

Building and Leading High-Performing Remote Teams

By Arlene S. Hirsch July 15, 2019



The popularity of remote work is rising fast. Multiple research studies show that employees who are able to skip commuting and work away from the office, whether at home, a coffee shop or somewhere in between, are happier, more productive and less likely to jump ship. But overseeing a team of remote employees doesn't come naturally to many managers, who are accustomed to seeing their employees in the office at least a few days each week. Some even question how they can know if people working away from the office are really working.

“The first thing we teach leaders in that situation is management by objectives—how you can give people the benefit of the doubt by setting expectations upfront and having a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities and timelines,” said Mari Anne Snow, who honed her skills in virtual team leadership as an executive at State Street Corp., an international financial services company based in Boston.

As vice president of corporate services, Snow was responsible for designing and implementing programs promoting flexible work arrangements, global collaboration and virtual project teams for 27,000 employees worldwide. Since leaving State Street, she has continued her mission to promote remote teams by founding companies that provide strategic direction and custom training to virtual teams and that design products for remote workers.

Managing Accountability

Proponents of remote work see it as a viable way for companies to expand and diversify their talent pool, reduce overhead expenses, and respond to business demands in real time. Yet many remote teams fail to meet their objectives.

“The guiding principles of leadership are the same regardless of whether the team is located under one roof or geographically dispersed,” said Brie Reynolds, senior careers specialist at FlexJobs, a virtual company that promotes flexible work options. “The real question is how do you take the best part of managing an office team and translate that into a remote environment?”

The best place to start is to make sure everyone is on the same page, said Darleen DeRosa, a managing partner at OnPoint Consulting, a leadership assessment company based in New York City.

“Leaders have to make it clear to team members that they are responsible for their own actions and the impact their actions have on the rest of the team,” DeRosa said. She suggests that managers of remote employees adhere to the following guidelines with those workers:

- Clearly communicate to team members who will be held accountable for what.
- Agree on a timetable for every project and assignment.
- Monitor progress by scheduling regular check-ins.
- Avoid blame if a deadline is missed or another issue arises.

Creating Context

“It's the leader's job to provide the context for the team,” said Melissa Lamson, president and CEO of Lamson Consulting in Phoenix. “They need to paint the big picture for team members and bring the importance of their roles to the forefront. Team members need to know what their roles are, and why they matter.”

Research from OnPoint Consulting shows that when remote teams meet early on, either face to face or via videoconferencing, it helps set them up for success.

“Initial kickoff meetings can jump-start interpersonal relationships and unite the team around a common purpose and goal,” DeRosa said.

Francis Norman, a principal consultant at Ulfire, an Australian consulting firm specializing in remote teams, recommends that team leaders establish a shared vision at the outset by engaging team members in conversation around the following issues:

- What are the overall goals of the business and how can each team member contribute?
- What is the role of each team member and the team as a whole?
- What are their accountabilities to each other and to the organization?
- How (and how often) do they want and need to communicate with each other?

This road map ensures that the team is moving in the right direction and that everyone knows the “rules of the road,” Norman said. As new members join the team, it can be used as part of the onboarding process.

Overcoming ‘Virtual Distance’

“Digital communication enables remote work, but it creates a whole set of new problems,” Snow said. “It’s easy to forget that you’re dealing with real people.”

This phenomenon is what Karen Sobel Lojeski calls “virtual distance,” which she defines as a sense of emotional and psychological detachment that builds up over time when people become over-reliant on technology to mediate their relationships.

“When virtual teams underperform, companies often think that geographic issues are the main problem and gravitate toward strategies to fix that problem,” said Lojeski, founder and CEO of Virtual Distance International (VDI) and co-author of *The Power of Virtual Distance* (Wiley, 2020). “Our data show that the root cause is virtual distance. It changes the way that people relate to each other.”

According to VDI data, the greater the virtual distance, the higher the negative impact on the team in terms of innovation effectiveness, trust, work satisfaction, role and goal clarity, and project success.

Team leaders can reduce virtual distance by creating an environment where team members feel emotionally and psychologically connected to one another and to the business, Lojeski said.

“When you work remotely, you can’t take somebody out to coffee or go to happy hour with your co-workers,” Reynolds said. “But there are other ways to get around this problem.”

Snow recommends that team leaders think strategically about how to establish a framework for people to connect and engage with one another. “This is not something that people will do on their own,” she said.

Yet creating relationships among remote co-workers and their managers is crucially important.

A Kenexa Research Institute study found that 50 percent of the positive changes in communication patterns within the workplace can be credited to social interaction outside the

workplace. An open channel for communication in a technology platform gives remote team members a “meeting place” where they can go to socialize. FlexJobs uses Yammer for water-cooler conversations; for big announcements; and to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries and promotions. Slack is another popular communication tool among remote teams.

When Reynolds was pregnant, her team threw her a virtual baby shower. “They had the presents sent to my house, and then they scheduled a videoconference so that everyone could watch me open them,” she said.

To be sure, it’s also beneficial for remote teams to meet face to face on occasion. Zapier is a completely virtual Web-based software company whose employees get together twice a year for a company retreat to play board games, go hiking and spend time getting to know one another better.

Employee volunteering is another effective way to boost engagement and morale. Remote teams can identify causes they care about and how they want to participate. They can conduct virtual charity auctions or fundraise among themselves for events in the community, such as food drives or charity walks/runs.

Leveraging Technology

Relying on effective technology is another aspect of effective remote teams. When people first transition from working in an office to working at home, they may struggle with feelings of isolation and personal accountability.

Museum Hacks, a virtual company that offers team-building exercises and activities at museums around the country, opened up a channel named “coworking” on its collaboration software where employees can work “side by side” on separate activities. These co-working spaces replicate the social accountability of office spaces except everything is done virtually.

Project software can also be used to create greater transparency and accountability. This enables team members to see what projects are being worked on, along with key timelines and deliverables, and can be updated in real time.

“Virtual teams must rely heavily on task-based trust, which is the belief that team members will do their job,” DeRosa said. Team members can earn the trust of their co-workers by being responsive, following through on commitments and taking responsibility for results, she added.

“It can be helpful for virtual teams to set up some ground rules in the team charter for how teams are going to use technology to communicate and connect,” said Kathryn Bartol, a professor of leadership and innovation at the University of Maryland in College Park. “The most

important issue is how do you build connectivity when you don't have people meeting face to face?"

According to research conducted by Bartol and her colleague N. Sharon Hill, how technology is used in geographically dispersed teams often is more important than the technology itself. Hill and Bartol found that when teams match the technology to the task, it helps improve communication and team performance.

Text-based media is generally more useful for sharing basic daily information, while video chats and telephone conversations are better for brainstorming, problem-solving and relationship-building.

"Face to face is 10 times more effective than the phone, and the phone is 10 times more effective than e-mail," Lamson said. Making good use of video is a best practice, she added, and can be a substitute for face-to-face communication.

Frequency of communication is another key variable.

"Leaders need to develop a feedback loop and then work hard to maintain regular communication," said Bartol, who encourages managers to use short text and video messages to give team members immediate feedback.

Preparing for the Future

Sacha Connor built much of her marketing career with The Clorox Corp. In 2010, she convinced the management team to let her transition from the company's corporate headquarters in Oakland, Calif., to a home-based office in Philadelphia.

"I became one of the beneficiaries of the company's willingness to flex to retain high-performing individuals and joined the growing arm of men and women who work virtually with their direct reports, teams and managers," she said.

Shortly after her move, Connor started talking informally with Kyra Zeroll, another Clorox marketing professional working remotely, to compare notes and share tips. Zeroll had relocated to San Diego when her husband accepted a new job.

As Clorox continued to decentralize its operations and more team members began working in remote teams, the two women realized that their virtual peers had similar experiences, training needs and questions, as well as a wealth of expertise to share. Together, they launched ORBIT, an employee resource group for remote employees, as part of the company's diversity and inclusion initiatives.

“ORBIT started as a way to build a community of fully remote employees to share our experiences and learn from each other,” Connor said. “But it quickly turned into a resource for the broader organization, which needed skills training on how to work in distributed/virtual teams across office sites.”

ORBIT’s overarching mission was to help remote employees thrive within an increasingly virtual environment. To do that, Connor and Zeroll needed to partner with different departments, so they worked with IT to get access to the tech tools they needed, along with virtual leadership skills training.

They also worked with HR to help the company adapt its people processes to better align with its remote workforce. This included partnering with HR around career pathing and ensuring that manager training included how to work with direct reports from afar.

“We also wanted to influence the C-suite about the future of work and create a community for virtual teams to learn from each other,” Connor said.

Eventually, she left Clorox to start Virtual Work Insider, a leadership training company for remote workers.

“Virtual work is the future of work,” Connor said. “Companies need to be prepared.”