthday celebrations. However, the “working as an island” concept can cost your company the benefits of everyone maintaining focus on the shared purpose of projects and the big picture of your organization as a whole.

That’s why it’s up to remote managers to proactively create projects that require collaboration between team members. Given the access to all the online tools for sharing work and working together (Dropbox, Google Docs, Zoom), there’s just no excuse for different levels and departments to not share knowledge, brainstorm and take different on different parts of a larger project. Plus, this is a great way to strengthen relationships, build empathy and improve communication channels. It’s your job to find (or if needed, create) these opportunities.

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5. Focusing inward rather than practicing active empathy

Now more than ever it is critical to practice empathy. This is easier said than done. First, you yourself are experiencing drastic professional and personal disruption. It can be hard

to focus a lot of attention on your direct reports when you're dealing with work stress and home stress. Second, each person is experiencing the "new normal" differently, which means you have to meet them where they are. For example, you might have some employees who feel like the restrictions on business and personal life as a result of the health crisis are unnecessary. Or others who feel like it's not enough. It's important to try to understand those perspectives and to address each employee based on those perspectives.

This is hard. All of it. There are no magic solutions to keep remote workers engaged, productive and seen. But doing your best to stay connected, to stay flexible and to stay empathetic can at least help make sure the new normal isn't always a bad normal.

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