



Managing Remote Teams

In today's culture of global markets, flexible working and wireless technology, more teams exist that are separated by location, culture, function or all three! It can be very challenging to manage such teams successfully, and requires a unique approach to team management.

The challenges facing the remote manager

Managing a team that dispersed across locations, functions or both, brings its own unique set of challenges. The most important of these are:



Location

Managing people can be difficult even when your team is all located in one place. Managing people who you do not see on a regular basis, and who do not see each other frequently (indeed who may hardly know each other) creates very real obstacles. People are naturally drawn to things that happen around them at the local level, so focus may drift away from their actual team, to their local group of co-workers.

Isolation

Just as team members can feel alone and forgotten in their corner of the business, managers can feel very isolated too. This can result in people working alone, and not sharing knowledge, skills, ideas as well as everyone feeling a lack of support. When people feel isolated, they begin to work on their own agendas, and can lose sight of the team objective.

Culture

Not limited to national or ethnic factors, the 'way we do things round here' can cause enormous problems for dispersed teams and their managers. This is particularly an issue with project teams, where team members may only be together for a short period of time. Teams who do not have the opportunity to create a consistent way of working will often revert back to their comfort zones that reflect previous teams, individual preferences and local etiquette. It is almost impossible to effectively manage a team of people who all work in a different way.

Trust

As a distant manager, you cannot oversee all aspects of your team's work. Business success relies on everyone doing what they are expected to do, to the right standard, at the right time and in the right way. It is difficult to trust people to perform their part of the task when we don't know them that well. Trust is something that builds up over time, and comes more easily with people that we have built a personal relationship with.



What successful remote managers will do

1. Bring the whole team together periodically

This is especially important at the start of a project, when a team is formed, or when new members join the team. The frequency of such meetings will depend (in part) to the geographical spread of the team, and the travel budget available.



2. Make sure every person is committed to what the team is there to do

Whilst individuals are separated by time and distance, they need to have a personal reason for working towards the team objective. Help people to identify and commit to personal goals that link to the team goal.

3. Agree 'ground rules'

The team should meet and decide together what they expect from each other. This includes between colleagues, and between manager and team members. A great way to do this is to ask what team members want from you, then state the conditions under which you can provide this. This then gives 'ground rules' for team members, based on mutual needs.

4. Agree a communication plan

Poor communication is one of the biggest problems in managing a dispersed team. Find out how and when people like to be communicated with. Use all of the methods available to you, and agree things like response times. Agree in advance what meetings are needed and why, and how people will stay in touch between key dates.

Be aware that selecting the most convenient method of communication is not necessarily the best method of communication. Aim to communicate with all members of the team in the same way as much as possible (or at least, in a similar way). For example, if you can sit down face to face with someone who is physically close to you to discuss an important matter, at least gives those remote from you the chance to have a two-way discussion over the telephone, instead of sending an email.

5. Give clarity

When teams are separated by geography, language or function, it is easier for objectives or goals to be misunderstood. If this happens, you have a number of team members working hard to achieve the wrong thing. It is the leaders job to ensure that each person knows exactly what is required of them, and how it fits into the wider picture. Give as much information as possible in as many different ways as possible, as it is not practical to closely monitor the work of team members.



6. Build team spirit

Find ways for your team to get to know each other and learn about each other personally and professionally. Clearly, group meetings and social events are ideal, but other methods such as setting up intranet 'chatrooms' or 'blogs' can be useful too. Another useful method is to link people up to work on specific things; two or three people working together will strengthen their links, and give them a common goal – your team objective!



7. Get to know people individually

You cannot get the most out of someone you do not know. Take time to get to know each individual, and show an interest in them at a personal as well as professional level. This will help to build relationships, motivate people and identify all of the strengths within the team.

8. Build trust

Effective teams are made of people who trust each other. To gain trust from team members, you must first give it. Assuming that people will do as you ask is more effective than expecting the worst to happen and micro-managing them. Be open and honest with your team and most importantly, do what you say you will do. Broken promises are the quickest way to break trust within a team.

9. Empower people as much as possible

People in remote teams have to have a certain amount of autonomy. You have to trust them to do the right thing. To do this, you have to make sure that they have all of the necessary information (which comes back to keeping communication lines open), and are clear about their level of responsibility and authority for decision-making. People in different time zones cannot be constantly waiting for you to make a decision, and even if they did, would you have better information than them? Remember, it is not just the team who are 'remote'...you are distant from them and their environment.

10. Put yourself in their position

Believe that people in your team want to do a good job, and are capable of doing a good job, and put yourself in their shoes to identify what they would want you to do to help them to achieve their goals. Ask "what can I do for them?" instead of "what do I need them to do for me?"



11. Be fair, and be SEEN to be fair

Give every person in the team the same amount of attention and opportunities. Whilst it is often quicker and easier to discuss things or make decisions with a few team members who are close or available, it may not be the right thing to do. Excluding some team members (even unintentionally) can give the impression that they are not as valuable to the team. In turn this can break trust, lead to a lack of commitment and in-fighting. Make extra effort to make sure that those people who are out of sight and not out of mind.

12. Listen to the team and share information



As a distant manager, you cannot have all of the information about all of the issues in all of the areas. Each person has a piece of the puzzle, and the best distance managers want everyone in the team to have all of the pieces. This means decisions and actions are likely to be made for the good of the project/team objective. Don't operate on a 'need to know' basis unless absolutely crucial to do so. Listen openly to the ideas suggested by your team, and either provide missing information or ask questions to clarify their thinking so that they can decide what best to do with it. Never dismiss an idea or suggestion out of hand.

13. Manage conflict swiftly

Work to avoid conflict within the team, and be aware of the subtle signs that show that things are not right. Never ignore the signs that something is wrong, or hope that it will go away. In remote teams, the problem is less likely to resolve itself than in traditional teams, as people have time to brood and make assumptions. How you deal with conflict is a personal choice, but deal with it as soon as you can.

14. Reward and Recognise individuals and the group

Work for your team members by raising their profile, and giving them credit for a job well done. Letting other team members know what they have achieved will help to build respect within the team, and strengthen trust, as other team members will see 'proof' that this person has been successful. A simple public 'thank-you' is often enough. Remember too to celebrate team achievements and milestones. Help everyone to see the part they played in achieving success.

15. Make technology work for you

With email, telephones, video-conferencing and the internet, working remotely is on the increase. It is important to make all this technology work for you, without it taking over your life. Technology will not manage your team for you; hiding behind it will not 'excuse' poor management. Managing teams, including remote ones, is about managing people. If you get the people aspects right, then the rest should be easy.

A one day workshop on Managing Remote Teams based on these points can be purchased at http://www.power-hour.co.uk/ourshop/prod_1172578-Managing-Remote-Teams.html