

Remote Leadership Best Practice Guide



Once upon a time, the idea of trying to complete everyday business—let alone major projects—using remote employees spread across different time zones, or even on different continents, was a non-starter for most companies. But as technology has evolved and the business world has embraced digital transformation, remote workers have become increasingly common—particularly in a world where global disasters like the COVID-19 (the novel coronavirus) pandemic can wreak socioeconomic havoc in what feels like a heartbeat.

Remote teams need effective and empathetic remote leadership. To get the best performance from far-flung remote employees, managers need to understand the differences inherent to remote work, find ways to meet the needs of their team members, and foster a shared commitment to excellence. By leveraging a few best practices, you can guide your remote team toward effective collaboration, high

morale, and shared success.

Remote Teams Require Different Leadership

For remote workers, the workday has a very different look, feel, and rhythm than it does for those in a traditional office setting. The workload may be the same, but the challenges are different. While remote employees may enjoy certain conditions their office-bound peers view with envy—fewer distractions from coworkers, a more open schedule, the comfort and convenience of “dressing down” or working from a comfy chair—the truth is that remote workers simply face different potential distractions in the form of family, pets, or unexpected visitors, as well as struggling with work-life balance and a very real risk of feeling disconnected, demoralized, or simply “out of the loop” while they work from home.

They can also find it hard to come together as one as they struggle with long distance connections, different time zones that don’t always accommodate standard office hours, and communications that are anything but real time. Face time is probably limited to conference calls on Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams. And, for many, trying to collaborate and build trust with their coworkers is extra challenging when they’ve never met face-to-face.

Successful leaders understand these distinctions, and find ways to leverage best practices for remote leadership when building and supervising remote team members.

With more and more companies embracing remote work as a standard practice rather than an occasional exception, team leaders need proven and effective ways to connect with their virtual teams—and their team members with one another.

Best Practices for Remarkable Leadership of Remote Teams

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a firestorm of interest in effective ways to manage remote teams during a crisis, but the rush to retain operational integrity using remote workers was merely more heat on a conflagration that started a decade earlier. A 2019 study by GetApp revealed that remote work has grown nearly 400% since 2010, and a 2019 survey by Buffer found that 40% of respondents used a mix of remote and traditional workers, often on the same teams, while a full 31% used remote teams exclusively.

With more and more companies embracing remote work as a standard practice rather than an occasional exception, team leaders need proven and effective ways to connect with their virtual teams—and their team members with one another. Following best practices will make it much easier for you to foster team spirit, build trust, and ensure everyone feels valued, connected, and engaged in the success of the project, team, and company.

COMMUNICATE

In a world where even teams that share the same office space often fall victim to misunderstandings and miscommunication, it's not exactly surprising to discover that remote teams struggle to find common ground and camaraderie that normally develops around the coffee station as much as it does the conference room.

Remote teams can gel more effectively when leaders provide clear and consistent guidelines for communication:

- **Establish formal guidelines and standards for communication methods, times, and protocol.**

- Establish a shared set of “office hours” that includes at least 2-3 hours where *everyone* on the team is online and available for short meetings, chats, etc. The immediacy of real-time communication not only makes it easier to get work done, but helps encourage team building.
- Working from home can make it hard to “leave the office”. Encourage your team to block out personal time on their shared calendars, and stick to your own standard to show the importance of setting work/life boundaries.
- Ensure everyone communicates their own availability beyond shared “office hours” to avoid awkward or impossible meeting invites, IMs, etc. All holidays should be on every calendar for the same reason.
- Set acceptable response times for each application or method of communication, e.g. 24 hours for email, 2 hours for Slack or Disqus, etc.
- Ensure everyone keeps the team updated on any location changes to prevent scheduling issues.
- Establish shared calendars, as well as overlapping windows based on different time zones. As with the team’s “office hours,” the complexity and difficulty will increase with the number of time zones, so it may be beneficial to set up groups in adjoining time zones on a calendar for everyday communication and then coordinate meetings that require everyone’s attendance on a separate calendar.
- Set and stick to schedules for recurring check-in meetings with both your direct reports individually and your entire team. This helps establish a flow to the workday, fosters clear communication and accountability, and boosts productivity by keeping everyone in “work mode” while still allowing for work-life balance. For example, you might schedule weekly check-ins with those

reporting directly to you, a separate weekly team meeting, etc.

- **Don't be afraid to "overcommunicate."** With no shared physical presence or water cooler to gather 'round, constant communication helps everyone feel engaged, get to know one another a little better, and build trust. It also demonstrates your own engagement as the team leader, and your commitment to following the standards you've set for the group with regard to communication and availability.

COLLABORATE

Leading your team like you're a part of it, rather than a distant overseer, is a hallmark of successful remote leadership. Working together toward shared goals, and recognizing both the individual needs and unique contributions of each team member, will go a long way toward forging a true team.

- **Provide the right data tools.** Beyond deciding between Zoom and Teams for conference calls or which platform to use for project management, choosing the right type of data management software can set the stage for your virtual team's success. For example, choosing a comprehensive procurement system like PLANERGY makes it easy for everyone to have role-appropriate, secure access to all the spend data they need for analysis, generating expense reports, managing budgets, etc.—and because it's cloud-based, it's mobile-friendly and available regardless of device or platform. That's a critical advantage whether your team is two towns apart or spread across three continents.
- **Delegate, don't dominate.** Skip the micromanagement and empower your team instead by setting standards, benchmarks, and deadlines, and then letting your team members choose how they want to get the job done. In addition to freeing you from the need to babysit every move your team makes, delegation boosts accountability and encourages every team member to stay engaged.

- **Be open to feedback.** Communication provides the “glue” for remote teams, but collaboration combats attrition and resentment. Checking in and asking for everyone’s input on how things are going can save you major headaches in the long run. Trust your team to tell you what’s working for them, what isn’t, and their ideas on how to improve things.
- **Choose remote-savvy hires.** Collaboration begins before the team’s finalized. Be sure to ask potential hires about their previous remote work experience (if any). Be sure to make clear both your expectations for the team and the methods you’ll be using to monitor accountability and performance. Be prepared to train, or provide training for, any new team members who may not have much (or any) familiarity with remote teams.

CONNECT

While they may connect in the virtual world, your remote workers are flesh-and-blood humans who need to feel a connection to perform at their best.

- **Encourage positive relationship-building.** Allowing time during each conference call and meeting to socialization can go quite a long way toward combating isolation and helping your team connect with one another—and you. Consider informal communication channels to help employees blow off steam or share a laugh; a meme-fest in a dedicated Slack channel or virtual lunches once or twice a week via Zoom can help everyone feel more like a team.
- **Consider an in-person meet-up.** Getting together during a pandemic is obviously a no-go, but if conditions allow and you can manage it, assembling your team for a quarterly or yearly face-to-face meeting helps everyone connect and learn to work together with greater friendliness, trust, and efficiency.

Remote Leadership Turns Scattered Staff into True Teams

Just like their more traditional counterparts, remote workers thrive under remarkable leadership. You can make sure everyone on your remote team is engaged, communicating effectively, and collaborating strategically by applying remote leadership best practices and investing in the technology designed to be mobile friendly for a remote workforce.

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