

The 4 Biggest Questions When Managing a Virtual Team

A Guide for Managing Teams Remotely

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Team management always has its challenges. From dealing with challenging team members to encouraging team cohesion, a manager is always putting out fires and aiming to strengthen their team. So what happens when the workplace is moved online? What happens when the team members you manage are not coming into the office but logging on from their couches?

There are many questions that come with moving from managing your team in the office to virtual management. Here are the 4 biggest questions managers have when managing a virtual team and actionable answers to help you and your team thrive.

How do I build an effective team remotely?

Don't overthink it. You build an effective team remotely the same way you build an effective team in person. Learn their behavior and work style, their communication style and feedback preference, and their values and motivations. Doing this builds trust among your team, creating a safe environment where questions can be asked in order to find the best answer.

Just like an in-person team, you need to equip your team for success. Doing that involves understanding what their work environment is like and optimizing what they have access to. Each person's "work from home" setup is different; thus, each person needs to be treated differently as they are onboarded to your expectations as they begin to work remotely.

While it's important to be clear about the work environment, it's equally as important to be straightforward about the expectation for work. Setting clear project expectations and guidelines allows employees the space to ask for clarification if it is needed. To frontload setting expectations, create a project brief with details to be helpful, ensuring team alignment on what is needed, when, and why. For example, if my copywriter is waiting on my notes on a topic to complete her article when can she expect my notes? What's the deadline for the article? What is the timeline from start to finish?

It's helpful to run through these questions as you build your remote team:

- Do they have the right equipment for their job? For example, do they have the tools to engage with video meetings?
- Are they alone or in a shared space? Does that space guarantee peace and quiet or do they need to seek out a safe haven for conference calls?

- Is there a time-difference to work through? Do they have a “personal production” time that matches with the others? Does it need to match? If they’re a late-night worker vs a standard 9:00-5:00 worker, how does that impact the team?
- For each project: What is the project, when is it due, what other work depends on each individual piece, who is responsible for what, etc.

How can I encourage trust and transparent communication with a remote team?

Having a committed team that knows, likes, and trusts each other is just as important remotely as it is when you share the same space. A high functioning team is a high functioning team - if you want efficient results and a culture of resilience and sustained growth, you want a high functioning team. To get that, you need to understand that productivity and profitability are built from a foundation of process. Setting up your remote team with clear expectations helps lay that base.

As Stephen Covey said, “seek first to understand.” If someone doesn’t immediately respond to your email, find out what’s going on before jumping to a conclusion or sending off a nastygram. Perhaps they are using time blocking or they prefer time to research their answers before responding. Or perhaps the email didn’t make it through to you yet.

Here are some questions to help you start thinking about creating a virtual workplace grounded in trust:

- How does your team like to be managed? What comes off as micromanaging to your employees and how can you hold yourself accountable to avoid micromanagement?
- How often do feel you should check in with your team just to hear how they are handling their workload and understand their struggles? Do you think your team feels the same on frequency? Would they want more or less check-ins?
- If your team is not receptive to checking in with you directly, what are other ways you could encourage sharing? (Anonymous weekly survey to check in, encouraging more team chats outside of work, hiring a team cohesion coach)

How can I help my team prepare and adjust to working remotely?

First the all-powerful, ever-reigning conference call. While some team members might be comfortable on conference calls or video calls, others might not be. Before jumping in, be sure to allow time to explain and explore the platform. If there are easy, beginner-level tutorials, share them with the team before the meeting. If anyone has questions before or during the call, encourage them to ask instead of sitting on their confusion.

Next, take advantage of the bells and whistles that come with the many meeting platforms now available. Use break out rooms often to encourage smaller groups to collaborate more effectively. Utilize the whiteboards to deepen engagement.

While features are great, creative facilitation of the call is equally as important. Instead of naming someone to respond, let another participant nominate the next person to respond. Take breaks by asking people to show a favorite item in their workspace. Be more specific and name an emotion and ask, "Show us something that brings you a smile in your workspace," or be brave with, "Show us something you wouldn't want us to see in your office - ie. a pile of paper, clutter pile, laundry, that you are working in your flip flops." The name of the game is *personalization*. Just like speaking to an audience at a conference, you want to sense the emotional field of the folks on your screen.

More than anything with transitioning from in-office to online, make sure you are asking if employees are enjoying the way they are communicating. Whether talking on Zoom, messaging in Slack, or dragging and dropping in Trello, the best way to understand if your team is adjusting to the WFH setup is to check in and *ask*. Ask if they are adjusting well and what you can do to help.

How do I facilitate virtual team building and improve morale? Why is it important?

Team members learn about each other and begin to care about each other's success. Getting work done and being productive is much more enjoyable and effective if people have buy-in that they are part of something larger. Taking virtual control of employee interaction or, lack thereof, allows you to set a precedence that team culture matters, whether people are working from home or clocking into the office.

Building bonds by creating environments that are safe enough to ask a question or say you don't know the answer encourages community. Be able to have healthy conflict where discussing issues doesn't become personal attacks improves trust in the workplace. Weekly "water cooler or coffee maker" chats, virtual lunches or even breaks during the day builds camaraderie. It is about breaking down the loneliness factor. To that end, if a phone call is more helpful than an email, *pick up the phone!*

Aside from virtual non-work chats, the ultimate goal is to learn more about the individuals on the team and to look for any themes among the team members. This helps people get excited to log on in the morning and encourages communication. At least once a week, try to start conversations by posing a question to the wider team. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Who loves classical music?
- Who has or had an unusual pet?
- Who lives in the city, town they were born in?
- Who has or had an unusual collection?
- Who plays a musical instrument?
- Who is a Game of Thrones Fan? Respond with your favorite character.
- Who doesn't like pizza?
- Who is a NASCAR fan?

- Who speaks a second language?
- Who scuba dives or snorkels?

Whether your team is already remote or looking to make the move to working from home more consistently, managing your employees always points back to this: being open, transparent, and willing to communicate and adjust. Yes, there are a lot of factors to consider when going fully remote. Yes, there are lots of conversations to be had and likely many frustrations that will arise.

Don't lose hope. Don't let the annoyances deter you from setting your people up for success. You can do this! And if you need some support to make that happen, [reach out](#).

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