

MANAGING A TEAM WORKING FROM HOME

With the ongoing uncertainty of COVID-19 and the impact of lockdowns on workplaces, managers and team leaders will find themselves facing the difficult scenario of managing a team of staff who are each working from home.

While this can of course be unsettling, uncomfortable or stressful for individuals, it can also present collective challenges for the operation of the team as a whole.

As a manager, you will need to overcome the challenges of working from home that you face in your own right as well as help your staff remain productive, effective and engaged members of a high-performing team.

Have a Daily Check-In

This might be one-on-one or as a group, depending on the nature of your work and how collaborative a process you would normally have at the office. You should prioritise video-conferencing for these check-ins; phone conversations and emails only go so far. Video-conferencing software is also sometimes easier to manager than a dial-in conference call for checking-in with a group of people all at once. Seeing people and participating in all of the verbal and non-verbal communication types with colleagues is an important aspect of working life, so try to maintain it for your team.

Most importantly, make sure these check-ins are regular, reliable and offer a chance for your employees to ask questions, seek advice and express their concerns.

Communicate

Regular communication with your team is vital, and is more than just the Daily Check-Ins. You will need to make sure you are available to your staff for the sorts of collaboration or consultation that occurred organically, incidentally or even accidentally when you were all together in the office.

It's important to be conscious of the psychological and emotional impact on yourself and your staff of suddenly working from home, too. You might find it helps to err on the side of over-communication rather than assuming that your employees will reach out to you proactively.

Provide updates on progress with the project you're working on, share information and congratulate or commend people who produce great work. Reinforce to your team that you are contactable and available to chat about their questions or concerns.

Establish Rules of Engagement

Just as you would in the office, as a manager you need to set clear expectations and accountability measures both for your staff and yourself as their team leader. Let them know when you are available for lengthy phone calls and offer them transparency around your schedule and when you're not going to be available for them to reach out to. Offer them an emergency contact method but be clear about how and when you want various issues triaged and passed on to you.

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Provide opportunities for remote social interaction

While normally, workplaces and managers don't need to worry about encouraging social interaction amongst their team members, if you're trying to sustain cohesion, goodwill and rapport amongst staff who are suddenly working remotely, it's important to provide some structured non-work discussion for your staff.

This could be as simple as offering a period of time at the beginning or end of a video-conference to discuss non-work matters or catch up socially, or it could involve more deliberate work-drinks or morning teas held over video-conferencing software.

While it might seem contrived or forced, many workers who've suddenly found themselves working from home report that these social activities are valuable form of social engagement for them.

Offer encouragement and support

It's important that staff feel supported by their employers or managers during a period of upheaval and stress. Suddenly finding themselves working from home due to a COVID-lockdown may be distressing, disorienting and uncomfortable for them.

Acknowledge their stress and concerns, empathise with their struggles and ask them how they're going. Be proactive about reaching out to employees who are struggling but not communicating with you about it.

Managers need to lead by example. If you demonstrate stress or unease about a COVID-lockdown, your staff will feel this way too.

Manage Expectations

Make yourself available to your team members and help them work out how best to approach their specific tasks or responsibilities.

Many staff will thrive with the newfound freedom or independence of working from home, but some will struggle with a lack of supervision or direct encouragement from a manager or even the cooperative energy of their colleagues.

You will need to be clear with your team about how you will be measuring and monitoring their work and their output. Likewise, they will need to understand that you are undertaking a significant shift in your own working style.

Resource your team

Ensuring your staff have adequate technology, equipment and furniture is important for them to work effectively and safely from home. You can't assume that every worker will have technology and software at home that is totally fit for purpose. As their employer or manager, it is your responsibility to equip them with computers, software, mobile devices or a high-speed internet connection so that they are appropriately set up to do their work from home. This might mean purchasing new equipment or allowing them to take some office equipment or furniture (for example, a proper typing chair or a PC monitor) home with them.

Be flexible

In the context of a sudden switch to working from home, especially if it has been caused on short notice by a COVID-lockdown, there is a lot going on in the lives of your staff. Trust your team, work with them cooperatively, and accommodate their requests or their concerns. It will build long lasting trust and goodwill between employees and the organisation long after life returns to normal.



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Remember the qualities of all good managers

A sudden and significant change to the way we work is a good opportunity to reflect on the role and responsibility of being a team leader or a manager. While the following are best practice in any workplace, the stress and upheaval of a COVID-lockdown or suddenly working from home make it all the more important for manager to:

- **Be empathetic:** Empathy or emotional intelligence under these circumstances is crucial to preserve goodwill, get the most performance or productivity from your team, and to protect the mental health and wellbeing of your staff during the potentially long-period you're working remotely.
- **Be organised:** A manager or team leader must juggle the competing priorities and pressures of the business, the staff and the project. It's important for you to reorganise yourself first before you try to reorganise your staff. They want to see that you have a plan, a way forward or a vision for how to make things work well for everyone in the team.
- **Be trusting:** Building trust with and amongst your team is essential in every workplace, but it's especially important when people are working remotely from one another. Workers need to trust that their manager has their interests at heart and is working hard to help them do their jobs. Likewise, managers or business owners need to trust that staff are working diligently, are engaged and motivated to succeed.
- **Be patient:** Newly remote teams and their members need time to adjust and settle into their new working environment. You will need to be patient as your staff adjust and allow them to make mistakes or seek further adjustments as they work out how best to do their jobs from home.
- **Be appreciative:** Working from home can be a great thing for some people, but for others it can be isolating and unsettling. Positive reinforcement is crucial to restore the stores of goodwill between you and your staff. Recognise and reward high performance and excellence. Employees who feel valued will have higher energy and motivation. This is especially important since the incidental or casual social contact in the office that normally facilitates much of this positive reinforcement is now impossible.
- **Be optimistic:** It's important to model optimism, positivity and enthusiasm. Lead by example and encourage your staff to see the positives or the upsides in working from home. Reassure them that you have confidence in them as a team to work through the challenge of working remotely. Optimism is contagious; team members who see that their manager is optimistic and hopeful will take this on board themselves. Likewise, staff who work for a manager who is pessimistic or negative will feel that way about their work too.

Be conscious of the real challenges

Working from home is a challenge. There's no sugar-coating it, especially if it is a sudden change or for an unknown period of time. You will struggle with the sudden lack of face-to-face supervision and a lack of immediate access to information. Likewise, employees will miss having a manager to immediately ask questions of or seek assistance from. Social isolation isn't just a problem for extroverts who thrive on interpersonal engagement at the office; it also makes it harder to assess people's mood or wellbeing, which might affect their work or their responses to colleagues. Staff will struggle too with distractions at home and with adjusting their lives to suit working from home.

As a manager, it is your role to balance and respond to these competing issues and concerns for your staff so that they can continue to perform well and produce excellent work.

