Leading A Remote Team During A Crisis

The Coronavirus crisis has created a new reality where many of us are working differently and away from our normal workplaces.

For leaders this is presenting challenges, including how to manage distributed employees, keep them motivated, maintain productivity and support them through a time of uncertainty.

Our brains seek to minimise effort and when change is required it takes more cognitive energy to adapt. At this time the people within our teams will all be required to change the way they do things. For some this is exacerbated by the change from the ‘old working reality, social dislocation and working remotely.

This can feel like a significant threat, which can mean our teams might not adapt to working remotely as easily as we would need.

Our role as leaders is to help our teams build new habits in these remote working times. And we can do this through providing direction, support and structure to guide them through the crisis.

Here are some tips on how
Encourage a sense of purpose and value

Remote working in these uncertain times can make people feel unanchored and your role as a leader is to help your team members have a re-defined sense of purpose and value. Coach, not tell, them to work out weekly goals that they can all share within the team and help each other hold to account. By achieving the goals that they have set, your team members will also feel a sense of achievement and value.

Give positive feedback where you can - using the What Why What method (what they did, why that was good and what they need to do to keep building on the success), to increase their sense of purpose, safety and value.

Demonstrate empathy

Change can be really challenging for some people – and working remotely can feel a lonely and unsafe place. Structuring the day and week can be one practical way to help people adjust to working remotely and bring a greater sense of order and safety.

Help your people structure their day in a way that works for them and you. Recognise that working from home can be disrupted by the challenge of living in ‘lock down’, so work with individuals to set a new working routine, with space to flex. For one person this might mean starting at 7am and having a longer lunch to do their outdoor activity. Others might need your help to structure their day and week into goal focussed slots of time.

Embrace what it really means to have a flexible work culture and allow people to get things done in a way that balances the business and personal needs.

Overcommunicate

When the situation is uncertain people seek information and when it’s missing it becomes a distraction. Frequently communicating information and details around new information, including any changing priorities helps settle the brain. This is particularly important during times of heightened anxiety and especially so when people are working in physical isolation.

Try to vary the ways in which you communicate information and your requirements – video, phone, email, blogs, pictures and voice recordings. Enable your teams to hear the messages often and when they need to through the safe recording of key information that can be accessed at the point of need.
Video calls have become the new normal and a way to ensure interaction and engagement. Use video calls well and when your video is switched on, it’s hard for people to try and do other things at the same time. Have a clear etiquette for your meetings: mute yourself when you’re not talking, participate in discussions, switch on your camera, turn up on time, turn off your phones and don’t email.

The volume of video calls can also feel overwhelming so support your people in identifying how they work best with video calls and give them permission to opt out (if possible) to focus on other things.

Be clear about your expectations around how the team will share information, manage projects and timeframes, make decisions and assign tasks. Stress what the key priorities are and show your appreciation when the team deliver on them.

Reinforce your team’s purpose and emphasise that safety, trust and sharing knowledge are of the utmost importance.

### Huddle

Develop new virtual ‘coming together’ habits with your team. Set up daily ‘huddles’ to bring the team together for no more than 20 minutes. Do this at the same time every day and ask everyone, including you, to answer

- What was the highlight of their day?
- What will be their focus for tomorrow?
- What are they stuck on and need help with?

Reframe the questions depending on what time of day you choose to run your huddle. Encourage your team members to develop their community by sharing social experiences - their new gym habits, how they spend their outdoor time and what new activities or hobbies they are getting involved in.

Increased trust comes through getting to know the whole person, so ensure that your community time is whole person centred... and accept that your people are sharing their home environment with you. Say hello to kids and dogs who want to join your video calls and above all respect the fact that you are having a unique insight into their lives.

### Check-In

Check in weekly with people on an individual basis to give them your attention. Use it as an opportunity to ask them questions like:

- What are you working on?
- What’s going well?
- Where are you feeling challenged?
- How can I help you?

Really listen – to understand and not respond. When you are connecting with your team members, remember that they might feel distanced from you and their fellow team.
Face them, acknowledge what they are saying and summarise to show you have really listened. Ask follow-up questions before responding so that they know you have connected with them even if it is virtually. You might have had a lot of video calls and feel jaded, but now more than ever focus on the person at the other side of the screen.

Be prepared to listen for what they aren’t saying – it can be harder to read underlying emotions virtually so check out how they really are emotionally. Be prepared to be present and hear whatever it is that they might need to share about how they are feeling.

Build engagement

Set aside a 30-minute slot to do something together as a team. For example, have coffee together, watch and discuss a Ted Talk or read a chapter of a book then talk about it.

In parallel, set up a chat where you can discuss what is happening in your lives in a more informal way and talk about how you feel in both a work and personal context. When we understand each other better, we feel more connected and engaged during difficult times.

Management performance

Just because you aren’t in your normal physical environment it’s no reason why you shouldn’t manage performance. In-fact it’s more important now than ever as people won’t have the ability to read ongoing performance feedback cues or check out how they are doing in the way they might normally.

Clear setting of expectations, checking for understanding and ensuring appropriate milestones are important here. As is giving feedback – so if someone does something that isn’t working for you, then make sure you use the What Why What method to give constructive, developmental feedback – they will often value the clarity this gives them. Be compassionate to this new world and how each individual is faring in it and be patient. This doesn’t mean you have to accept underperformance and you can still stretch your people to develop their contribution beyond where they currently are.

Continue to help people develop during this time through setting interim development plans and encourage them to learn and try new things.

Have faith

One of the key things that leaders struggle with the most is managing home-working teams for the first time and trusting they will do their jobs. It’s impossible to supervise people so you’ll need to trust they aren’t sitting on the sofa watching Netflix or doing the gardening.

Build trust with your people and resist the urge to micromanage. You can do this through being clear in your expectations and communicating regularly.
If someone isn’t responsive or meeting a deadline, don’t just assume they’re not working. Don’t wait to say anything, reach out. They might be feeling overwhelmed or dealing with personal issues, so give them the benefit of the doubt. This is a worrying and anxious time for everyone and it’s hard to know what’s going on with someone when you’re not in the same room.

Manage your own resilience

During times of uncertainty and fear individuals are looking for reassurance. When they don’t have it, they begin to monitor the behaviour of their leaders and fill in information gaps for themselves. So, it’s important to demonstrate the behaviours needed for success in overcoming adversity.

Sustain yourself for the long haul by making room for what inspires you, such as a space to ‘think’, a walk or other form of exercise. Identify the people who lift you up and reach out to them for support.

Stay focussed on what you can control and influence and don’t spend time on the things you can’t do anything about. Help your team to build their confidence and resilience by supporting them to do the same.
Got something else on your mind that you need help with? Email us at:

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