Managing Virtual Staff During COVID-19

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Suddenly Switching to a Remote Team? Seven Priorities to Help Managers Transition Well
There has been unprecedented change over the last several weeks as countries scramble to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Among these changes, governments are asking citizens to self-quarantine or practice social distancing. In response, many businesses with brick-and-mortar locations are finding themselves facing a new reality: equipping a remote workforce.

While remote working is not a new concept, there are a significant number of companies now trying to implement it for the first time. Managers will play a critical role in helping their employees transition well.

If you are a manager who has never led a remote team, this assignment may feel overwhelming. It's important for you to know that you are not alone. Fortunately, there is a wealth of information containing tried-and-true strategies for managing a remote team successfully. Below are seven priorities to keep in mind as you get started.

1) **Equip your team members.** Your first priority is to make sure employees have the tools they need to do their job remotely and understand how those tools work. If you have staff that have never worked from home before, they may not understand how to connect to the company network. You shouldn't assume everyone has had practice navigating a video call. Perhaps this is all new to you as well. Schedule the necessary trainings, and then be patient with the process. The silver lining is that these are wonderful skills for your team to learn, and they could prove to be very beneficial for the long-term.

2) **Prepare to fail.** It is inevitable that not everything is going to go smoothly. The entire world is navigating unchartered territories. Let your employees know that you expect there to be a learning curve during this time of transition. Mistakes will happen. Working as a team you can discover together what works well and what needs to be adjusted.

3) **Communicate. Communicate. Communicate.** In the *2020 State of Remote Work Report*, lack of communication and collaboration were identified by the employees surveyed as their biggest struggle with working remotely. Managers need to communicate clearly and frequently. For individual employees, depending on the size of your team, consider daily check-ins or a standing weekly meeting. Also, it's helpful when managers set "office hours" when employees know they can reach out with questions or for support. How you communicate is as important as how often you communicate. Don't rely solely on email or other forms of text communication. Video conferencing and telephone calls are more personal and can help foster better communication. Keep in mind, remote teams don't enjoy the benefit of side discussions while riding down the elevator or impromptu meetings at the copier. Therefore, managers need to create multiple opportunities for team members to communicate with one another as well.

4) **Build connections.** Workers that are used to being anchored by a shared office space may struggle with a sense of belonging when they are forced to work remotely. You can help bridge the distance by being intentional about relationship-building. This might mean allowing time at the beginning of a call to find out how an employee is doing personally or asking questions related to a shared common interest.

5) **Define your expectations.** It is critical that your employees know exactly what is expected of them as a remote worker. Areas of consideration include:

- **Work Schedule** — Are there set hours? If so, what are they? If the schedule is flexible, are there specific times the employee needs to be available for calls or meetings?
- **Communication** — How frequently do you expect an employee to check in with you? Which method of communication should be used for what situations? How quickly should employees respond to emails or phone calls?
- **Processes** — Are there any changes in processes now that the employee is remote? For example, what is the protocol for making decisions if a team member is not available? Will project management be handled differently?

Also consider letting employees know what they can expect from you as their manager. Examples of this include:

- **Leadership** — Reassure employees that you are putting steps in place so your team can be successful while working remotely. As mentioned earlier, this includes a commitment to helping them obtain the tools they need in order to do their job effectively.
- **Availability** — Specify when you can be reached for support or questions. Commit to responding to employees' emails or calls within a set amount of time.
- **Support** — As you are aware, working remotely is just one of many challenges your team is adjusting to at this time. Let them know that you care about their personal wellbeing and remind them of any resources the company has made available to assist them.
- **Transparency** — Pledge to let employees know as soon as it is appropriate of any changes that are taking place that might impact their job responsibilities.
- **Feedback** — Commit to sharing constructive feedback. Communicate your openness to receiving feedback.

6) **Debrief often.** In the beginning, schedule time to debrief frequently in order to identify what seems to be working well and where alternative solutions are needed. As everyone acclimates to their new reality, these debriefing sessions can be phased out.

7) **Celebrate successes.** Everybody needs a win right now. If something works, celebrate it. Take the time to publicly thank team members for jobs well done.

Despite these uncertain times, there is great potential for your team to grow. It's possible to come through COVID-19 stronger and closer than ever.

Reference
Buffer. (2020). *2020 state of remote work report*. Retrieved March 26, 2020, from https://lp.buffer.com/state-of-remote-work-2020

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