

## Managing Remote Teams During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak

As more locations are impacted by the recent coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, organizations are increasingly asking employees to work remotely. On 09 March 2020, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission asked its D.C. based employees to work from home until further notice.[1] Twitter, Google, Microsoft and Amazon have also instructed employees to work remotely if they are able to do so.[2]

For managers who have never managed a remote team, the situation may present new challenges. It is harder to observe employees' day-to-day workflow or build trust, so misunderstandings occur that might not happen in person. Managers must be intentional about how they lead their teams and adapt their management style to fit the unique needs of remote teams. This resource includes three important recommendations for leading remote teams:

1. Establish Clear Expectations
2. Focus on Performance Outcomes
3. Build Open Lines of Communication

Managers can use the tips and tools in this resource to manage teams effectively when team members are working remotely.

### Establish Clear Expectations

In remote work scenarios, it is difficult for managers to maintain the same level of communication they are used to having with an in person team. This means that employees may also struggle to know what their manager needs from them or expects from their work. To overcome these challenges, managers should set clear expectations around individual roles and responsibilities as well as team norms.

**Define Individual Roles and Responsibilities** — If employees don't have clarity around their individual role and responsibilities, it will be difficult for them to align work with what their manager wants. In remote environments, employees might not know the best channels to get in touch with their manager, the right colleagues to go to with questions or the volume of work they are expected to accomplish in a day. Managers should discuss with employees what they expect of employees, as well as what employees can expect from them as a manager. Additionally, managers should elaborate on their expectations upfront when assigning new projects. Creating detailed project plans can help ensure both the manager and employee are aligned on expectations and responsibilities before moving forward with the project.

**Establish Team Norms** — When leading remote teams, managers also take on increased responsibility for setting norms around team behaviors and practices. Common norms to discuss may include preferred methods of communication, how to handle conflict, and working styles. By establishing these norms upfront, the team can define its expectations around team behavior, communication practices, project management processes and collaboration practices. Establishing norms becomes especially important in remote environments, where team members don't necessarily interact on a daily basis. Managers should start by explaining their own working style and preferences to help employees quickly understand what they can expect from the manager. Managers should also hold a discussion on team norms to define what team members expect from one another and from their experiences on the team in general. Give managers the [Team Norm Creation Exercise](#) tool to help them lead a discussion to establish team norms.

### Partner with Employees for Performance Outcomes

With more limited visibility into employees' day-to-day activities, managers may face challenges in managing employees' ongoing performance. In many cases, managers only see employees' work once it's completed and have limited opportunities to offer input on work in progress. In other cases, managers may worry about employees' productivity. The lack of visibility may frustrate some managers, but there are a few strategies they can use to partner with employees for positive performance outcomes.

**Hold Ongoing Performance Conversations** — To ensure employees have the support they need, managers should set up regular check-ins and performance conversations with employees. In remote environments, managers have limited visibility into challenges or barriers facing their employees at work, and consequently they should make a point of establishing a regular cadence to check-in with each employee. As part of conducting performance conversations, managers should begin by helping employees establish well defined goals. The goals should be not only relevant to the team’s work, but also personalized to the employee’s interests and development needs. To evaluate progress against these goals and other individual work objectives, managers should establish clear performance metrics so that employees know what criteria they will be assessed against. These metrics may include product quality, schedule adherence or customer satisfaction.

Additionally, managers shouldn’t be the only source of feedback when they evaluate employee performance. They should request feedback from collaborators, peers, mentors or other colleagues to gain a complete picture.

**Build Trust with Employees** — A base of trust is critical to any well-functioning remote team. For employees to be engaged in their roles and productive in remote work situations, there must be a level of mutual trust between the manager and the employee. In an in-person environment, there are more opportunities to naturally build trust during informal interactions — with remote teams, these opportunities don’t necessarily exist, so managers need to be even more intentional about building team trust. Employees at high trust organizations experience 106% more energy when working, 50% better productivity and 76% higher engagement.[3] Managers can build trust around their management of the team by being transparent and sharing information openly as much as possible. This will make sure employees feel they are in the loop and are not caught off guard if unexpected information arises. Managers can also build trust by recognizing the accomplishments and abilities of the team. This builds trust by demonstrating awareness of individual talents on the team and showing that the manager values the team’s contributions. There is a checklist included below with action items to help managers build mutual trust on their teams.

**Table 1: Checklist for Building Trust on Remote Teams**

Checklist for Building Trust on Remote Teams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Make your actions as transparent as possible</b> — Share information proactively with the team. Gather team input prior to making decisions that impact the team.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Be accessible and responsive</b> — Remote managers should make clear the best ways for employees to reach them. Managers should prioritize assisting with employees’ needs when requests arise.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Create team profiles</b> — Have team members create profiles of their personal interests, hobbies, skills, strengths, development areas and areas of expertise.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Maintain confidentiality of team operations</b> — Agree on norms for what information can be shared outside of the team.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Be proactive in assessing progress</b> — proactively ask employees if they are facing any challenges or barriers. Ask if employees need any extra support.</li></ul>

- **Recognize the team** — Recognize specific successes and talents during team meetings. Promote recognition of team members outside the team.

Source: Gartner

### Build Open Lines of Communication

When the team is working remotely, it will likely be more difficult to maintain effective communication compared to a team working in the same location. There is no water cooler, no bumping into colleagues in the hall, and no office to stop by. This can lead to employees lacking the information they need to do their jobs effectively and feeling disconnected from the rest of the team. In these situations, it is crucial for managers to maintain team engagement and ensure team members have the information they need to complete their work. To accomplish this, managers must build open lines of communication across the team using a few strategies:

**Employ multiple communication channels** — Organizations today have an array of communication channels available to them, each serving a variety of purposes. Teams can use video conferencing software for project discussions, check-in conversations and virtual team meetings. Instant messaging apps may work best for urgent questions, informal discussions and real-time information sharing. As part of determining team norms, the team can discuss expectations on which communication channels they feel most comfortable using as a group.

**Create Team Transparency** — Transparency is a prerequisite for high-performing teams. Employees are largely on board with increasing transparency in the workplace — 71% of employees say their employers should increase their transparency — but working on a remote team can strain achieving a transparent team environment.[4] Without open communication channels, employees might not feel comfortable reaching out to one another or to their manager. This places a burden on the manager to set an example of transparency, sharing openly with employees and encouraging them to always feel comfortable sharing their thoughts or asking questions. Managers should also build transparency around individual strengths and weaknesses on the team to encourage employees to share their skills with one another. Leaders can give managers the Manager Guide: Create Team Transparency to help them identify the best strategy.

### Conclusion

Managing remote teams can present different challenges than can managing a traditional, in person team. Although managers may at first struggle with their lack of visibility into employee's day to day activities, remote teams can perform just as highly as other teams — 79% of employees report increased productivity and better focus when working remote.[5] To achieve improved results when their teams are working remote, managers should focus on establishing clear expectations, emphasizing performance outcomes and building open lines of communication.

### Recommended by the Authors

- [“Managing Virtual Teams”](#)  
This webinar helps managers effectively manage virtual teams. It offers recommendations on adjusting to virtual team management, communicating with and engaging virtual teams, and assessing team progress and promoting team unity.
- [“Toolkit: Remote Work Policies”](#)  
Setting policies for the organization can help clarify manager and employee responsibilities in remote work. This toolkit provides templates to establish remote work policies for the organization.

- [“Coronavirus in Mind: Make Remote Work Successful!”](#)

The coronavirus is requiring more organizations to ask employees to work remotely. This resource includes recommendations to help HR leaders ensure teams maintain their success when moving to remote work.

## Endnotes

[1] [“SEC Becomes First Federal Agency to Ask DC Employees to Work From Home Over Potential Coronavirus Case,”](#) CNN.

[2] [“Microsoft, Google, and Twitter Are Telling Employees to Work From Home Because of Coronavirus. Should You?”](#) Inc.com.

[3] [“The Neuroscience of Trust,”](#) Harvard Business Review.

[4] 2019 Gartner Future of Work Employee Panel Survey

[5] [“State of Remote Work 2019,”](#) OWLLabs, Global Workplace Analytics, September 2019.