Leading From Afar

What you need to keep in mind when leading a remote team, from necessary skills to promoting company culture.

In today's rapidly evolving professional landscape, remote work isn't just a trend. Rather, it's a necessity. As organizations embrace the flexibility of remote work, leaders face the challenge of guiding their teams from a distance.

This e-book examines the benefits and drawbacks of remote work and explores the nuances of leading virtual teams. We'll offer insights, strategies and actionable advice to help you promote teamwork and communicate effectively within a remote environment.

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The Pros and Cons of Remote Offices

You should initially consider how employees view remote work when aiming to improve your remote work leadership skills. Understanding what your team members think of a fully remote versus hybrid or in-office model is important.

98%

The consensus from a recent report by Buffer, "State of Remote Work 2023," shows that employees don't necessarily want to be back in the office. Out of **3,000 remote workers** polled, Buffer found that **98%** "would like to work remotely, at least some of the time, for the rest of their careers."

This clearly indicates that some form of remote work has become an integral part of the modern workforce and is likely here to stay. This is especially true for Generation Z workers.

Remote work allows for increased diversity

Oftentimes, remote employees can work from anywhere, which allows companies to tap into a global talent pool. The Buffer report implies that companies are already embracing this trend, with **62%** of respondents saying they currently work with teammates across different time zones. This suggests that organizations are increasingly looking beyond their local talent pool and are willing to embrace the benefits of a more diverse workforce.

Greater flexibility in schedules

Remote work offers flexibility that an in-office setting simply can't. Many remote workers enjoy the sense of freedom provided by the flexibility of remote work.

For example, a busy parent may use their flexible remote schedule to drop off and pick up their kids from school without losing work time. Other remote workers enjoy being able to fit in a workout, cook meals or do household chores around their work.

A desire for continued flexibility

Does the future have even more remote work in store? According to remote workers, the answer is a clear yes. And the data from Buffer's report seems to lean toward that as well.

According to respondents, "**71%** of companies are permanently allowing some amount of remote work." This could look like a hybrid option with certain days in office per week or per quarter.

Most remote workers are still able to form connections with colleagues

Despite the struggles of connecting online, **75%** of remote workers surveyed by Buffer reported "feeling connected to their colleagues or clients." This is due to the fact that **46%** said they've interacted in person, and **38%** "know about each other's lives." Those who feel disconnected "say there is no opportunity to connect socially (**56%**), or they don't interact with their colleagues (**53%**), or they don't know about them as a person (**51%**)."

In-office work allows for more communication and collaboration

However, being in the office every day may offer further communication and collaboration with co-workers. The Buffer report highlights several areas where remote work misses this mark. According to respondents, one of the biggest challenges is "loneliness," with **23%** citing it as the biggest hurdle to remote work. This is followed by "not being able to unplug" (**22%**) and "staying motivated" (**20%**).

Remote work can disrupt work-life balance

Of those surveyed by Buffer, **78%** said they have a healthy work-life balance. However, their answers to other poll questions seem to tell a different story. In fact, **81%** say they "[check] emails outside of work hours," **44%** are working more this year than last year and 1 in 5 remote workers say they feel more burnt out than the year prior.

It's easy to see why:
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Remote work can blur the line between work and home. Just as it's easy to add household routines to the workday—like doing laundry—it's easy for remote workers to add work tasks into non-work time. For instance, someone winding down while watching TV in the evening might get an email on their phone. Replying only takes a few seconds, so they hop back on their computer to answer, even though the workday is over.

5 Necessary Skills for Remote Work Leaders

The data seems to suggest that most workers prefer some sort of remote work option. However, as a leader, how can you effectively manage a team that works across several time zones and during different schedules?

There are five main skills and tools to use for effective remote work leadership including:

Trust   **Empathy**   **Gratitude**   **Communication**   **Structure**

1. Building trust

Trust is key to the success of distributed teams; without it, nothing would get done. When managers build trust within their teams, they will drive productivity, collaboration and engagement.

If employees know their leaders trust them to do a job well, they're more likely to be enthusiastic about their work. As a result, this can increase the likelihood of innovation within an organization. When employees know they are trusted, they're not afraid to go above and beyond, to speak up or to try things that are out of the norm.

Trust also plays a major role in getting employees to be honest and transparent about the challenges they are facing. This makes them more likely to ask for help and seek support toward reaching their goals.

2. Leading with empathy

For remote work models to succeed, leaders must be empathetic. Working remotely is quite different from working in the office. Empathetic leaders understand this and support employees based on their unique needs and circumstances.

In a remote work environment, developing empathy as a leadership skill means respecting both an employee's work and their personal life. Empathetic leaders support employees based on what matters to each individual. This could mean supporting them as they balance child care and work or supporting them as they aim to improve their well-being.

3. Practicing the power of gratitude

Various surveys have found that remote workers are more likely to feel disconnected from their teams and their company's mission compared to their in-office counterparts. It's easier for people to connect and engage with one another in face-to-face interactions.

To prevent employees from feeling disconnected, managers need to show gratitude for their teams daily. This should result in greater engagement and productivity levels.

A simple "thank you" can help an employee feel included and show them that their work contributes to a company's overarching goals and vision.

This not only helps employees feel valued, but it helps them feel more connected to a company. This sense of connection has become a key driver of employee attraction and retention.

4. Communicate, communicate, communicate

Although communication is vital to building an effective team, it's simultaneously more difficult and important when your team rarely sees each other in person. When you work remotely, the hallway conversations, office banter and overheard learning experiences are replaced with a vacuum of silence, save for the ping of chat notifications.

To overcome this, you must:

> **Be intentional:** Decide what your message is, who needs to hear it and the order they need to hear it.

> **Be diverse:** Use a primary medium and style to communicate your message, but don't let it be the only one.

> **Be consistent:** Be certain you mean what you say and say what you mean. If something changes, notify the team as soon as possible so everyone's on the same page.

5. Remain structured but flexible

Your digital team needs structure to be successful and remain connected. Common informal activities such as project status reports, check-ins, as well as recognition and feedback that could be done over coffee must now be replaced by scheduled meetings, dashboards or templates. Ensure you are setting clear expectations and providing instructions for how these activities should occur.

A mix of modern platforms (e.g., Slack, Asana, Workflowy, Monday, etc.) can be integral in helping you provide a consistent experience for your team members while collecting rich information to help you lead more effectively.

Set expectations around when and how team members are available.

> Do they need to be online at certain times of the day?

> How long should it take to respond to a non-urgent email?

> How long can they be out of office before they need to notify someone beforehand?

Answering these types of questions in a structured manner allows everyone to avoid unnecessary anxiety and conflict resulting from mismatched expectations.

The flip side of this structure is the temptation to become rigid, and you must actively work to avoid it. Although these tools, processes and expectations are great as a baseline, they should not become etched in the proverbial stone.

Many team members are switching to a remote or global team because they desire flexibility to accommodate their lifestyle. Too much rigidity will kill that idea, along with their morale and desire to innovate.

Keep your list of hard-and-fast rules as short as possible, limited only to those things that must happen for the team to reach their goals.

Ditching the Ping-Pong Table for Better Perks

Around the early **2010s**, companies started offering nontraditional benefits for employees, led mostly by the industry-disrupting tech companies of Silicon Valley. These perks ranged from in-office beer fridges and nap pods to Ping-Pong tables and pet-friendly workspaces.

A decade later, employees are less likely to be enamored with these perks. Many employees see them as surface-level benefits at best. Additionally, many of these perks focus on in-office employees, which can leave remote team members feeling left out and undervalued.

As the leader of a remote team, you may have to advocate for your team to get the perks and benefits they want and deserve. Here are five perks remote employees would like to have instead of table tennis or happy hour.

Instead of company happy hours, consider flexible work schedules.

Envoy's "Return to the Workplace Report" states that "**63%** of employees say flexibility would make them feel more empowered. Nearly half agree that having the freedom to split time between the workplace and home, and the flexibility to choose which days to come in, are just as important as traditional benefits like matching 401(k)s and paid time off."

The demand for remote positions is still strong, and remote workers have continued to vocalize their preference for workplace flexibility.

Instead of offering the perk of free lunch at work, consider providing home office stipends.

Lunch services typically require employees to be physically present at the office, making it less appealing for remote or flexible workers. Focusing on a home office stipend shows that a company values the remote work environment and supports employees in creating productive and comfortable spaces.

Instead of obscuring benefit details, consider offering accessible and transparent benefits.

Accessing the full scope of employee benefits may take time, with the details cloaked behind jargon or needing to be fully explained. A confusing 401(k) vesting schedule, for example, could leave employees feeling undervalued or even like they're being taken advantage of.

Being transparent about benefit details and the conditions attached is essential. This transparency may make employees feel more secure about their long-term financial well-being.

Instead of focusing solely on monetary benefits, consider adopting a holistic approach to employee wellness.

Perks like generous paid holidays off, paid time off, professional development and flexible work arrangements recognize that employees need more than just money to thrive. A 2019 LinkedIn "Workplace Learning Report" showed that "**94%** of employees say they would stay at a company longer if it invested in their learning and development." The 2023 edition of the survey found that "opportunities to learn and develop new skills" were a top priority for **29%** of respondents when considering a new job opportunity.

Offering opportunities for training, mentorship and career advancement shows employees that the company is invested in their growth, not just their output.

How to Promote Company Culture in Remote Work

Good communication skills and offering a variety of remote-focused benefits are only a couple aspects of being a successful leader in a remote setting. One of the biggest struggles for remote teams is creating an environment that embraces company culture and builds camaraderie between team members.

A commitment to articulate and communicate your company's values and foster employee connections can engage hybrid workers, strengthen their loyalty to your business and improve productivity.

Here are a few techniques workplace experts recommend to strengthen your company's culture:

1

Establish and articulate your organization's identity.

It's important to align people around a purpose—either the company's mission or a cause that's adjacent to the business, says Sophie Wade, author of *Empathy Works: The Key to Competitive Advantage in the New Era of Work.*

Regularly reminding employees of what the organization stands for can help remote team members feel more connected to each other and the company as a whole.

2   Give reasons for interconnection.

Many remote teams only ever interact with one another. In a traditional office setting, however, you might encounter people from other departments, such as a sales team member having lunch with a member of the accounting department.

These interactions can naturally form friendships that lead to open collaboration and communication. Natural cross-department communication helps your team better understand how their work fits into the overall goals of the business.

As a remote team leader, consider looking for ways to get your team to interact with others in the company they otherwise wouldn't have a reason to.

3   Foster an ownership mindset.

A strong sense of trust is needed when people don't see their boss all the time. Providing clarity around goals and offering freedom for people to do their work however they want can build trust and create an ownership mindset.

Remember that not everyone sees management the same way. Be open and ask your remote team what each of them would like from you. Where one team member might like daily check-ins, another might see this as micromanaging.

4   Open multiple lines of communication.

Remote employees can't hop over to another's office to ask a question. As a leader, however, you can set up channels to help facilitate communication. You may need to use multiple communication lines, such as Slack or another messaging platform, phone and email.

It's also a good idea to encourage employees to be open about how and when they prefer communication. Most people will naturally gravitate toward one method of communicating over another. If your employees are open with one another, they'll know that one person prefers a Slack message while another wants you to call with questions.

Team or full-company meetings, depending on the size of the business, can also give everyone a chance to talk about what they're working on, what's going well and what's not. This practice also promotes cross-communication by connecting employees who can help each other.

5 Organize events to connect people.

If your remote team members are in the same relative geographical location, you can organize team bonding activities to help them connect. Make sure these events are social, such as a happy hour or team dinner, and not solely focused on work.

For truly remote teams—whether across the country or worldwide—you can use virtual bonding events to foster a sense of community. During the pandemic, virtual happy hours became a common staple for remote teams.

Worried that not everyone will be on board with team bonding? Start with a survey of your team to learn what types of activities each member would be most excited to participate in.

6 Plan occasional in-person meetings.

Employees who have met each other in person tend to form deeper connections. Being able to place a name to a face—including a person's mannerisms—makes it easier to successfully interact with them.

Try to set up in-person meetings, if at all possible, with your remote team. This can also be a great time to host a team bonding event that isn't work related.

7 Develop a system for recognition.

Recognizing remote workers is essential for building a positive company culture. Look for examples of team members who embody the values of your organization and recognize them regularly.

However, don't be tempted to simply hand out regular awards, like a coffee gift card. Customize recognition gifts to fit the employee, which shows that you know them and value them as a person, not just a worker.

Leading From Afar

As you lead your remote team, remember that the key to success in a remote environment is clear communication, trust in your employees and fostering a strong team culture.

No two remote teams are the same, so it's important to seek feedback from your employees. Not only does this help you understand the struggles and needs of your team, but it helps build trust with your team. Additionally, be sure to apply that feedback to your management style.

Embracing these principles will help you empower your team to thrive in a remote work landscape.

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