

MANAGING REMOTE TEAMS DURING COVID-19



As of this week, the Government has advised increased social distancing and recommended people to work from home where possible, many businesses across the UK are advising their people to work from home until further notice. This is not only unprecedented, but it's possibly a daunting concept for many employees and managers alike. But it doesn't have to be!

I started working from home four years ago. I'm a very social office worker, and the idea of working alone, in a room in my home, with no face to face people interaction, did concern me I have to confess. However, although it was strange initially, I find I get so much work done; there are no distractions, limited interruptions, space to think and research... it's great! There are, however, certain self-disciplines I have learnt over the years, and I can certainly share that great remote management makes a huge difference to the feel and success of homeworking.

In this article I wanted to share my tips for people who are required to manage people remotely, in the hope it can help reduce your stress in the current situation.

The good news is, managing remotely isn't actually that different to managing office-based teams. The majority of what you do is very similar, maintaining rapport, managing performance and motivation, engaging trust, coaching and mentoring, delegation, making conversations meaningful etc. all very much the same – just done at a distance rather than face to face.

There are actions managers can take and measures they can put into place to aid a smoother and more productive experience in the coming weeks and months. My guidance below is in no way exhaustive, but it goes some way in supporting those new to remote working and management.

RECOGNISE THE CHALLENGES OF REMOTE TEAM MANAGEMENT IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES:

- **Communication** – humans are social, even those who see themselves as less social. Brain activity studies have helped us recognise the value in social interaction, and this can be a key challenge in working and managing remotely.
- **Reduced sense of connectedness** – when people see each other every day they build and maintain rapport, when this is suddenly cut off, there is a high risk that teams will become less connected. Add to this the lack of contact people have with the business as an environment to belong, connection to their work can also be reduced.

- **Loss of motivation and trust** – if the business fails to maintain effective and regular communication (both overall and via managers) this can result in a loss of trust. Equally, loss of regular communication (face to face) can also result in reduced trust between colleagues, teams and managers. The human brain is designed to notice danger; if it has no reassurance that a situation is being managed, it will naturally begin to process negative and less trusting thought patterns – in nature this defence mechanism was designed to protect us, in business however, it can be very damaging.
- **Loss of focus** – where some will delight in the opportunity to work from home, perhaps they find it easier to concentrate without the distractions of the busy office environment, they celebrate the loss of the commute, or they appreciate being able to put a wash on during the day! Others will struggle with working from home for more than a couple of days, it's easy to lose focus on the work and start getting on with home jobs, watching TV etc. It's important for managers to help their people maintain focus on the fact they are working from home.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP OVERCOME THESE CHALLENGES:

COMMUNICATION

Maintain regular and meaningful conversations with your team, both individual and as a group. Hold your team meetings virtually, encourage team members to have meetings between themselves to discuss challenges and successes.

There is a multitude of technical support available to help us maintain effective face to face contact in a virtual environment, we are incredibly lucky – take us back ten years and it could have been quite different to be in the situation we now find ourselves in. Zoom, Skype, GoToMeeting, Adobe Connect and other virtual platforms have transformed the opportunities we have in business communication. It's essential these are used to help managers and teams connect over the coming weeks and possibly months.

DISCUSS AND SHARE CHALLENGES

Encourage team members to share and explore options for overcoming challenges. The term 'two heads are better than one' really does take effect here. We all need reassurance that we're doing the right thing, where contact in the office would enable free-flowing discussions, it's important that opportunity is given remotely for those discussions to still take place.

CELEBRATE SUCCESSES

Don't forget to celebrate when things have gone right! In the office, people would likely voice when they've achieved something and when they overcame a challenge. As they won't have this opportunity for now, give them the space and a platform to share these successes and celebrate them together.

ENCOURAGE 'WATER-COOLER' VIRTUAL CHATS

Think about it. Some of the best conversations we have at work are at the coffee area, canteen or by the water-cooler! It's all too easy to miss these opportunities when working remotely, so it's up to you to encourage informal chat discussions – again the use of the virtual team environment through instant messaging and virtual face to face platforms comes into play here.

You can do this by leading them – book in with the team, ask people to get themselves a coffee/tea/water etc and ‘sit around the table’ in Zoom (my personal favourite), WebEx etc. to have an informal ‘how’s life?’ chat.

KEEP THE INFORMATION COMING

It’s vital to keep people in the loop with what’s going on in the business, otherwise it’s human nature often to assume the worst and this will disconnect people psychologically from the business. People will need to know about overall business performance, what’s being done to protect future success in these extreme circumstances, updates on when they might return to the office etc. Also, any staff changes – if people leave/start, the team won’t be able to see the changes, so it’s up to managers to keep their people informed and thus involved and engaged in the business ongoing.

MAINTAIN MEANINGFUL PERFORMANCE DISCUSSIONS

Keep performance discussions alive through regular catch ups with your team members individually. Explore how they are feeling, what they are doing, what they’re finding challenging and what support they need from you. Doing this, along with giving them opportunities for their development through online methods (reading, study, e-learning if available and virtual classroom training), will help keep them connected and engaged in their work.

SUPPORT YOUR PEOPLE IN WORKING FROM HOME

By offering tips and guidance to the people in your team, you can help them maintain their focus when at home, tips can include:

- Get up, get washed and dressed as you would usually (perhaps a little less suited if it’s a very formal working environment in the office), try to maintain similar routines to normal work days
- Make a space at home that is just for your work – even if it’s at the kitchen table, when you’re at work, that’s your space for it.
- Avoid doing dishes, washing, cleaning, mowing the lawn and gardening, painting the walls etc. during work hours – it’s easy to slip into a habit of distraction of ‘home jobs’.
- Have proper lunch and work breaks (this is when you can do home jobs if you really want – it’s your own time)
- Work proper hours – not lots more nor lots less; work is work, home is home – try and keep it that way as much as possible

I hope this article has been useful to you. If you have any fears/concerns you’d like to share or discuss, please feel free to connect with me either on linked in or via hello@thirst4learning.com. I want to help people transition to this new way of working, and if I can share ideas and tips to support then I am very happy to do so.

Best wishes to all in these tough times.