

Managing a Remote Team?

Help Your Employees Thrive with These Simple Strategies

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With today's technology-enabled mobility, supervising a partially distributed team has become more commonplace. But if your entire staff has had to move to a remote framework, navigating your role as a leader can feel a bit daunting. There's no doubt that change can be hard for everyone on your team—including you.

Whatever your managerial experience has been, it likely involved face-to-face interaction with your team members. In a remote setting, you will need some specific strategies to foster connection and productivity while keeping your team enthusiastic and engaged. If your team is unexpectedly spread out in various home office or offsite locations, there is bound to be a disruption of routines and social interaction. Your team will be looking to you for guidance—and the good news is that you can help them thrive! Succeeding in a changing environment is all about communication and flexibility. Start with these simple strategies.

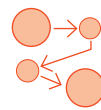
At the Outset



Set Expectations. For you as a manager, shifting to a remote working scenario may feel like uncharted territory. But workplace researcher and strategist Kate Lister, President of Global Workplace Analytics, suggests that taking the right steps now can help your team create a real-time framework for success.

As you embark on a remote work structure, start a dialogue on expectations, and ask your team for their input on developing a realistic framework. Make sure that you're in agreement as it relates to measurement metrics, expectations for productivity, and team member accessibility. How should employees update you when needed? What support will they receive from the organization, such as IT assistance or HR guidance?

As Lister notes, you can reassure your team that you and the organization are there to support them beyond the office's traditional four walls. Determine how and when your offsite team will meet—daily, every few days, or once a week—and put the structure in place. Once you're underway, you can adapt as you go based upon team needs and feedback. In fact, according to flexible work strategist Cali Williams Yost, CEO and Founder of Flex+Strategy Group, your adaptability will equip you for the long term to attract and retain talent, increase productivity, optimize resources, and be prepared for what comes next.



Agree on Priorities and Processes. Help your team prioritize what is possible—and not possible—to achieve from offsite. Empower your employees by asking what assignments they would like to translate

into virtual work. Meet with each employee to review what they specifically will be working on, both short- and long- term, and discuss realistic metrics, milestones and how and when your communication will happen.

Kylie Roth, Senior Director of Workplace Research for Knoll, suggests that you should not make all of these decisions at once: instead, aim for a 90-Day Plan that looks toward the future but includes designated checkpoints to stop and evaluate. This will not only help jump-start the process, but it will also allow everyone to be on the same page from the outset. Remember that while priorities may shift, having a basic outline enables you to see what can easily move up and down on the list.

Yost suggests that this is a chance to confirm your ongoing process—for example, should you have daily check-ins by jumping on a quick video chat, or table topics for discussion until the weekly team meeting? Whatever your process looks like, review it often and adapt it as needed. Make clear to your employees that even though they may be working from home, the business day will still retain structure and have familiar work flows to follow, though communications frequency and modes will differ from the norm.

Lister stresses that the expectation of 24/7 availability can be a detriment to telework, so encourage all on the team to be mindful of your organization's general business hours when texting, emailing, calling, or sending meeting requests. In fact, be sure to assure your team that the workday will end when normal business hours are over. Roth suggests that as a leader you can do this by modeling work/life boundaries appropriate to your organizational culture.

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Along the Way



Manage Expectations. From the outset, you may get varying reactions from your team. Some workers may enjoy working remotely and will easily thrive, while others may struggle with staying productive or battling loneliness. Yost recommends that you let your staff know that together, you'll be learning how this can work—and that for this reason, the process could change moving forward. If this is a short-term situation, address the “why don't we do this all the time?” questions. Point out that this phase will allow you to explore how a remote structure could work long-term, and always acknowledge that it is a work in progress for everyone—and that's okay. As Roth notes, be sure to keep an open dialogue so your team knows that their input and ideas are welcome on this iterative process.

Roth also advises that managing expectations means being flexible and empathetic during the process. For example, it may take some time and experimentation for home-based workers to find a rhythm to the workday, particularly if they are managing children, pets, work-at-home spouses and other responsibilities. Distractions may need to be forgiven rather than managed in some cases, she adds.



Use Familiar Tools. As you and your team adapt to remote work and a new check-in process, it's helpful to keep some workflow aspects unchanged. For example, if you already use a tool like Zoom, Skype, or Google Meet, don't try to switch it up while you're adapting to a new remote work structure. Instead, leverage the tech that the team is familiar with, whether it's a popular project management app like Asana, a collaborative tool like Slack, or even a simple shared Google sheet. Lister suggests that whatever tools your team is using, encourage them to make use of all of the tool's capabilities, such as virtual commenting boxes during group calls or presentations. This can increase team engagement from afar.



Communicate, Communicate—and Communicate Again. Amidst changes to place and space, the heart of managerial success lies in communication. This is especially true when the move to offsite work was unexpected. Lister notes that when managing remote workers, it's important to communicate more, not less—whether it's by email, text, or jumping on a quick video call. Yost echoes the importance of regular check-ins to review priorities, brainstorm, reprioritize, and/or update your team.

Remember, increased communication doesn't mean you are micromanaging; rather, these processes are the replacement for in-person dialogue since you are no longer face-to-face. And since we all learn and process information differently, multiple forms of communications are beneficial, as they offer a variety of opportunities for people to take in messages and express themselves.

For example, your team might decide to text quick updates, email more in-depth questions, and jump on a Zoom call when you need to feel more connected. Each platform gives a different experience for staying connected, and each staff member may have a preferred tool. For example, some people are shy about on-camera video calls but can let their sense of humor shine on Slack, explains Knoll's Roth. These different media give people a chance to “speak up” and “share” in the ways they feel comfortable, and can showcase the different personality types that make your team unique, she added.



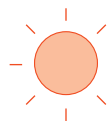
Trust Your Team. Delegate assignments just as you would if you were all in the same location. When you are in virtual meetings, make sure there are leaders assigned to specific tasks and that everyone is clear about who owns what task. As Lister notes, managing when you can't see your team can be a challenge for some leaders—but you need to trust that your people are, in fact, working. Everyone works differently, especially in remote settings and when blending “work and life” in the same space. But when you combine accountability with breathing space, you'll give your team the opportunity to thrive.



Foster Team Spirit. Be positive! In fact, aim to have fun at the same level as would take place if you were in the office together. If you are having a virtual staff meeting, invite the team to chime into the conversation or use emojis to express their personalities. With video calls, invite staff to adopt “virtual backgrounds” that show a favorite location they've visited or a place on their bucket list; you can begin your weekly all-staff video calls by guessing “where” each employee is.

Socializing is important, and your team may be missing the camaraderie of a shared workplace. If it fits your company culture, encourage them to find each other on Instagram or Facebook, and to group-text silly memes or GIFs for a healthy dose of daily humor. Spend the first few minutes of team calls chatting about family, pets, hobbies, or other non-work topics that you'd normally share during an in-office coffee run. If you recognize birthdays in the office, try a Zoom-based cupcake break; or, after a successful week of accomplishments, have the team sign on with their beverage of choice in hand for a Friday afternoon happy hour! You might even invite them to “bring” kids and pets to the meet-up.

And Every Day



Learn and Grow as a Manager. Whether or not you are new to managing a virtual work group, always reflect on what is working and what could be done better. Encourage your staff to give you feedback and be up-front about how this new dynamic is working for them. Continue to ask yourself: what am I learning?

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Your flexibility can allow your team to thrive. It can also be the blueprint for your future shared “work space,” and reveal what that space could look like moving forward—for example, a long-term framework that supports employees facing personal challenges, such as child care needs or managing an aging parent.

As Roth reiterates, change can be hard and the members of your team will adjust to it in different ways and at different speeds. But for you as a manager, adapting to change provides opportunities to create new ways of working and doing business. So embrace the opportunity to grow—and watch your team grow right along with you!

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For further reading:

Working Remotely? Use These Tips to Jumpstart Success. Knoll, March 2020.

Lister, Kate and Harnish, Tom. *Undress for Success: The Naked Truth about Making Money at Home.* John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009

Yost, Cali Williams. *Tweak It: Make What Matters to You Happen Every Day.* Hachette Book Group, 2013.

Yost, Cali Williams. *Work + Life.* Penguin Group, 2004.

Through research, Knoll explores the connection between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments.

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