

9 Things to Watch for When Your Team Goes Remote

Remote Work Leadership Series: Part 1 of 2

If you lead a team and have gone remote—or maybe have expanded remote work due to COVID-19—here are 9 things to be conscious of to help you succeed. And when (not if, but when) you struggle, remember that yes, this is all doable. Others have gone before you and have been successful, so you can do it, too. If you start swearing that your team just can't make the transition, remember that yes, they can:

1. User adoption becomes critical.

Going remote means you've really got to emphasize that everyone get on the same systems, and learn how to use them. Communication depends on it! For instance, take file storage. Google Drive is, on its best day, a great place to lose information. But if not everyone's on it, things can go even more maddeningly sideways. Key project files stay on the network, because everyone adheres to your security policies, obviously, but then someone shares an image for a deck from iCloud. Which someone else turns into a slide, also in iCloud. By the end of the week, that whole team has silently migrated to iCloud. Meanwhile, someone on a different team shares a project plan via Quip, which one of their teammates turns into an Excel based project plan. But wait: there are people still updating the Quip doc, so now y'all have dueling plans. And then there's you, poor soul, looking through your "Shared with me" Drive folder for a file referenced on said spreadsheet that's actually somewhere on an employee's personal Microsoft OneDrive.

2. You just became first line tech support.

Your team may need additional equipment to work effectively, and if your company isn't used to supporting remote workers, it'll be up to you to get them squared away. (Having Zoom accounts doesn't automatically make people ready to rock.) Little things that might not be problems during a once-a-week call can become major headaches when they start to affect every single call—especially customer presentations and other calls where professionalism is paramount. Be patient, and make it safe for your team to bring their challenges to you. I've posted my essential equipment checklist in a companion document [here](#). Taking care of your people by setting them up right can help them stay connected with the company, with you, and with each other. In the initial phase of the move, have your team come to you with their issues. It'll give you better insight into what they need, and it'll keep them connected to you. Offloading people to tech support too quickly creates

additional communications headaches (it's one more channel where things can fall through the cracks), and sends a signal that your people are not worth your time.



3. Prepare to see more of your people than you ever planned to see—and please don't judge.

Lots of people are about to go remote who weren't planning on having their personal space in frame on video calls with their coworkers, so if it's for more than a short period, this may turn their homes upside down. Some team members may need help setting up a place to work, too: even if the equipment is good, if the only spot they have to work is with their back to a west-facing window, then good luck with afternoon calls when the sun starts streaming in. Talk with them about the adjustment, and again, be patient.

4. Be extra accountable.

If something isn't working, take responsibility for the first fix attempt before asking the employee to make a change. For example, let's say you're on a video call with a team member and notice they're in their

kitchen. Don't ask if they wouldn't mind moving; instead, ask if they'd like to order a shoji screen for client calls. Hold yourself accountable for fixing problems, not them—again, they weren't planning on working from home, so give them some latitude as they adjust. The kitchen set up might be temporary! If they can solve it, they will, and you can be confident in this because by being accountable yourself for that first fix attempt, you earn the right to ask them to provide that second fix when needed.

5. Be intentional.

Working over the phone and video is not the same as working face-to-face. (I know people at Cisco, including one of my favorite people in the industry. I've heard their pitch many times. Still and all, no; its not.) A screen inherently puts more distance between you and your employees, which means more opportunity for miscommunication. Communicate clearly and intentionally, and use good listening techniques: ask others to repeat back what you're saying, use shared docs to build action plans... whatever it takes. And when in doubt, play it straight: miscommunications with employees rarely break in your favor, so be extra careful with sarcasm that could be taken literally.

6. Be proactive.

Working remotely can be isolating. Check in with your people more than you think you should, and not just about work. Literally ask them how they're doing. "How's work? How's your mindset? Are you working out?" Since you won't have any fly-by hallway meetings, you'll need to create those types of interactions. Show an interest! Better: keep a journal of what's news in your employees' worlds. You're losing the ability to overhear bits and pieces of their conversations in the office, so the only things you'll hear about are things they bring up. Do what you need to remember those things from one conversation to the next!

7. Expect new and surprising types of stresses to negatively impact results.

Obvious things to watch out for are depression and/or feelings of isolation. But sometimes, stressors are less acute and build in time. For instance, both introverts and extroverts can struggle working remotely: extroverts are alone all day, while introverts have to do video calls all day. Alternatively, someone who has always been extremely polished in the office may own a loud dog, or have an infant that is now the star of their calls, which can cause a break their image and embarrassment

or fear. This is an adjustment for everyone, and often in ways no one anticipated (or did anticipate; plenty of people opt to work in offices precisely to avoid the challenges of working from home). Some adjustments will hit in ways people lack the language to describe. Helping them name these issues so they can solve them is part of your job, O Fearless Leader.

8. Fix your team check-ins.

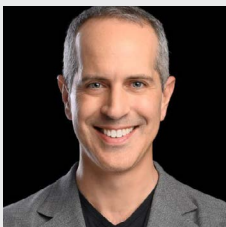
The easiest thing, and what most managers seem to do, is to have their team read out one at a time during check-ins. No one likes that, they've never liked it, and now that they're remote, it's a ritual that's goes from annoying to brutal. What's preferable? Basically anything else, because on calls, it can be very difficult to interrupt someone who rambles, and even harder to stop a sidebar conversation. There are no social clues to help speakers know when they've lost their audience. Create a dynamic conversation as an active leader. Ask people to walk in with questions. Of course, this requires a pre-shared agenda. See where this is going? We're back to intentionality.

9. Create safe places for team members to talk about nothing.

Don't be so controlling that you shut down private Slack channels about hobbies as fast as you can find them. Let people have their outs. Especially now that they're remote, they need ways to connect with their teammates, and stay connected even when there's no active project gluing them together.



Finally, give yourself a break. There's a reason you hadn't gone remote before, and so if you find yourself doing it under duress, you're stepping into something foreign and uncomfortable. And doing it at a time not of your choosing. Which is to say, you'll have plenty of unforeseen challenges and *I-told-you-so* moments. And that's OK! As I said at the top, this is doable. Hopefully, the above will help you avoid some common pitfalls and find success sooner rather than later.



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