

TIPS FOR MANAGING A DISPERSED TEAM

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Telework is one of the fastest-growing flexible work arrangements for hourly and nonexempt employees, particularly for administrative assistants and customer service representatives. In some cases, employees are hired as home-based employees. Therefore, managers are increasingly faced with managing dispersed teams of employees, some of whom work in the office, some of whom work off-site occasionally or on a regular basis (teleworkers) and some of whom are remote workers, rarely working at a company office.

The following principles represent the essence of what it takes to be successful managing at a distance. If you follow these principles, you are on the right path toward being an effective manager of dispersed teams.

Develop and Maintain Strong Relationships

The most important key to successful distance management is relationship building. As with any relationship, building distance relationships requires time. The ability to build successful relationships enables the other key principles. It makes the manager approachable with questions and concerns, creates real understanding of the manager's and each employee's unique needs and requirements, and establishes the level of trust to be able to communicate directly with employees' internal and external customers if necessary.

Build Trust and Ensure Reliability

Trust is about reliability and confidence in a relationship between two people. It is about believing you can give up control and expect a certain outcome, of a particular quality, at a designated time. Knowledge work is often invisible and frequently uncertain, so we need to embrace performance management systems that clearly communicate goals and intention and use technology, if available, to measure required output. Without trust and ways of ensuring reliability, telework/remote work will fail.

Communicate Effectively and Frequently

Check in frequently with both the full team and each individual member, and ensure that the members of your team are proactive in checking in with you. This requires two things: you must be approachable and accessible to them. Managers who are approachable tend to ask many open-ended questions that are aimed at finding out the employee's point of view rather than getting their own across. These managers spend significantly more time listening than talking and have built a strong professional relationship with the employee.

Intentional, planned communication is critical to managing dispersed teams. Determine when to use different communication vehicles to achieve your desired objective, including teleconferences, e-mail, voice mail and face-to-face meetings. Remember that face-to-face has its place. Face-to-face contact is extremely valuable in three situations: kicking off a team effort to jumpstart the relationship-building process, maintaining the relationship at a high level, and expressing negative emotions, such as feedback about poor performance. Though time-consuming and sometimes expensive, face-to-face meetings in these situations typically have a high payback.

Ensure Accessibility and Responsiveness

Accessible managers schedule frequent check-in times and then let nothing get in the way of keeping those times. They also may give out home and cell phone numbers and let employees know what times are off limits for phone calls. It is easy for things to be left unsaid when you are only getting together by electronic means.

Make Expectations Clear — Manage for Results

Distance work relationships between the manager and team members most often go awry when the team members are not clear about the expectations of the manager and other team members. Expectations can be about needs for coverage, accessibility, checking in, changing work demands, and roles and responsibilities. It is critical for workers to understand the context and overall purpose of the work they are doing; precise outcomes they are expected to deliver; specific activities they will undertake to achieve each outcome; milestones, including check-in times and due dates; and the amount of time each activity is expected to take. Then, it is easier to manage by results, which is the key to managing performance of teleworkers. Document everything you want done. Every meeting should be followed up with a statement of the actions agreed to, identification of the individual with lead responsibility for each action and due dates. Be sure to document all agreements that have been made between the manager and individual workers or among team members.

Customers (Internal and External) Make the Best Judges

The best judge of an employee's work may be the internal or external customer. You need to build relationships with the customers if you want open and honest feedback. It is often easier for the customer to give negative feedback to you than to the person who produced the work product. As the manager, it is your responsibility to deliver the feedback to your team members. Be sure you've gotten concrete examples of problem behaviors from your customers and be prepared to hear your team member's side of the story before you work together to establish a plan for change.

Distance Magnifies Management Mistakes

Effective distance management requires a solid understanding of management basics. Distance managers must be masters at such competencies as setting expectations, planning, delegating, giving feedback and managing time. They also must be highly disciplined about following through on commitments and extremely good communicators.

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