

Leading Virtual Teams

The principles and techniques leaders can utilise to successfully lead virtual teams.

Communication

Coordination

“Successful remote work is based on three core principles: communication, coordination and culture” (HBR, 2018)

Culture

Communication

Structured communications



Most employees value structure and predictability in their work lives. Establishing clear ways of working in the initial stages of remote working enables team members to feel confident in how they can and should communicate. Ensure daily check-in's with team members, either collectively as a team or individually.

Bursts of communication



Research studies have found that bursts of communication can be better for remote teams where ideas were communicated and responded to quickly. Have regular, short meetings around specific decisions rather than broad check-ins where decisions are more likely to be pushed.



Directly address emotions

It's easier to hide emotions online and to never divulge personal details. During feedback sessions and one-to-ones, managers and leaders should make a point about asking about the person's life outside of work. This ongoing communication will allow for truthful conversations when either a personal or professional crisis comes along.

Decentralise team communications



There is a temptation for leaders to desire all communications to be filtered through a central place. This will be counter-productive, negatively affecting both the agility of the team and the trust team members have for each other. Allow team members to communicate and work together freely, reporting back regularly during catch-up.

Acknowledge distractions



Remote working can often be challenging for employees and distractions may arise which temporarily side-line employee efforts. As a leader, there is a need to be responsive, flexible where possible and supportive to employees.

Coordination

Ensure accountability



While even the appearance of micromanaging is a risk, team members must be held accountable for their workload. Beyond one-to-one and team meetings, put in formalised tracking documents or tools to allow everyone to be clear on upcoming tasks and associated challenges.

Bridge the connection



Teams are formed through individual moments of personal connection. With remote teams, leaders have to utilise technology to bridge the connection and creating informal (and private) spaces online where employees can interact is essential.

The right tools and training



Too often people are left behind by technology. When working within a virtual team, not having the right technology (or knowledge to use it) will make that person feel isolated and unwanted. Leaders should not be afraid to experiment and test solutions, working with their teams in collaboration to discover the right solution for them.

Keep strategy on track



It is very easy for people working in a remote environment to become task focussed. Ultimately, this may lead to the leader becoming a delegator of tasks rather than a co-ordinator of strategy. Have regular strategy meetings where you connect current work with the overall purpose of the company.

Set the 'rules of engagement'



For remote workers, having clear rules around communications helps reduce anxiety and increases efficiency. While each situation is different - how and where to use video conferencing versus instant messaging for example - the important factor is the clarity of the rules for each person.

Demonstrate trust



Trust is the oil on which remote teams run. Micromanaging and overly monitoring will be detrimental to trust and lead to people actively disengaging with the work. A laissez-faire approach will have a similar effect however, so the balance is key.

Culture

Embed the culture



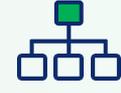
One of the most difficult things to do as leader of virtual teams is embedding the culture of the organisation into how they work and behave. In a virtual environment, people must be connected to the culture through regular activities, such as end-of-the-week online town halls, helping people get closer to the culture and build a shared identity.

Be socially close



Even in a virtual-only team, a concerted effort should be made to be socially close wherever possible. Allocating time for 'play' such as intra-team quizzes or creating a shared Spotify playlist, will allow team members to get to know each other's personalities in a very real way.

Agile co-ordination



The eponymous 'coffee chat' can be the source of agility, collaboration and innovation in any organisation. In the virtual world, regular sharing of work across departments, working from live documents within teams and utilising software tools specifically designed to encourage co-ordination are all levers that a leader can pull to fill this gap.



Humour travels farthest

When people are primarily communicating digitally, humour is an essential component to build bonds and trust. As a leader, this sort of behaviour should be encouraged, setting boundaries where appropriate.

Recognise employee contributions



Leading remote teams can make it difficult to establish ways to provide both formal and informal recognition feedback. Like recognition in a traditional workplace, one size doesn't fit all, and it is important to understand and recognise team members contributions in a way which they value.

Sources:

Behavioral Scientist, "Bursty" Communication Can Help Remote Teams Thrive, 2018 | Gallup, How to Build Trust with Remote Employees, 2018 | Harvard, Challenges to Managing Virtual Teams and How to Overcome them, 2020 | HBR, Why Remote Work Thrives in Some Companies and Fails in Others, 2015 | HBR, A Guide to Managing your Newly Remote Workers, 2020 | Korn Ferry, The Mental Health Toll of Working in Isolation, 2020