

# MANAGING A REMOTE WORKFORCE

## *How to Support and Inspire Employees*

Managing employees through any anticipated market shift is a challenge, but what is truly daunting is finding yourself suddenly responsible for an entirely remote workforce, especially when the work becomes permanent. You and many of your peers are facing this unexpected situation as part of the global response to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. You urgently need to develop new skills so you can fully support and inspire your remote team during a time of ongoing uncertainty. This guide provides advice on how to acquire those capabilities and use those new skills to help guide your remote team to success.

### TRAIN YOURSELF TO MANAGE AND FULLY SUPPORT YOUR REMOTE WORKERS

Your goal is for everyone—your team and yourself—to be able to collaborate and work productively in a remote setting. For many organizations, the move of all or most employees to remote work may be sudden and unplanned, for instance, taken as an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a manager, you will want to gain as much understanding and insight into best practices for remote working, and then to keep adding to and expanding that knowledgebase. You may want to take advantage of formal learning on remote management topics, such as effective virtual communication, resilience, and handling stress, as well as asking other managers for their top tips and advice on how best to assist remote workers.

To become an effective remote manager, the key skillsets you need to explore, develop, and enhance fall into three major areas—**agility, communication, and empathy**. Let's examine each of these three areas and how you might improve and grow these skillsets:

#### ENCOURAGE AND ENABLE AGILITY

You need to recognize the inherent differences between working in a physical office and working remotely. Simply recreating or imposing the traditional workplace experience on your remote teams will not result in high-performing employees, but instead will perpetuate existing inefficiencies. You want to help your remote team become more responsive, be better able to adjust to change, and to thrive during major industry or market shifts and times of uncertainty.

View the “new normal” of remote working and management as an opportunity to revisit standard workflows and then revise or rewrite those practices. Some organizations may find that a different and more iterative working style provides a much better support framework to help remote employees and their managers become more productive.

For instance, if you’re not already using an agile methodology, consider learning about this approach, with its focus on the incremental completions of projects in shorter periods, known as sprints. You may want to gain certification or recommend that members of your team study and become qualified agile practitioners.

## **PROVIDE CLEAR AND CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION**

Your remote employees will continually look to you, their manager, for guidance, particularly those staff who are new to working from home. Your team is most eager for a remote working framework detailing how they should do their own work, collaborate with their peers, and engage with you. Your employees will anticipate that you will be able to clarify the guidelines for remote work and provide any updates to those advisories.

Your remote team will want you to provide definitive answers about what you and the organization as a whole expect from them in areas including:

### **WORKING HOURS**

Employees will be interested in the acceptable degree of flexibility of work duration.

This may include the possibility of ‘windowed work’—the division of the workday into a mix of dedicated work and personal time segments.

### **AVAILABILITY**

Your employees want to understand the preference for indicating online availability for work or meetings. For instance, does a team member need to be visible throughout an entire video conference or only at the start and end of the call?

### **CONNECTION**

Each remote team member will want to feel that they are still a key part of the organization and a valued contributor to the ongoing success of the business. They will want to know how to share their input and ideas through a variety of channels.

As a manager, you will want to model the behavior you expect to see from your remote team, whether that is presenting a professional appearance online, updating and sharing your calendar with everyone, or in how you collaborate with others. You may want to hone your communication skills to ensure that you are consistent and clear in all of your engagements with your remote workers, regardless of the medium, whether in a video conference, in a phone conversation, in an email, or a text message. You may seek additional formal training in assertive communication and how to build and maintain trust with your audience.

## **PROMOTE WELLBEING AND SHOW EMPATHY**

Always keep in mind that your own remote working experience may be very different from that of your team members. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have a dedicated home office, a quiet, distraction-free work environment, and the ability to keep to regular working hours. Working from home further blurs the line between what separates the workday from home life, with the potential risk that an employee may feel like they’re losing their work-life balance.

As a manager, you will need to prioritize remote employee wellbeing and watch out for any signs that a team member is failing to thrive, such as a remote worker becoming less communicative, engaging in less collaboration, and missing project deadlines. In keeping a two-way flow of communication, you may want to share your own struggles with remote working to encourage your team to open up about any issues they’re encountering.

You will also want to model what a good work-life balance looks like to your remote team, not only in terms of taking regular breaks during work hours but also emphasizing the importance of self-care, including diet, exercise, and sleep. Show your appreciation for your remote team and celebrate personal and work milestones. Hold informal online gatherings to build and boost social interactions so that your remote workers don't feel isolated. You may want to take some courses around how to develop and expand self-awareness and empathy so that your remote workers feel you offer them both a sympathetic ear and emotional support.

## CREATE A COMMUNITY AND ECOSYSTEM OF REMOTE LEARNERS

As we've seen, learning plays a key role in helping remote employees and their managers realize their potential more quickly as they learn a range of new technologies and skills. Your organization may conclude that now is the time to make a stronger commitment to lifelong employee learning by making learning part of its mission statement or by highlighting learning as a competitive differentiator for why people want to join your organization.

As a manager, you can do your part in helping your organization build a community and ecosystem of remote learners. You want to ensure that you and your team have access to a single source of curated learning with a wealth of different types of personalized training, any time, on any device.

Each employee has their personal learning preferences. You'll want to offer your remote team the ability to learn about a particular technology or skill in a variety of ways—from virtual instructor-led training (VILT) and on-demand courses which may offer certifications upon completion, through to short videos and bite-sized lessons. You'll also want to empower some of your remote staff to create learning content based on their own experiences, which you can then use to train new hires on the required remote technologies and skills.

You'll want to regularly check in with your team to ensure that the training they're receiving meets their needs, both informally during check-in calls and formally with surveys about learning. To encourage employees to spend time learning, you might suggest they schedule a regular time for training or study on their calendars should they ever find they're underutilized in their regular work.

Learning can provide a great opportunity for remote interaction with peers. For instance, a manager or a team member could present what they have just learned in a training course to their colleagues and then lead a discussion on that topic. Much like a book club, you as a manager could suggest that your team hold a regular online learning club to share knowledge and study best practices, or as a way for the group to prepare together in advance of a final test or certification.

## DEVELOP TOMORROW'S LEADERS AND NURTURE TALENT REMOTELY

As well as directly meeting the current needs of your remote workforce, you'll also want to look to the future. You'll need to consider how your employees and their skills align with your organization's overall business direction and liaise with HR on workforce and succession planning. As a manager, you will want to deepen the expertise of your team to better position and nurture some employees as potential managers.

As you identify potential managers, you will want to suggest that they take some of the same training you have already undergone to build out their agility, communication, and empathy skillsets. Remote mentoring can be very helpful in developing new talent, as can using a buddy system to team up two peers who are interested in investigating expanded or more demanding roles and responsibilities.



## RESKILL AND UPSKILL IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

Nothing is certain in today's world, which means that your organization may need to shift its focus from its traditional core business to a completely new one. At the same time, the growing use of artificial intelligence will result in some roles and responsibilities no longer needing to be performed by humans, but potentially still requiring human supervision. The nature of how we define work is also changing, so every organization is reassessing its future need of employees.

As a manager, you want to encourage your remote workers to regularly reskill and upskill so that their capabilities are a better fit for what your organization will ultimately require. It is clear that every individual needs to cultivate a mix of technology skills, for example, data analysis or cybersecurity, alongside a variety of 'soft skills,' such as communication and collaboration, to be a well-rounded high-performing employee.

Learning will become more of an integral part of everyone's workday rather than something that only happens at a designated time. Your employees can set off on personalized learning journeys to refresh and update their existing skills but also explore what they'd need to learn to pursue a new role.

## MEASURE PERFORMANCE TO CONTINUALLY IMPROVE LEARNING

As you and your team adjust to remote working, you'll want to measure the performance of project goals, outcomes, or results. It may be tempting to deploy employee-monitoring software to track what your remote employees are doing online, but this approach can backfire badly. Employees may see the usage of such technology as overbearing, and they may feel that you and your organization simply don't trust them. They may also devote valuable work time to try to get around or 'cheat' the surveillance software. Any kind of perceived Big Brother surveillance may erode the positive and supportive remote working environment that you, as a manager, have worked hard to establish.

As with all communication with your remote team, make sure they understand the parameters you're putting in place to measure their success, and then track their productivity by work completed. You'll want to apply this approach to assessing and measuring the impact of remote learning too.

By putting learning at the heart of your current and future remote work plans, you will ensure that you and your remote team can perform your roles optimally with agility, by using a clear communications style, and with empathy.

## REMOTE PERFORMANCE METRICS TO CONSIDER TRACKING

- **EMPLOYEE LEARNING HOURS**  
The number of learning hours per remote employee per month.
- **AVERAGE LEARNING HOURS**  
The average number of learning hours across your entire remote team.
- **COMPLETED COURSES**  
The number of courses completed per month by your remote team.
- **INCOMPLETE COURSES**  
The percentage of courses started by your remote team but not completed.
- **COURSE TYPE**  
The types of courses accessed by the different roles on your remote team.

**NEED HELP KEEPING YOUR REMOTE TEAM MOTIVATED? CHECK OUT THESE TIPS**