

COLUMNS

Managing remote teams: 8 mistakes to avoid

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Working from home has its own set of challenges for managers of teams. Image credit: Knight Frank

By [Amanda Lim](#)

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While employees **working from home** are faced with their own challenges such as trying not to go stir-crazy team leaders are facing a different challenge: managing teams remotely.

With all face-to-face interaction currently replaced by technology, how can managers maintain their relationships with their team members?

To run a successful team in times like these, it has become necessary to think on your feet as there is little chance to prep or plan.

In your work environment, it is more than likely you are being led by your instinct, turning on video when conference calling, having daily check-ins and setting clear expectations. But these just scratch the surface there is a lot more you can do to help your team thrive.

Managing remote teams does not require a whole new skillset as Mark Mortensen, associate professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD, said: "You shouldn't think about [**remote workers**] in a fundamentally different way. They are still people working in an organization to get stuff done".

But it does require an additional sensitivity. Humans are social animals by nature. We need to feel connected to the groups with which we identify. In the world of work, that equates to our companies and our teams.

Team leaders need to bridge the gap between connection and isolation. You need to go above and beyond to include those working in physical silos, taking a "**proactive approach**", as Keith Ferrazzi, the founder/CEO of Ferrazzi Greenlight, puts it.

To help you navigate the distance between you and your direct reports in these uncertain times, here are eight mistakes to avoid when managing remote teams.

Do not treat all your direct reports in the same way

"Treat others how you want to be treated" is a slightly outdated communication style and should actually be replaced with "treat others how they want to be treated."

Applying the same rules to all of your remote team members is a common mistake. You need to adapt your approach on a case-by-case basis.

As advisory and analytics company [Gallup](#) points out: "Some remote workers feel isolated by working alone, while others feel liberated. Some love 24/7 access to work; others need to have a real boundary between office and home."

Start by simply asking your team how they would like to be managed remotely. And once you know, respect it. Do not, for example, email them past 5.30 p.m. if you know they will feel obliged to reply.

Do not skimp on "water-cooler chat"

In our blog [How to Hire the Right Talent](#), we spoke about the value of community within shared office space, and that working from home all day has its downfalls.

You miss out on the micro-interactions of working alongside people, which can be really meaningful in combating loneliness and boosting collaboration.

In fact, research has found that [loneliness](#) is one of the most pervasive complaints among remote workers who miss the social interactions of an office setting. This can be hardest for extroverts, who do not have the chance to connect with other people.

Remote teams may not get to enjoy the informal chats they would in the office when making tea with a colleague, catching up in the caf over a 4 p.m. chocolate bar or just indulging in a bit of office gossip.

Try to replicate these in the virtual world. Weave small talk into any conference calls or instant messages. Offer emotional support, listen to worries and create a space where your team can share personal stories and laugh about things outside of work.

[Lighthouse](#), the leadership and management blog, sums it up well: "Rapport does not come from doing and talking about work. Rapport comes from getting to know them as a complete person".

Do not leave out any context

Research quoted in the [Harvard Business Review](#) has detailed the potential pitfalls of remote working, saying that tone of voice, facial expressions and, most importantly, context, can get lost in translation.

This lack of "mutual knowledge" among remote teams can translate to "a lower willingness to give co-workers the benefit of the doubt in difficult situations".

In the office, if you are having a bad day, those around you will pick up on this implicit fact either by overhearing your phone calls, your sighs of frustration or your body language.

As a result, line reports will view urgent demands and blunt responses as "a natural product of [your] stress," rather than a personal attack.

But at home, we have a much smaller understanding of everyone else's day. Information needs to be explicit. We are likely to personalize behavior if we have no surrounding context.

As the days of remote working continue, your relationship with your direct reports will have a huge impact on their [productivity and motivation](#) as the saying goes, [people don't leave jobs, they leave managers](#). Take the time to give them context when they need it.

Avoid making remote-work mean extra work

The boundaries between work and personal life are much harder to maintain when [work ends in the same place personal life begins](#).

Your remote workers are already juggling more, whether it is looking after kids or figuring out how to co-work with their spouses and in generations below spending a lot more time with flatmates they probably met on SpareRoom.

Be conscious that the people-pleasers among them will struggle to say "no" to you firing extra work their way especially in a climate where they think they have to prove their worth to the business. Let your teams log on and log off on time.

Encourage them to manage your expectations and push back remind them this does not make them appear lazy it makes them appear in control.

And hold up your end of the bargain.

Once you have put schedules and expectations in place, stick to them. Do not be late for your morning call or leave them guessing their priorities, and do not overcrowd their days with anything unmanageable.

Do not forget your team's professional development

When managing remote teams, a lot of your catch-ups are likely to center around activity, rather than goals. Especially in uncertain times, our day-to-day can be reactive crisis management.

But it is important not to lose sight of the bigger picture. Talk to remote workers about their career aspirations and the skills they want to develop.

Research from [Gallup](#) reinforces this notion: "It's important to use this time to also nurture talent and encourage learning and development just because you're not in the office it doesn't mean that you have to stop growing skillsets".

Do not forget to give praise where it is due

Sitting next to your line reports gives you ample opportunity to praise their hard work and celebrate their successes because the likelihood of hearing about them is much higher.

When you are managing remote teams, "there are few natural moments to see, let alone [praise, good work](#)" especially if your employees are too shy to self-promote in the virtual world.

For example, swiveling around on an office chair to mention a recent success is a lot less nerve-wracking than the radio-silence that could follow a seemingly boastful email.

Not only should you encourage your team to volunteer their successes, but you should directly ask them to name one, every week. And praise it with the enthusiasm, no matter how small it may seem.

A team that focuses on its wins will be far more motivated than a team that does not.

Do not ignore the power of trust

Trust is make-or-break when it comes to managing remote teams.

On one hand, team leads are likely to be skeptical about how much work their line reports are actually doing.

But on the other hand, your direct reports are likely to panic about proving their proactivity to you perhaps even working over-time to subdue their [imposter syndrome](#) which will only lead to a [productivity slump](#).

When no one can see that you have turned up to work, there is an added pressure to prove yourself, and moving your cursor to be "available" on Skype does not count.

Writing in [Forbes](#), LaKiesha Tomlin from Thriving Ambition Inc. stresses the importance of trusting your employees, and suggests a way to combat this if you cannot.

Ms. Tomlin explains: "Set up work-from-home guidelines, such as emails must be responded to within 24 hours, use text for urgent matters, and no calls between certain hours to make sure teammates are not working around the clock".

Do not forget you are human, too

Excuse the cliché, but there is a reason pre-flight safety demonstrations tell you to fix your own oxygen mask before helping others you can only effectively support and [strategically lead](#) your team if you are feeling okay yourself.

While you might not want to lean on your direct reports for your own emotional support, make sure you have your own network to discuss any anxieties you are facing in these uncertain times.

A small chat that reminds you that you are not alone can go a long way.



Amanda Lim is head of flexible office solutions at Knight Frank

*Amanda Lim is head of flexible office solutions at **Knight Frank**, London. Reach her at amanda.lim@knightfrank.com.*

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