



A Leader's Guide to Managing Remote Teams

Remote work is a trend that isn't going to slow down any time soon. Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, many companies are considering maintaining permanent remote teams as a viable alternative to in-office staff.

The Digital Workplace Group has predicted that 38% of the population of full-time employees may be doing their work remotely in the next decade. Gallup's State of the American Workplace report found 43% of Americans spent at least some time working remotely last year.

With more and more companies utilizing remote teams in the next few years, the question will be... does it make sense for your team?

It depends...

The obvious benefits to employers are many, including:

- Access to a wider pool of applicants outside of normal commuting distance
- Improved employee retention
- Enhanced employee work-life balance
- Appealing to millennials
- Lower costs for office space as business grows
- Increased productivity

These don't need a lot of explanation... but managing remote teams, can be significantly more challenging than managing on-site employees. Ignored, such challenges can have a negative impact on business outcomes. Potential negative impacts can influence a company's culture and employee morale, employee engagement, digital and physical security, quality of virtual meetings, employee accountability, and new employee training to mention a few of the more significant ones.

In other words, when leaders and their teams are dispersed, accountability and team alignment can become more difficult.

Why?

According to HubSpot's 2019 Remote Work Report, 29% of remote workers say communicating with coworkers is one of the biggest challenges they face when working remotely. For team members who would ideally communicate primarily face-to-face, this remote work change has the potential to be a complete shock to the system.

When one thinks of managing any team, the first two things that come to mind are collaboration and communication. Most of your conventional leadership skills will still produce results in a virtual environment, you may just need to adjust your approach a bit.

Keeping remote team members engaged and motivated doesn't have to be complicated. Managing remote teams simply requires a different approach, one that strikes a balance between supervision and trust. We the One Page Business Plan Company we have been lead and worked as a remote team for years... So, with that in mind, let's take a look at each one of these issues.

Corporate Culture and Morale

Being disconnected from the overall corporate culture can be demotivating. With fewer opportunities to engage with team members or coworkers, morale can suffer as employees may begin to feel isolated, especially those with high social needs. Also, there can be a lack of connection to the overall company vision, mission, and objectives... which may result in misplaced priorities within your organization.

To counter this, consider bringing everyone together on an occasional basis for a Friday afternoon luncheon, golf game, or night out. In many cases, physically meeting a person who has merely been a phone or email contact can have a tremendous positive effect on relationships and productivity.

Without that visibility and physical presence, remote employees are potentially more likely to miss out on the day-to-day recognition awarded to in-office employees. Ensure your employees remain connected by transmitting your organization's culture, whatever the location.

To do this, consider using a dedicated employee-only website or app to provide updates including company updates, success stories, employee recognition, and an effective way to communicate during a crisis such as an earthquake, hurricanes, fires, or power outages. One company uses virtual Friday Huddles where they will get all remote employees on a conference call once a week for an hour. They spend the first 20-30 minutes discussing business and then chat about personal things or anything else while eating. To make it more fun, they will often send them SnackNation remote boxes, or other food items from places like UberEATS or Grub Hub.

Keeping remote employees and teams informed reminds them that they're part of a larger organization, and that the organization has a vested interest in their relationship.

A word about online monitoring tools... these are always an option, but the use of these should be managed carefully to avoid the feeling of "spying" on employees. Remote team members with more skill and experience may not require as much supervision, but new employees might need closer observation and guidance. Giving employees breathing space and trust is the way to go as long as they are meeting objectives or productivity goals.

If you are still using email or spreadsheets as your primary means of interaction with leadership team members, your remote work program is going to be at a disadvantage. Although there is still a place and time for these things, there are much more effective tools for team collaboration that build on old-school methods and foster better results. (More on that later in this document.)

New Employee Training

To ensure the best possible results, make sure new hires have the proper equipment, software, and capabilities to effectively do their job from day one. This includes having the ability to securely access and work on documents and attend meetings via apps like Zoom or GoToMeeting. New team members will likely need additional training and support to manage their time, productivity, and ability to meet your expectations. Providing tools and training that can help remote workers better manage their time can be a great motivator. It shows that you are vested in their success.

Help new employees feel like part of the team from their first day. While some people prefer to work alone for achieving maximum productivity, remote work can feel isolating for others. In an office environment, new hires would likely meet colleagues during an office tour on their first day, as well as around the common areas and at employee events over time. This doesn't translate well for remote workers, who will spend little or no time in your office. It's also important to find other ways to introduce your remote new hires early on. Notify your team when a new hire comes on board and encourage them to reach out and welcome them to the group by providing contact information right away.

The Challenges of Leading Remotely

One of the most significant problems when leading a remote team comes from having to lead and manage differently. Why? A lot of tried and true methods are no longer available to leaders... especially when it comes to the lack of face-to-face interaction... a smile in the hallway, a welcome pat on the back, a firm hand shake, a quick note of encouragement left on a desk, or a spontaneous sit down in a team member's office. Some remote team members may struggle with reduced access to managerial support and communication. In some cases, they may feel that remote team leaders are out of touch with their needs and are not as supportive as they could be.

Italian management professor Gianpiero Petriglieri recently wrote...

"It's easier being in each other's presence, or in each other's absence, than in the constant presence of each other's absence."

So beautifully and eloquently perceptive!

In an attempt to overcome these types of obstacles, some leaders develop an over reliance on Zoom or other video-calling service. There is a different quality to our attention when we are online as virtual interactions can be extremely hard on the brain. During an in-person conversation, the brain focuses mostly on the words being spoken, but it also relies on non-verbal communication. When a person is shown only from the shoulders up, seeing hand gestures or other body language may be difficult at best. For somebody who's quite dependent on those non-verbal cues, it can be a quite difficult to go without them.

How can leaders deal with these types of issues? One way is to resist continuously defaulting to video, especially for conversations that you used to have by phone... especially without notice. Many times, when a team member gets "face-timed" without notice, it may well be seen as overly invasive. (This can be a particular problem when the team member is in a distant time zone.) Check to see if there are any upcoming video conversations you could have by telephone instead.

A second way is to take time during video meetings to catch up before jumping into the reason for your meeting. Take the time to check in socially with your team member(s) as it's a way to connect and build trust, especially if you don't know the person well yet.

Consider having scheduled check-ins. If you don't have regularly scheduled one-on-one's or team group sessions for updates, it will be harder to ensure that your remote team members are getting the time and attention they need. We recommend setting a regular schedule for these events to keep in communication. This way, the calls are regular and predictable, so team members know when their concerns and questions can be answered. (We do that here at the One Page Business Plan Company.)

Despite these issues, video can be done right. Take the case of The Blake Group that used to meet face to face. Today, they are now fully virtual and haven't missed a beat. Fred Cuda, CEO, is headquartered in Connecticut with 13 locations across the northeast. He's a quiet leader, but knew he needed to ramp up his leadership for the sake of his team and his company. He sent out his first-ever video to his team in March in 2020. [Watch it here](https://vimeo.com/402344960). (<https://vimeo.com/402344960>)

Although he's not likely to win an Oscar nomination, he wasn't shooting for that. His team knows him well and felt the authenticity of the message. The sense of vulnerability gave them comfort. Cuda has continued releasing these videos daily (often recording weekly) and is getting messages from his team of over 200 people who say they appreciate them and look forward to them each morning.

Another client who did a great job as well is Ben Pinnell with Hickory Construction in Tennessee used Vimeo on his phone (super easy) and shared it with his team. [Watch](https://vimeo.com/401155492/137e7e9793) (https://vimeo.com/401155492/137e7e9793) his first use of video as leader of the firm. We like Vimeo because it has many options to manage the sharing of a given video. Recording with Zoom (or other similar video-call programs) is also easy.

Resist making it complicated. Don't wait for marketing to help you figure out what to say. Don't think of it like a performance that requires practice. Don't give yourself time to get self-conscious. Do it and don't look back!

Employee Engagement Issues

Remote team members may experience declines in job performance and engagement when they begin working remotely, especially in the absence of adequate preparation and training.

Remote team members often report that they feel isolated, or "out of sight out of mind." Without in-person interactions and the opportunities for traditional water cooler or hallway conversations, it's hard for remote workers to build trust and strong relationships with their teammates. If team members don't have visibility of their contributions, it's harder for them to feel recognized and appreciated. Employee engagement can be at its maximum when employees feel that their work is meaningful and appreciated. Making recognition visible across the team helps people feel more connected to everyone's work experience will help your remote workers feel included and like they're an engaged part of the team

Keeping remote workers engaged and motivated doesn't have to be complicated, but resist relying too heavily on email alone to communicate with and motivate remote team members.

Most of the motivational methods you currently use to inspire in-house employees can be applied to employees working from home as a weekly one-on-one time session via Zoom or similar application.

As with all things in business and relationships, communication is key. Consider adopting a platform for effective team communication. Remote teams have an equal interest in being included in the management of the business.

Magnified Cyber and Physical Security Concerns

Even when employees and teams are on-site in a secure location, there will always be security concerns, but when remote teams and employees are involved, there can be even greater threats. Consider establishing best practices for accessing, and protecting sensitive information, at even greater levels than in the office.

Hacker incidents and serious data breaches are so commonplace now that if you want to stay safe, you'll want to take additional measures for remote team members. Unscrupulous service workers in an employee's home, dishonest or nosey relatives, burglars, or hackers looking to exploit weak spots as a way into your company's servers all represent threats that are not normally considered in a secure office environment.

As we move more and more of our business information, customer lists, invoicing etc. into the cloud for remote accessibility, it becomes increasingly important to make sure that company data is secure. Is the team member's anti-virus or firewall software operational and up to date? Are they using outdated, unsupported browsers or operating systems no longer security patched by their developers?

Two-factor authentication creates another safeguard beyond simple passwords. In typical log-in the user is prompted to confirm the access request through a different medium. For example, texting a numeric code to enter to access

documents. But if your firm's information is extremely sensitive, consider a more secure form of authentication using a separate physical device known as security key.

If your company doesn't have technology tools already in place, consult with your organization's IT department to ensure there is an appropriate level of data security before too much time passes.

Work-Life Balance

Improved work-life balance is often cited as one of the benefits of being a remote team member, but as it turns out, that may not always be true. Remote workers are more likely to be subject to interruptions, blurring the line between work and home life. This can often lead to increased stress on personal and professional relationships.

How does one reach a balance? Work-life balance is often talked about but rarely done well. But, in reality, it can be achievable. It's a skill, and like any other skill that can be mastered. It is beyond the scope of this document to present a course on achieving this balance, however, if remote team members don't manage the work-life equilibrium, they will be at greater risk of burn out than in office-based teams and therefore may experience increased turnover. Here are a few ideas you may find helpful.

- Encourage your remote team members to create firm boundaries between work and personal time, determining when they stop work and start their personal life each work day. It's usually different for different people.
- Encourage remote team members to make weekends and vacations free of work.
- Encourage team members to focus on results and output, rather than activity alone.
- Encourage time management and priorities

The Solution to Remote Team Accountability

Accountability has become harder when working remotely. As a leader, how do you know if your remote team members are actually doing what's being asked of them? How do you balance the need for supervision without causing resentment? One way is to focus on productivity, not activity. As long as the remote team member is reaching milestones, completing projects on time, or accomplishing goals, micro-management isn't required or even useful.

When communicating expectations to your team, they should come in the form of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to leave little room for misinterpretation. [For more on this, download a copy of our KPI Guide.](https://onepagebusinessplan.com/kpi-guide-download-page)
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At the same time, by using an online planning and performance system, leaders will enjoy greater visibility of where team members are in terms of their objectives, strategies, and action plans. It will allow deeper, more involved, and more productive conversations.

When leaders and teams are dispersed, meetings must be focused on what's most important and who is doing what by when. Anything less invites tab-surfing when participants become distracted and begin checking the weather or stock prices when a virtual meeting turns out to be aimless and scattered. By developing One Page Plans for each person and each key project and keeping them in one place on a virtual platform visible by all team members virtual team meetings can become highly productive... perhaps even more so than traditional face-to-face sessions.

A One Page Planning and Performance System will keep coordination of job functions in alignment, while tracking progress and graphically measuring results.

To see a short demo video, click here <https://onepagebusinessplan.com/solutions/tour-our-system/tour>

In reality, it has never been easier to lead and organize a remote workforce. Tools like The One Page Business Plan help to keep remote workforces organized and help ensure remote teams can still interact, even if they are not all in the same place!