

7 skills for managing remote employees

Following the coronavirus outbreak, South African companies are hurriedly putting social distancing policies in place to keep employees safe.



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Helene Vermaak, business director at The Human Edge, says that even though businesses are acting with agility, some employees may not be able to do the same.

“Many employees may find working from home challenging, as they may not be equipped to deal with these changes.”

One of the key attributes required when working from home is the ability for teams to collaborate, but unfortunately, many leaders are unprepared for managing remote teams.

“We know that change in any form can have a destructive streak, weakening work commitment. The key to avoiding the destructive streak that change can leave on an organisation is for the leadership team to build a burning level of job commitment, as soon as possible,” says Vermaak.

Effective communication

Vermaak says that the success of any team is determined by the speed and quality of communication between colleagues. Teams need to be able to hold candid and effective conversations, without emotions and politics, to ensure higher morale and results.

“In the wake of Covid-19, establishing these norms and skills with teams that are facing new ‘rules’, new spaces and heightened emotions is vital,” says Vermaak.

Leaders are going to need to be able to manage in the moment and repair what the change is damaging or destroying. Vermaak says that they are going to need to move quickly because high-velocity change places heavy demands on organisations and as such, they need employees who invest themselves fully in their work and deliver powerful results.

Managers need to ensure that there is transparent and timely communication so that employees are not guessing or wondering. Vermaak says that when distance and technology are suddenly thrown into the mix, the influence that managers have over their team’s ability to engage in dialogue and create a collaborative and healthy culture is significant and should not be underestimated.

Best practices for managing remote teams

- **Frequent and consistent check-ins**

Check in frequently and regularly with remote employees. Check-ins can vary from daily to bi-weekly or weekly but should always be consistent and entail a standing meeting or scheduled one-on-one via virtual communication during social distancing.

- **Face-to-Face or Voice-to-Voice**

The most successful managers insist on some face time with remote employees. However, with in-person meetings not being possible or recommended at this time, make use of video conferencing technology or pick up the phone to ensure colleagues occasionally see one another's face or hear one another's voice.

- **Exemplify effective communication skills**

You cannot overemphasise the importance of general, effective communication with remote teams. The most successful managers are good listeners, communicate trust and respect, inquire about workload and progress without micromanaging, and err on the side of over-communicating.

- **Explicit expectations**

When it comes to managing remote teams, be clear about expectations. Managers who are direct with their expectations – especially when the ‘rules’ of work have suddenly changed – have happier teams that can deliver to those expectations. People are never left in the dark about projects, roles, deadlines, etc.

- **Always available**

Successful managers should make themselves available timeously. They should go above and beyond to maintain an open-door policy for remote employees – making themselves available across multiple time zones and through various means of technology (IM, Slack, Skype, email, phone, WhatsApp, etc.). Remote employees can always count on their manager to respond to pressing concerns.

- **Technology maven**

Successful managers use multiple means of communication to connect with their remote workers. They don't just resort to phone or email but are familiar with video conferencing technologies and a variety of services like Skype, Slack, Zoom, GoToMeeting and more. They often tailor their communication style and medium to each employee.

- **Prioritise relationships**

Team building and comradery are important for any team and remote teams are no exception. Good managers go out of their way to form personal bonds with remote employees. They use check-in time to ask about their personal life, families and hobbies. They allow team meeting time for 'water cooler' conversation so the whole team can create personal connections and strengthen relationships.

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