HOW TO KEEP YOUR TEAM ENGAGED WHILE THEY'RE WORKING REMOTELY

A practical and actionable guide for leaders
Remote work is on the rise in the U.S. and projected to keep rising in the years to come. And if you’re like most managers, you might feel anxious or uncertain about what it takes to successfully lead a remote team. You might also be asking yourself questions like, “Will we be as productive at home?”, or “How do I keep track of their progress?” If you’ve never managed remote workers before, it can feel very overwhelming to be asked to start now.

The good news is that remote teams can and will thrive when managers are strategic and intentional about establishing expectations, individualizing their leadership styles, and communicating well. In fact, some managers report that their teams perform better and are more engaged when working remotely!

In this guide, you’ll find practical and actionable steps designed to help you move from feeling overwhelmed to feeling confident in your ability to lead a team of remote workers.

A Stanford University study found that the productivity increase among remote workers is equivalent to an extra day per person per week.

42% of all U.S. employees already work off-site at least part of the time. - Gallup

51% of U.S. workers say they would quit their current job for one that allows flextime. - Gallup
SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

FOR GOALS & PERFORMANCE

Before you make the transition to remote work, schedule a strategic planning session in which you get very specific about your goals and expectations. According to the Gallup Organization, only about half of our employees know what’s expected of them at work. This means setting clear expectations is likely the most foundational element influencing our employee engagement.

During the session, discuss the following questions together:

- What are our team goals for the season? What will success look like? What are our most important priorities, especially if they are shifting right now?
- Who is responsible for specific tasks and how do our tasks and expectations fit with what everyone else is doing? What are our deadlines?
- How will we connect with and engage our customers and/or the community?
- If we’re unable to perform specific aspects of our jobs, how can we intentionally use this time to work towards future goals? Are there online learning opportunities we can take advantage of now?

FOR TEAM COMMUNICATION

In addition to discussing performance expectations and strategic goals, you need to discuss how team members will communicate with one another and stay relationally connected while working remotely.

Address the following questions together:

- How often will we meet together, and which tools will we use to facilitate these conversations?
- How will we communicate our progress and provide feedback to one another?
- How can we build in some social/relational time with one another?
INDIVIDUALIZE YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE

CUSTOMIZE TO EACH INDIVIDUAL

The most exceptional leaders recognize that each person on their team has a unique set of needs and will handle remote work differently. Leaders who ask great questions and listen for clues to these natural patterns of thinking, feeling, and behavior will be better equipped to adjust their management style in a time of transition.

In addition to holding a strategic planning meeting with the entire team, it’s also important to do a check-in with each employee to see how they are handling the transition to remote work.

Ask the following questions, listen for clues, and take good notes:

- "How are you feeling about transitioning to remote work?"
- "What challenges, worries, or concerns do you have about working from home? What are you excited about?"
- "Are you set up with all the technology and/or space you need?"
- "What do you need from me as your leader to be successful and comfortable working from home?"
- "How often would you like me to check in with you?"
- "What do you think might help keep you energized and feeling connected to your team members and to me?"

As you listen, brainstorm ways you can create an individualized approach to ensure that each employee feels seen, heard, understood and supported while working remotely.

But the plan alone won’t be enough. You will have to prioritize individualization, which means that your regular task and communication rhythms will need to shift to accommodate and support your team members during this time of transition. Not only will it be worth it; it might also cause you to rethink your leadership approach moving forward because of the boost in engagement you and your team will experience.
What are the regular social and relational rhythms of our team? Are there any ways for us to continue or replicate them while working remotely?

Who has expressed more need for connection and communication? Who might struggle away from the office? Who needs more frequent feedback?

Do I need to help facilitate any conversations or partnerships between team members?

How can we have some fun together as a team while working remotely?

Social interaction and healthy workplace relationships are crucial elements of an engaged workforce. But all too often companies send their remote employees into a relational abyss and assume an “out of sight, out of mind” approach to leading them. One major risk associated with working from home is the feeling of loneliness or isolation that some employees can experience. In fact, the Gallup Organization found that 21% of remote workers say “loneliness” is the biggest struggle they face. In light of this, leaders can’t ignore the relational and social needs of their team members. When possible, it’s up to them to create rhythms that meet these needs.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself about your team:

- What are the regular social and relational rhythms of our team? Are there any ways for us to continue or replicate them while working remotely?
- Who has expressed more need for connection and communication? Who might struggle away from the office? Who needs more frequent feedback?
- Do I need to help facilitate any conversations or partnerships between team members?
- How can we have some fun together as a team while working remotely?

Each team is different. Some teams are composed of individuals who simply need a check-in during the day about progress and task management. Other teams might benefit from a short daily video conference that is relational and social in nature. These types of meetings will boost engagement and motivation for some, while frustrating others, so it’s also important to remember that loneliness and isolation won’t affect everyone on your team equally. Some of your team members might report that they love how productive they are from home, while others might communicate that they are struggling without their coworkers or even the sights and sounds of the office. Again, individualization is key. Know your team members and adjust to their needs.
COMMUNICATE MORE FREQUENTLY

SCHEDULE CHECK-IN MEETINGS

Depending on how long the remote work lasts, leaders need to be strategic about scheduling check-in meetings in which they return to the same topics they addressed in the initial planning session discussed earlier. The experience of working remotely is fluid and ever-evolving. One team member might struggle initially and then hit her stride as she gets used to the new normal. Another team member might feel productive and engaged initially and then begin to struggle with lack of resources or social interaction. It’s up to you as the leader to stay consistent with your check-ins, both individually and collectively.

Schedule a few check-in meetings with individuals and ask:

- "How are you feeling now that we are a few weeks in?"
- "Do you miss anything specific about working in the office?"
- "What are you struggling with the most right now, and how can I support you better?"
- "Do you have any needs that aren't being met, and if so, how can I help?"

When meeting with your entire team, ask questions like:

- "What have we done well as a team during this season? How are we using our individual and collective strengths?"
- "What challenges are we facing due to working remotely?"
- "How are we doing with aligning our tasks with our stated priorities? Do we need to reevaluate any of our goals in light of the past week/month?"
- "What can we do to better support each other while working remotely?"

By continuing to ask these questions of both individuals and the entire team, you’ll communicate that you’re an engaged and invested leader. You’ll also get crucial feedback that will help you continue to individualize your leadership approach, anticipate and meet the social and relational needs of your team members, and lead the team to reach performance goals and objectives.
Managing remote teams doesn't have to be overwhelming. If you equip and engage your remote employees with the communication strategies and actionable steps outlined in this guide, you'll set them up to thrive and flourish under your leadership.

To recap this guide, our recommendations are to start working to:

- Set clear expectations for team performance and communication
- Individualize your leadership style to each person on your team
- Meet the social and relational needs of team members
- Communicate more frequently and schedule check-in meetings

Here's to building engaged and productive remote teams!