Managing Remote Teams

Focus on Outcomes

Now that you and/or your team members are working from home, you may be asking, “What is my team doing on a day-to-day basis?” or “Is my team still positively contributing to the goals of my department or the university?”

These questions exemplify the differences between an “input” style of management vs. an “output” style of management. Not being able to see our employees everyday forces leaders to set strong performance goals and expectations for what an employee achieves vs. measuring the amount of time they spend “on the job.”

It’s not possible to manage every aspect of the work done by a remote employee – nor should you try. Instead, be sure that your employees know what is expected of them and provide productive feedback to help them maximize their effectiveness. This is also a non-judgmental way to find out about current capacity and if your people are overloaded or underutilized.

Keep in mind that even under the best output style of management, employees are navigating many stressors and distractions that can make accomplishing work difficult. Consider what projects may be most appropriate given the focus and timing required and speak openly with employees about their ability to complete them.

Set Clear Expectations

- Ask employees what they are working on each week and be clear about what you expect to be completed.
- Define the scope, deadlines, and deliverables for each task or project your team is working on.
- Take a supportive role by asking, “What do you need?” or “How can I help?”
- Do not micromanage – leave it to the individual to figure out how and when to get the work done.

Ask direct reports...

- What concrete directions do you need to move forward on your current projects?
- How do you feel about your capacity and workload?
- What clarity do you need on your priorities for this week?

Provide Frequent, Honest Feedback

- Don’t assume “no news is good news.” A lack of regular communication can lead to confusion about an employee’s status and performance, for you and for them.
- Choose the best medium to communicate. While text and IM are quick and easy, they lack the nuances of spoken communication that are important for both good and bad messages.
- Get specific about praise, and constructive feedback. “Good job” is fine sometimes, but specific details will be more
meaningful and show your employees what they can continue to do to be successful.

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**Build Trust**

Trust is the foundation of a successful team, and it starts with managers building trusting relationships with each employee on their team. This can be more challenging during a crisis that brings high stress, uncertainty, and a quickly changing environment where people feel nervous and insecure. Misunderstandings can (and will) occur more frequently.

Cornell employee surveys have shown a primary factor impacting employee intention to leave is whether or not there is a trusting relationship between a manager and their employees. And employees have indicated that trust in their leader starts with their leader demonstrating trust in them.

You can build trust by…

- Setting clear expectations, as previously outlined
- Providing employees with the space to decide how to accomplish a goal themselves (not micromanaging)
- Having transparent two-way communication
- Managing your reactions to situations in your words (in your voice and written) and remaining calm
- Recognizing and respecting the unique differences of team members and respect them as a “whole person”
- Demonstrating you care about employees by asking about their wellbeing and things that matter to them personally
- Trusting that every team member is working to the best of their ability during this time
- When you miss the mark, own your mistake, apologize, and indicate what you will do differently next time

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**Communicate & Collaborate Effectively**

While we have numerous tools at our disposal to interact with each other during this crisis, it isn’t the same as in-person interaction. Employees also have different engagement styles and handle interruptions differently. Whereas one will find Skype chats effective, another person may find them intrusive and distracting.

It can be harder to share ideas and collaborate when you don’t work at the same time or run into each other in the hallway. This is compounded when everyone on your team is juggling both the personal and professional requirements of this crisis. Many employees struggle with reduced access to managerial support and communication in a remote environment.

Be thoughtful about your collaboration tools.

- Discuss as a team what tools you will use to work together (Zoom, Google Docs, Slack, Skype for Business, etc.) based on the topic or need. If you try something and it doesn’t work well, make a shift!
- If someone is struggling with effectively using a collaboration tool, share free training and tips to help them learn.
- If you have both remote and on-campus employees, ensure that the collaboration tools support both populations.

Be planful about your time, and the time of your team members.

- Use video conferencing meetings for short check-ins or for meaningful discussions. Routine updates can be shared asynchronously through email or instant messengers.
- Hold short daily check-in “water cooler” meetings with your team if it can occur effectively and not pose added stress.
- Meet individually with direct reports regularly. Use this time to understand how they are doing, discuss workload, goals, and deliverables, and remind them of self-care.

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**Arrange and Lead Effective Meetings**

- Be intentional about meeting duration (we suggest a maximum of 45 minutes) to ensure employees have visual and auditory breaks before their next meeting and can do some self-care.
- Share verbally things you may not say explicitly if you were in a room together.
- If employees are working strange hours, unavailable for a Zoom meeting, etc., think about how information will be flowed to them. Asking people to watch a recording may not be effective for everyone. Share notes and highlights in addition to the recording so that they may digest information in their preferred way.
**Increase Your Transparency**

The more you tell people what you know, and what you don’t know, the more likely they are to trust you as a leader. Answer what you can. Then, the best thing to say is, “I don’t have the answer to that question, let me see if I can find out.” As long as you follow-up accordingly, this gives employees a sense that they can believe what you say and are taking their questions seriously.

**Support Your Team**

When employees are working from home, their professional and personal lives may be difficult to separate. This is especially problematic for employees who do not have a separate physical space to work in at home, and who cannot work in other physical venues because of COVID-19 restrictions.

With the added caregiving challenges as a result of school and childcare closures, changes to nursing home and caregiving regulations, etc., employees are under more duress than typical. You may be experiencing this personally as well.

In these unprecedented times, your team is looking to you for support more than ever, and they need you to stay calm and grounded. Because of this, you have the opportunity to lean-in to leadership in essential ways.

**Tune In With Yourself**

- Are you okay?
- What do you need right now?
- Are you getting enough sleep?
- Are you taking enough breaks through the day?
- Are you moving your body?
- Are you getting outside?
- Is there anything you need from your manager to feel more supported?

There are going to be days where you don’t feel like you can create a sense of confidence in your team. Be aware of this and consider if you are in the right mindset for the meetings that are on your calendar or if they can be rescheduled.

**Support Flexible Scheduling**

In many cases, supervisors, managers, and their teams have the ability to update normal working hours to allow employees to adjust to this crisis. You should start the discussion with your employees about their schedule by asking them what they need to be most successful. Some alternatives to consider include changing their “shift” from 9 to 5 to: early morning hours, late day hours, or working four 10-hour days.

For represented employees, be sure to make changes within the parameters of the collective bargaining agreements which apply. In many cases, the union must approve proposed scheduling changes before they can occur. A general best practice is to seek advice from Workforce Policy and Labor Relations if you have questions about your bargaining unit employees.

**Ergonomics**

Ask your employees how they are set-up for working from home. If they are experiencing ergonomic issues, encourage them to visit the Wellbeing web page dedicated to ergonomics for tips on making the most of their home space.

**Support Boundaries**

Encourage employees to unplug when their work is done and to focus on their self and family care. Encourage employees to be fully “off” outside of that time. Modeling this behavior for your team will signal that it is ok to do.

**Be Mindful of Mental Health**

We encourage you to be open to these discussions by asking employees how they are doing, and reminding them that if they need a break, it is natural, acceptable, and will not come with negative repercussions from you or other campus leaders.
As a leader, it is important to ask your direct reports how you can best support them. Ask:

- How are you doing / feeling right now?
- What is one thing I could do to help you?

Offer a time to discuss, one-on-one, how the current situation is affecting them.

Discuss personal and professional barriers or challenges that may make it difficult to perform at their best. Again, before providing solutions here, ask them if they would like you to help them think through these questions and make the suggestions about them, not you.

It is ok to show your team that you are human too and share some of the feelings they are experiencing. This may help some to feel they can open up with you as well.

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**Lead Equitably**

Marginalized and underrepresented communities are suffering even more during this crisis. They are more impacted in terms of who is getting and dying from COVID-19; the inequities in our healthcare system are real, as are the financial repercussions, food insecurities, and lack of social support. As a leader, you need to be particularly aware that you may have staff members dealing with these situations, and they may be reluctant to share their concerns.