



Managing a Remote Workforce:

Four Supervising Essentials

Managing People at a Distance

We're living in exciting times. The modern workplace is a very different environment than the past. Today there is a growing ability for people to work remotely, but how do you effectively manage people you almost never see face-to-face? How do you adapt? How do you connect and stay connected with remote workers? How do you build a cohesive team when there is no physical contact? How do you create opportunities for team members' growth and development?

Does this sound interesting?

If yes, lets' dive in to explore the wide world of managing remote teams.

Priorities as a Remote Team Manager

What is the best way to manage remote workers effectively, especially if remote work begins almost overnight? There are four main responsibilities that the remote manager has: building trust, removing roadblocks, nurturing team connections, and managing workload and deliverables. By embracing these responsibilities, the remote manager can operate a successful remote team. Here, we explore each of these points in turn, along with some practical applications that can help right away. Upon the completion of the course, participants will have real-world tools that can be used to help manage virtual teams, and continue to lead satisfied and productive workers.



Four Supervising Essentials

1. Building Trust

Providing Consistency and Structure in a Virtual Team

The first goal of the remote manager is to build trust, not only between themselves and the individual workers, but between the remote workers on the team as well. So, what does that look like? Well, the first element is making sure that there are well-documented procedures in place and that they are being consistently followed. How can a team have a solid basis for performance if the requirements of that performance haven't been defined? This is important for any team, but even more critical for remote groups. Since the individuals on the team may not interact with each other as frequently as a co-located team, there is a lot more opportunity for them to head off in different directions unless there is a solid understanding upfront. This is one of the manager's most important jobs. It is ultimately the manager's responsibility to make sure everyone on the team understands their role. Making sure there's adequate definitions of the work at hand and that individual tasks and deliverables

are spelled out provides team members with actionable goals to meet, reduces ambiguity, and sets common ground.

The manager must apply rules around procedures and performance to everyone on the team equally. If Judy is held to a certain standard and finds out that Sam gets away with not following the procedures in full, like he doesn't capture all of the data or doesn't conduct QA, she's going to be annoyed. She will very rightly want to know why that is, and not being able to provide a good answer can cause a manager's credibility to take a hit. It's much better to set the expectation and have rules in place upfront and have everyone follow them consistently. Building a level playing field makes it fair for the whole team. One last note, if a lot of people aren't following the procedures, it may be because the procedures are broken. If that's the case, change the procedures and enforce the new ones.

Developing Working Agreements and Defined Norms in a Virtual Team

Now, just because it's the manager's responsibility to make sure procedures and expectations are in place, that doesn't mean that they are the only ones developing them. In fact, it's critical that managers get the input of the team whenever they are standardizing process or setting goals. First of all, the team members are often the experts at what it takes to get the job done. They're the ones who may know what steps need to be taken, in what order, and where the process can get bogged down. Maybe there's a spot where work has to pass through a gate that's controlled by someone outside the team. Maybe there's a manual process that ought to be automated. Or information required that isn't provided through standard input forms that team members have to then go and research. Whatever the case, involving the team in setting up the process means everyone is invested in it and its success.

Creating a team working agreement is extremely valuable. How do the team members want to communicate? When will people be available? What are mutually agreeable service levels and turnaround times? Who is available to help with specific tasks? Making this a collaborative effort means everyone is invested in its success. While this is a good idea for any team, I think it's especially important for remote teams to have a solidly defined set of norms. It will smooth team interactions, build trust among team members, and bake in accountability. All important factors to overall team health and success. But at the end of the day, it's the manager's job to guide the team in this process of creation and make sure the needs of the team are in place.

Empowering Team Members to Lead in Their Field of Expertise

Here is another way to build trust and a sense of common purpose on a team; allow team members who are experts to lead in their fields of expertise. This won't work with all teams and all circumstances, but here is an example.

Chuck manages a team of developers, some of whom work remote. The company encourages employees to be continually developing their skills, so team members will often be learning a new development tool or methodology. When appropriate, Chuck will ask them if they want to be the lead on an upcoming project that will allow them to put their new learning into action. Now, not everyone accepts. Not everyone is comfortable as a lead, and sometimes people will feel that their skill level isn't high enough yet for a given project, but that's their choice. The important thing here is that everyone is given the opportunity if it occurs.

This fulfills multiple objectives. First of all, it's demonstrating trust of the employees. Everyone who wants a chance to shine can get it. Show us what you can do, says the organization. It's also allowing Chuck to delegate work which lets him concentrate on the most critical tasks. He stays available in case the project lead needs help, but he tries to stay as hands-off as possible so that the success really belongs to the employee. And it builds trust and closer working relationships between the members of the team. Every time someone shows their new skills and competence, it creates a stronger impression of them with their team members, and generates more respect for their professional and technical skills. The team has come to think of themselves as a band of experts, and more experienced members are actively mentoring newer workers, something which occurred more or less organically.

2. Removing Roadblocks

Ensuring Remote Workers Have the Equipment to be Effective

One of the challenges to a successful remote team is infrastructure. This has a few different aspects. First of all, who supplies your remote workers with the equipment that they use in performing their job? Are computers supplied by the organization? Do remote workers need a headset or a computer with a camera for video calls? And what about monitors, or printers, or even mice and keyboards? And if something goes wrong with the equipment, will remote workers get service from the support team? Decide what is critical, and develop a process for supplying, maintaining, and verifying that workers have the tools they need to do their jobs effectively.

Embracing Cross-Cultural Awareness in a Virtual Team

To reduce the above barriers to cross cultural communication, one can take the effort to develop one's listening skills. This will ensure that we start hearing the real meaning of what is being said instead of understanding at face value. Becoming aware of our perceptions towards others will ensure that we take steps to not prejudge a person or stereotype them. By accepting people and their differences and acknowledging that we don't know everything will make us open up to people and their differences resulting in us using contextual information for better understanding. Seeking feedback and taking risks to open up channels of communication and being responsible for our feelings and actions will go a long way in ensuring that miscommunication is mitigated.

Removing Barriers to Communication

Communication is key! Remove barriers to communication by establishing modes of communication like Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

The popularity of Microsoft Teams continues to rise. In fact, as of spring 2019, the workstream collaboration platform boasts more than 500,000 organizations. Combined with the growth of workstream collaboration, more and more companies are opting to deploy Teams to tap into the benefits of collaboration in the digital workplace.

Zoom is another option when it comes to enterprise communications, offering a secure, easy-to-use platform for messaging, audio and video conferencing, and webinars throughout room systems and desktops.

3. Nurturing Team Connections

Role of the Manager

Often there can be differing opinions of the role of the manager on a team. Some argue the main purpose of the manager is the care and feeling of the team members, making sure that they have everything they need to successfully complete their jobs. The manager may roll up their sleeves at time to pitch in, but that's not their primary purpose. Rather, they have the responsibility for monitoring overall team performance, schedule and workload and making sure everything comes together as planned. In addition to these tasks, the manager of a remote team has some special responsibilities. Primarily, the remote manager acts as the hub that connects the geographically disconnected team. They're the ones who are going to be the primary contact back at the command center and will like be the passing point for information flowing to the remote workers from departments heads. The manager holds a pivotal role for the team as the intermediary for a lot of activities. This is going to require some special effort, addressed here in the training, going forward. Discussed will be some of the ways the remote manager can tackle that challenge.

Maintaining Regular Contact with Team Members

Special consideration number one for managers of remote teams; ensuring lines of communication are open and kept open. This means having frequent and regular contact with all team members, both individually and as a

group. This is important for all managers, but especially the remote manager since there's not going to be opportunities for chance encounters. Microsoft Teams and Zoom, as mentioned above, are popular modes of communication.

Deepening Relationships with Remote Team Members

It's pretty much universally accepted wisdom that a strong team is more likely to be a high-performing team. With a remote team, the ability to have team-building experiences is small, so you have to use whatever you have. That's one of the reasons why scheduled meetings matter so much. Even if there isn't a lot of business to discuss, every meeting is an opportunity to build connections between the members of the team. Managers encouraging team members to share information that may not be team-related, like projects they're working on or non-work-related personal topics, allows team members to get a chance to know each other as people, not just cogs in the wheel. Knowing more about people creates the opportunity for more empathy, which will contribute to the spirit of the team as a community.

For example, any time a new member joins the team, they could have a chance to introduce themselves at their first meeting. In addition to team meetings, the manager can take time during one-on-one calls to interact on a personal level. It can't be all about business all the time. It's important to get to know your people as individuals. What excites them? What motivates them? Where are they feeling blocked, either at work or personally? And what's their style of communication? What's the best way to share or receive information? Finding out more about subordinates enables managers to provide the assistance and guidance needed. One last item... the power of video calling vs. the phone. Seeing someone on the other end of the line, even if you're not physically in the same place, creates a much stronger connection much faster. The point is to use anything that can remove barriers to communication. So, encourage team members to use their video cameras if possible.

Encouraging Team vs Individual Identity in a Remote Team

As the manager of a remote team, you've got people scattered all over the place. But the mindset a manager wants to instill is that their workers are a team, that they're a group who are working towards a common purpose, not just a bunch of isolated individuals. That's why opportunities that will allow team members to work together and collaborate, whenever possible, are so important. Having shared goals creates multiple team-building benefits.

First of all, successfully collaborating on work establishes trust between team members. When people have worked together and succeeded, they gain confidence in the skills and reliability of their partners. They also get a better idea of what those skills are. There may be people on your team who have expertise in certain processes or technologies, and that may not be common knowledge. Working directly with other team members on projects can expose these skills or point out to the skill holder a place where they can contribute to the team on a different level. The manager can create the possibility for this deeper domain knowledge to get exposed.

When team members talk directly to each other, it's going to be strengthening the connection between them. Yes, the manager is the central hub of the remote team, but communications among team members doesn't have to be restricted to manager → team member and team member → manager. A manager can identify places where the work can be logically distributed between small teams. For starters, ask for volunteers on the team who are willing to make the effort to work collaboratively with their peers. Give the teams a little help to get them started, and check in with them regularly. They may have extra challenges, and the manager may need to make some extra effort to help smooth their way. Allow team members to make their own suggestions for collaborative work too. Being personally invested in a project is a good motivator. Allowing someone to show off their good idea is a great way to do that.

Lastly, encourage team members to not be scared about asking for help during team meetings. This will not only make it more likely that the work gets done, but it will help build trust among the employees, and get them thinking more like a team too. Same thing for people on the team volunteering to help others when and where they have the bandwidth. Nothing will say, we are a team, better than the individual workers looking out for each other, and taking an active part in ensuring their mutual success.

4. Managing Workloads and Deliverables

Setting Clear Goals in a Remote Team

In this last section of the course, we dive deeper into some specific actions that can have a major impact on team cohesion and performance. Item number one is making sure that very clear goals are set and priorities for the team. The easiest way to achieve this may be to make sure to communicate fully with the whole team, what these priorities are. Use regular meetings to recap frequently, and give lots of opportunity for people to share any challenges.

Sharing with the whole team is important. Reason one, it avoids creating subsets within the team. When having smaller group discussions might be acceptable with a team that's co-located, special efforts with a remote team are needed to avoid that 'us and them' mentality. Discussing team goals as a team will help this, even if not all team members have a stake, they should have a chance to hear the discussion. Second, there are sometimes connections between things that not everyone knows about. It may be that the project that Bob and Julie are working on directly impacts the work that Katy is going to be doing. Now giving her the ability to learn about their work will give her a different insight into the work she'll be doing and may, in fact, change the approach she was going to take. So, at the risk of overcommunicating, share, share, and share. Overcommunicating is a lot better than under-communicating, and will cause a lot less havoc in the long run.

Providing Feedback to a Remote Employee

Ideally, managers have regular and meaningful communication with team members, so a good relationship is already established. But even with strong connections, giving feedback to remote workers comes with special challenges. There's a conscious effort involved that one doesn't have to worry about when you can bump into someone at the coffee machine.

All of the conversations with staff are the result of the action of connecting, so it's a lot more intentional providing feedback to remote workers. A first consideration is, what communication tool fits the message? For instance, text messaging or even email might not be the best modes to provide important feedback. Sure, it's fine to send a great job text for a special achievement, as long as it is followed up with a more complete conversation.

Regular weekly contact with your team members, as previously mentioned, is a perfect opportunity to be both providing and receiving feedback from them. A manager's positive feedback provided should be specific, not just, "You did a good job," but how and why. It's important that the worker knows a manager understands their work. Negative feedback, of course, is tricky.

No one likes giving bad news and there's a tendency to put off unpleasant tasks. However, it's got to be done. There are ways to make it easier for everyone. A manager can start by describing what is perceived as the problem and its consequences. Then, ask the team member for their perspective. Listening carefully, team members may be providing context management is not aware of. Once they're done, ask for their suggestions to fix the problem. The goal is to make the team member a participant in the solution, rather than just taking their pitfalls then taking orders. Make this collaborative as much as possible. Come up with some concrete actions and after the meeting, follow up with an email reiterating the agreement. This will help build confidence that people are really hearing each other when they speak and provide an opportunity to ask for clarification if needed.

Hopefully, most feedback sessions will be positive, but even there, make sure to leave time for the team member to speak. They may want to talk about their workload, or about ideas that they've had, or their thoughts on development. They may also surface issues that they're facing that you don't know about, and they may have questions about their performance that haven't been addressed. The long and short of it is that you're striving for open and honest communication which won't happen unless you have open and honest conversations. Make your team one-on-one sessions a priority. It's worth every second!

Communicating Change in a Remote Team

In reality, things change. Projects get dropped or suddenly become hyper-critical. Strategic goals move in new directions. Leadership and other workers move into new roles or new people come in, or people leave. All these changes have the potential to cause uncertainty and stress so it's critical for the manager of a remote team to communicate any changes to the team's goals or priorities immediately. There is too much opportunity for wasted effort if information isn't shared promptly, getting ahead of the rumor mill.

To stay ahead of the curve, an email message can be sent out as soon as possible with a summary of the change, followed almost immediately with a team meeting. Use the meeting to give as much detail as is available regarding the change, and give the team an opportunity to voice their reactions. Then, start discussing how the team will respond to the change, allowing time for input. Try to make any decisions as collaborative as possible. Having team buy-in will make implementation easier. When the meeting wraps up, send a follow-up email to the team, documenting the discussion and any decisions made. If the change impacts some team members more than others, schedule time to meet with them separately, but share the results of those discussions with the entire team afterwards, via email. And if individuals on the team have special concerns that they need to talk about, make time for them. Taking a little extra care of people not only heads off potential problems, it also strengthens the bonds between you and the team member, and helps demonstrate your genuine empathy. Communicate, communicate, and communicate.

Using Tools to Collaborate and Prevent Duplication in a Remote Team

Virtual whiteboard, or other project tracking tool, such as the Planner tool inside Office 365, are great visual representations of work being done. In a remote team, they're even more useful since team members may not have clear understanding of what other team members are doing. Even with regular meetings, it's good to have a visible display. Not only does this share what people are working on, it also helps prevent duplication of effort. With a co-located team, we can just draw something informal up on a whiteboard and leave it in a team space, but how do we serve a virtual team? With Planner, buckets can be created that define project phases, and then cards for individual tasks. Cards can be assigned, reassigned, and moved to different buckets as needed. Managers can make comments on the cards. Documents can be attached or hyperlinks added to other information as well.

In Summary...

During this course, we examined some of the unique challenges of working with a remote team, and talked about ways of meeting those challenges. We started by defining four key points of a remote manager's role: building trust, removing roadblocks, nurturing team connections, and managing workload and deliverables. Building trust on the team and between the team members and the manager is an important factor in smoothing interactions between team members and improving overall communication. Provide consistency through team working agreements, promote equality and transparency, and distribute authority wherever you can. Removing roadblocks focuses heavily on making sure team members have what they need to do their jobs; including hardware, services, or access to organization information, and also building cross-cultural and interpersonal awareness between team members, and creating opportunities for inter-team interactions. Nurturing team connections means understanding the manager's role as the pivot point around which the team rotates. It means keeping in regular and frequent contact with the team, both as a team and individually. It means deepening your relationship with remote team members and demonstrating empathy and encouraging a team identity. Finally, we talked about how to manage workload, provide feedback and communicate change for remote teams, including tools that can help in tracking and collaborating on work.

In summary, communicating freely and openly with team members is the single biggest factor to successfully leading any team!

