

How Can You Keep Your Remote Workers Productive?

Here's a primer for leading and motivating people when they work from home.

Q Everyone in our organization is now working from home. I've been pleased to find that this way of working has many efficiencies and other benefits. But my worry is that, without daily contact, people may lose motivation. How can I help them stay energized and focused on the right things?

A Just like any other change, a shift to a work-at-home policy will take some adjusting for you and your team. Here are a few ideas that will make things run smoothly.

Up your frequency of one-on-one check-ins. Here's where video is so helpful. You want to be able to look people in the eye when you ask them how they're doing. You can glean a lot more that way than through e-mail or the phone.

Over-communicate your most important priorities. To make sure a vital message sticks, use as many different techniques as possible to reinforce it. For example, you can start the day with a quick team huddle (over video of course). Then follow-up with a recap e-mail.

Encourage people to work together (without you). When everyone is remote, it's easy for you to become the hub for all communication – which of course is a huge time suck for you and a missed opportunity for them. Assign people to work on projects together (over video). Encourage brainstorming and best-practice sharing (over video). Consider assigning collaborative homework in advance of your team meeting or huddles.

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Be sure you're deliberately asking your team for their best thinking for ways to work effectively in this new environment. Ask them, often, what's working and what more they need from you and from one another. You can't ask questions like this too many times.

Look for creative ways to reinforce key messages, such as starting an internal podcast.

Formalize informal communication. When you're in an office it's natural to connect first before jumping into work. “How was your weekend?” “What do you think of this weather?” When everyone is working remotely, it's tempting to skip the small talk. Be sure to find ways to communicate at a human level.

Learn the art of great remote meetings. Take time to establish new norms for your remote meetings. Find ways to be sure everyone participates. For example, send out a question beforehand by e-mail so people have a chance to ponder it, and then begin the meeting by asking for people's answers. For example:

- What's the most important thing you're working on? How can we support your success in this area?
- Who went out of their way to help you recently, and why was their input so helpful?
- What's one aspect of your job that frustrates you? What's one idea for making that easier?
- Where's one area where you would like more feedback from this team?

Questions like this will build trust and help people open up. (For details on virtual meetings, see “Connecting through the Camera & Keyboard” on page 16.)

In summary, the keys to remember are: (1) Communicate far more than you did when people were seeing each other in person. (2) Mix it up with as many different ways of communicating as you can. The human connection is more vital than ever when you're no longer talking in person. 

— Karin Hurt, *Let's Grow Leaders*, letsgrowleaders.com

