Managing at a distance

How to manage remote workers

Remote working is now an established part of the mix for many organisations, with many employees working from home or other remote locations all or part of the time. So, as a people manager, how can you ensure your remote workers are supported to perform as well as possible, especially when you may be managing them from your home, local office or other remote location?

In fact, good people management skills are not fundamentally different when applied remotely than they are face-to-face. If you already have good management procedures in place, you may well have much of this covered, but there are some essential things to be aware of. This document is a useful checklist you can use to make sure you're doing the right things.

Communication

This is the big one. The main difference between all being together most of the time and remote working is the lack of opportunities for informal communication. In a shared workplace, managers can more easily gauge if people are happy and productive, by 'reading the room' and picking up on body language and other non-verbal cues. When it comes to remote working, you need to make a particular effort to keep your virtual finger on the pulse.

Establish and maintain rapport

A rapport comes naturally when you work with people every day, gradually getting to know people through informal interaction, and crucially earning their trust so they know they can come to you with concerns. Working remotely, you have to be much more intentional to achieve the same result. So:

- **There is no substitute for speaking to someone directly.** While meeting regularly in person will not be practical for remote workers, a video meeting is the next best thing, followed by an audio-only meeting or old-fashioned phone call. Even if it means juggling time zones, a conversation of some kind is usually the best way to get things done and avoid misunderstandings.

- **Establish structured daily or frequent check-ins.** These can be collective or one-on-one, but they must be regular and predictable, even if there is nothing urgent to discuss. People should know they have a regular opportunity to voice their concerns, so things are not allowed to drift for days on end.

- **Don't do everything as a group**, make sure you have regular one-on-ones with each person.

- **Encourage regular communication to build a rapport between team members.** This keeps colleagues connected and prevents people feeling isolated or even suspicious of one another if the manager is the only point of contact. Allow a few minutes at the beginning or end of more formal meetings for colleagues to chat and catch up - don't leave them in the lobby/waiting room.

Practise active listening

Active listening is a skill that requires practice, especially remotely. It means concentrating on what the other person is saying and ensuring you fully understand before responding. And it's not enough to listen, people need to know you are listening, which is not always obvious when you can't read someone's body language. So:

- **If using video, keep a positive and open 'listening' posture.** Maintain eye contact and remember visual cues such as nodding to show you're listening and understanding what they are saying, but don't force it, let it come naturally.

- **Allow people the time they need.** Don't interrupt, and make sure they have said all they've needed to say before you respond.

- **Repeat what people have said back to them** to show you're listening and give them a chance to correct any misunderstandings, always ask them "is that right?".

- **Use people's names when talking to them,** both their own and anyone else you are discussing, to show you are paying attention to their particular situation and not generalising.

- **Think in advance about how you might need to adjust your communication style** to suit the person you are speaking to. Will this person need a lot of prompting to speak up, or do you just need to let them open up and pay attention? What level of detail is good for them.

- **Don't be tempted to check email or anything else** during the conversation. They will notice if your eyes are drifting and you'll miss something important!

- If you do have to refer to another screen such as a document being discussed, explain this, so you don't appear bored or disrespectful, and return regularly to full 'active listening mode'.

Understand the other person's environment

Modern information and communications technology has made remote working possible in a way it was simply not before. But not everyone has the benefit of a home office with state-of-the-art facilities. So:

- **Be flexible and tolerant,** recognising that not everyone has the equipment for a video call. Even if they do, they may be reluctant to use it if working from a bedroom or with kids around. Consider audio-only or even a phone call if they are more comfortable with that.

- **When you do use video, be clear whether people are expected to have their cameras on all the time.** It's best that either everyone has it on or no one does. When video is on, please encourage them to ensure adequate lighting (not from behind, otherwise they'll appear as a silhouette), to consider what's in the background and how noisy the environment is, and to speak clearly into the microphone.

- **Be aware that hours of video calls can be tiring,** as they require more deliberate focus than face-to-face meetings, so make cameras optional where visual contact is less important. As with any meeting, keep it short so people can sustain concentration. If a lot has to be covered have breaks, and suggest attendees use the time to take a few moments out to get a drink and not check their emails or start another task.

- **Where possible, define in advance how long you expect a meeting or call to be,** and what's on the agenda. Consider not having an AoB (Any other Business) item - if it's important, it should be on the list, and then everyone has a chance to prepare. AoB can be a time when meetings get hijacked and run over. A clear agenda and timings will make it easier for people to concentrate as they won't be wondering how long is left and what's got to be covered.

- **If you need to communicate something that only affects one person, do it separately** rather than in a group meeting, both to respect their privacy if relevant and avoid wasting others' time.

- **Dress appropriately** for a video call just as you would for an in-person meeting, or at least what's going to be visible (will you stand up at any time? Then best not have your tracksuit bottoms or shorts on!). Your appearance is one way you convey your status as a manager, and it also reflects on your organisation. At the same time, don't be distracted by the fact that you are always on your own screen. Avoid the temptation to look at yourself, and especially to change anything about your appearance while on a call. You should be listening to others!

A lot of the above is true of a good face-to-face meeting as it is a remote one. Manage meetings well, and you'll get the best outcome in the shortest time.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing and mental resilience is at least as important a concern for remote workers as it is in a shared workplace. It is not only valuable in itself, but is key to productivity, since happy workers tend to work in a more focussed and smart way. Nevertheless, remote workers are easily neglected when it comes to companies' wellbeing programmes, so it's important to consider their particular needs. So:

- **Offer encouragement and emotional support.** Actively check in with people to ask how they are getting on, and listen carefully to pick up on subtle cues that something may be wrong.

- **Be aware of the signs of key mental health issues,** such as people becoming distracted, bad-tempered or seeming harassed. These are harder to spot remotely, so you have to be intentional about it, and reach out to help those who seem unhappy.

- **The five key elements of wellbeing** are being connected, keeping active, learning new things, giving time to others and taking notice of the world around us, so make sure your people have opportunities when it comes to all five.

- **Often it falls to the employers to remind their staff** to take a walk, make lunch or pick up a magazine now and then. Please encourage them to take regular breaks, especially from sitting at a computer, so they don't feel misplaced guilt for being human.

- **Encourage people to have a dedicated workspace, free from distractions,** and as comfortable as an ergonomic office workstation, even if this is temporary and set up each period they are working. Leaving or changing the homework environment tells the person they are not at work. Without that cue, the temptation is to be 'always on' and available for work all the time, which isn't good for wellbeing and importantly, productivity.

- **Lookout for burnout.** While some managers fear remote workers will slack off, sometimes the opposite happens. Without a commute to bookend the day, people can work excessive hours (a phenomenon sometimes called 'online presenteeism'), which is not sustainable long-term. So, make sure they remember to switch off.

- **Don't forget your own wellbeing!** An unhappy manager is bad news for everyone, remote or otherwise.

Assessment and training

Remote workers are entitled to the same opportunities to develop their careers as anyone else. And of course, it is in their manager's interests to ensure they are performing as well as they can, as well as acquiring the new knowledge, skills and competencies they need to achieve the company's goals. There are particular considerations when it comes to remote workers:

- **Think of yourself as a coach as well as a manager.** Take extra responsibility to help people develop without the benefits of a supportive workplace.

- **Judge people on results, not their apparent level of activity.** Remote work is by its nature more flexible, so avoid unnecessary micromanagement.

- **Regularly evaluate the processes in place** to maximise the benefits of remote working and mitigate any downsides.
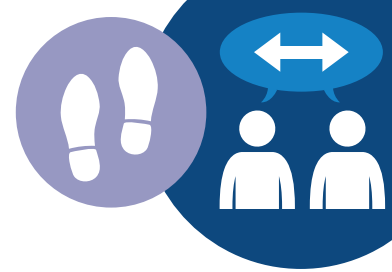
- **Make good quality learning resources available online** so employees can access them anywhere, anytime. Simply putting books or slide shows online doesn't make for effective online learning.

- **Be sure to celebrate the same work milestones that would be marked in the workplace,** whether through virtual gatherings or simply letting everyone know when someone has gone above and beyond or hit a target/milestone.

Processes and procedures

Finally, managers must always ensure their people are clear about respective expectations and responsibilities. You should be aware of any relevant legal obligations concerning remote workers in particular, as well as your own organisation's policies. For example, are there rules about when people can and cannot choose to work remotely, and under what terms? If moving from site-based to remote working, it may be necessary to amend contracts and review the terms of employment intermittently, so be ready to discuss these issues with your people and refer them to the appropriate HR colleagues if required. Make sure you clearly understand them first.

Even on a more informal basis, it is a good idea to write down arrangements that have been agreed for remote working if they vary on an individual or team basis. Ultimately, the key to managing remote workers is simply to understand their particular needs and challenges, and then treat them with the same care and consideration you would show to other colleagues.

About this course

Charlotte is settling in to her new role as Manager of a Rise and Dine Deli. The outlet she's joined is underperforming and the team she must manage has low morale. She thinks this may be, in part, due to the mental health and wellbeing of some key team members. Your role is to make the decisions that will help Charlotte handle sensitive conversations. At the same time, you will learn how to manage the mental health and wellbeing of your own team.

This document forms part of **Managing People Series: Episode 2, 'Wellbeing'**. Managing People is an immersive and interactive story-led learning experience from www.upskillpeople.com