

Distance Leadership - 5 x Q&A

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The coronavirus pandemic is expected to change the way many organizations operate in the future. How do corporate leaders, managers, and individual workers make this unexpected shift? This Q&A is a short summary of different webinars and studies on how to work at home and lead teams or groups through this time of crisis.

1. How do we get people mentally prepared for distance work?

Develop rituals and have a disciplined way of managing the day. For example, starting the day with 10 minutes of planning and prioritization of your tasks. Reflect upon what you want to bring to the table at the morning Skype check-in meeting, questions you need to ask the team members.

Schedule a start and an end time of your day to prevent too long hours, a feeling of bad conscience and burnout.

Have a rhythm, because the human brain needs habits to stay calm. Get up at the same time every morning and start working at the home office at the same time every day. Define a set lunch time, schedule time to go outside for even just a few minutes every day after lunch etc. Share the focus you have on creating a rhythm with your employees.

You must check in on people – if possible, every morning. Make sure that not only are they set up but also that they have a rhythm to their day and maintain contact with others. Ask: “What can I do to make sure that this transition is working for you?” “How do you organize yourselves in a good way?”

If you have employees, who are extrovert and accustomed to have a lot of contact and collaboration with others, make sure that still happens one way or another. Talk to them about how to handle it and be very specific about: “Who to talk to, how often, and how can you be inspired?”

2: How should those check-ins happen?

Contact should probably increase for the whole team and its members. New employees, those working on critical projects and people who need more contact will require extra one-on-ones.

Do fun things virtually: Happy hour, coffee breaks, lunch together. All these things can help maintain the connections you had at the office.

There is ample research showing that virtual teams can be completely equal to co-located ones in terms of trust and collaboration. It just requires discipline and interaction.

*“As much as you need to lead
and manage the business, remember to lead
people.”*

3: How does working from home affect your mental wellbeing?

People lose the coincidental watercooler or coffee station conversations with colleagues when working remotely. These small interactions are big and important parts of the workday that have a direct impact on performance. How do we create those virtually? For some groups and individuals, it will be constant instant messaging. For others, it will be live phone conversations or video conferences, Facetime, WhatsApp, WeChat, Yammer etc.

You can encourage those types of contact points to ensure mental wellbeing. People are not necessarily going to be able to figure these things out by themselves. You must emphasize the importance of the digital contact and stimulate people to have even more virtual contact during the day.

When you run your online group meetings, aim for inclusion and balance the time, so everyone feels seen and heard. Take the time to discuss the challenges of distance work at home with the spouse and the children around, home-schooling etc. Leaders should prepare for that conversation and help people think those issues through.

The blurring of boundaries between work and home are suddenly very real, so managers must develop the skills and policies to support their teams. This might involve being more flexible towards the employee's work hours and self-planning to prevent his/her guilty conscience, which could have a negative effect on mental health and performance.

Exercise and being outdoors is very important for our mental well-being. Bring that important knowledge into the conversation with the individual employee and the team. Inviting employees or team members to virtual Walk & Talk's is also a good way of working including both work, exercise and being outdoors.

4. What can you do, if you sense that an employee is struggling or lonely?

When suddenly taking away people's normal routines and connection with others - and it is open-ended - some will struggle, be insecure and need extra help. Signs could be fewer emails or more tension in group conversations - make sure to follow up on that immediately. Increase contact and encourage others to do the same. Investigate their situation. Ask questions and be extremely present in the conversation. Get them what they need in terms of mental safety, talk to them about how to get help, the acceptance of making mistakes and the need for being included. Focus on the next task and empower the employees to take responsibility and act. Show them that you trust them.

5. What are the Top 3 things that leaders can do to create a good remote culture?

1. Make sure that team members constantly feel updated on what is going on in the department/company. You need to communicate what is happening at an organizational level because being at home, they could feel detached from the mothership. They wonder what is happening at the company, with clients, and with common objectives. The communication around those are extremely important. You should be emailing more, sharing more information than ever.
2. During this time of working remotely, people will also start to get nervous about revenue goals, other deliverables (and their job?). You will have to make sure they feel secure. Also, you need to be equally accessible to all team members. Working from home, people's imaginations could start to run wild and the tension could be rising which is not very productive in times of crisis.
3. Good crisis communications is accurate and comprehensive communication with increased frequency, being realistic and honest about challenges, communicate hope that the organization will come through and provide sense of "we are in this together". We know that every CEO of every organization need to be much more visible right now - through video conferencing or taped messages - to give people confidence, calm them down, and be "hope-giver-in-chief". We also know that a more accessible leader at every level within the organization is needed. YOU as the people manager is needed to lead your team. The team need to feel you, to feel they are a part of the community and strongly feel, they all have a part to play.

Sources:

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