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Successfully Managing Remote Teams

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Introduction

Managing teams can be a challenge. When you try to manage teams across different geographical regions and perhaps time zones, you have a situation that can be difficult for even the best manager.

Remote teams have become more common in the workplace. They satisfy the need for accessing specialized expertise at a cost savings. With advances in technology, there is now a broad array of communication methods to enable remote teams to function more smoothly and cohesively.

This white paper explores how to make a dispersed team successful, including:

- Types of remote teams
- Challenges and pitfalls of remote teams
- How to successfully manage a remote team
- Using technology and remote teams
- Other tips for successfully managing your remote team

Types of Remote Teams

Remote teams can take on many different forms. These teams may be made up of geographically dispersed individual members forming one team, or distinct existing teams that are not co-located. Remote teams make good economical sense when you can access expertise from a specialist without having to take on the team member full time. This is often the case in mergers where the aim is for synergy by creating strong pockets of expertise and making them available company-wide. In larger organizations, it is not uncommon to have satellite offices.

Teams can also include a partnership with a third party, such as other companies or clients, to complete the project work. These companies can take advantage of remote talent to fill a specialized need such as technology firms that use expertise from India, Russia, and other countries for their programming.

Teams may also cross corporate boundaries, such as project managers incorporated into work teams or business managers into development teams. Without co-location for even part of the team, these teams take on the characteristics of remote teams.

Home-based offices add to the numbers of remote workers for organizations. Even if they may not work solely from their homes, while they are there, the complications of dealing with remote teams comes into play.

And let's not forget the sales staff in your organization. Although they do technically have a home-base office, it is more common for them to be working sporadic hours from a hotel, airport, or client site most of their time.

Challenges and Pitfalls of Remote Teams

The challenges for remote teams affect both the teams themselves and the manager managing them. And growing the team can compound it. It is hard enough to add a new member to an existing team—it is even harder when the team is remote.

Team members are now expected to interact with a wider set of peers from different areas, countries, and cultures. With the physical and cultural distance barriers, such as time zones, multicultural sensitivities and language affect the ability to communicate in real time.

Maintaining quality and productivity are paramount, but one of the biggest problems the team will face is communication. Even if you have all the team members on the same page, communicating well and working productively, the distance barrier will create a challenge, and it is difficult to ensure that they are working together. Communication is essential to keep all team members on board and up to date on the most pertinent details of their tasks and the latest revisions including:

- Programming code
- Schedules (project, work, holiday)
- Outcome of meetings (decisions, action plans, minutes)
- Plans
- Other information

As a manager, it will be up to you to manage the interaction of the team members and ensure smooth communication between your team members.

After communication, another critical challenge as a manager of a remote team will be building and maintaining trust and cohesion with your team members.

How to Successfully Manage a Remote Team

So how do you manage your team? Where should you start? What do you need to know to be successful?

90% of your problems will be people problems, and only 10% will concern utilization of technology—so it is smart to address your people issues first. Start by working with your team to create a team plan and make sure that all members of the team are familiar with the end result. Your team plan should consist of the following six activities:

1. Set up your communication plan

Outline what needs to be communicated, how it will be communicated, who needs the information, when do they need it, and what happens if communication breaks down. The communication plan should also outline meeting structure—when are they needed; what will be their purpose; in what format will they be held (chat, video conference, teleconference, combinations of methods); who will be in control of the meeting; and who is responsible for publishing the outcome.

2. Outline the decision making process

How, as a group, will you make decisions; what is your back up plan to make a decision; what escalation path have you set when a decision cannot be made if your prime decision maker is either unavailable or unable to decide.

3. Determine your conflict resolution strategy

How will you deal with conflict and what your rules for avoiding them.

4. Distribute goals, roles and responsibilities

Set out the goals, then communicate who does what, including their specific responsibilities.

5. Ensure fair work distribution

This may need to be adjusted as time goes along and the project or work changes.

6. Decide your leadership level

What will your leadership be? It needs to be appropriate for both the team as a whole and its individuals.

Now that your plan is in place, you should get to know your team. If you can't see them face-to-face, pick up the phone and introduce yourself. Let them know what you will be expecting of them and ask for their input. Determine how much time they can realistically expect to be working on your project.

If at all possible, have face-to-face meetings, especially when the team is initially launched, or when a new member joins in. Face-to-face connections help build trust quickly, and it is trust that strengthens relationships on the team. If the budget permits, it may be possible to travel to a central location, or at the very least, use video conferencing to enable members to make more of a personal connection as they initially meet to facilitate better communication in the future.

With expectations set for each team member, check in regularly to monitor their progress and provide them with feedback (both good and bad). Make sure that they are well informed of the work flow – not only what is expected of them, but what other team members are responsible for and how their work affects them.

Stay on top of your meetings. Make sure that they remain productive and produce the desired output such as brainstorming, editing documents and files, and making decisions. Ensure that the right decision makers are present at meetings to ensure that decisions are made on a timely basis. Even if the meetings are video conferences or teleconferences, they will need the same level of preparation, if not a little more, to be well executed.

Keep your remote workers in the loop and motivated to work. Encourage collaboration on ideas and decisions to keep them connected. Keep your communication consistent to avoid the trap of "out of sight, out of mind". And make a plan so that team members can easily contact you. When you are unavailable, contact someone in authority who can ensure work progresses when issues are encountered. This will involve you determining an escalation path including decision-making authority levels.

Technology and Remote Teams

Technology makes it possible to have productive teams located all over the globe. However, there are issues that must be handled to ensure that the technology, and how team members use it, does not become a barrier itself. One excellent form of keeping in touch and providing access to information is either through the Internet or an intranet site. These can provide a central location for a repository of information and can be secured to provide appropriate access. A revision system will ensure that only the latest information is being viewed, edited, or transmitted. Mailing lists, issue tracking logs, and specific work space can be set up for your team and can be organized by projects for simplicity.

For meetings, take advantage of video feeds, conversation streams, access to documents and slide presentations, and even smart white boards that can be hand written on at one location and the images then printed at others. Meetings may take a little more preparation to ensure that sites can link-up properly, so appropriate time and resources will need to be made available at all locations prior to meetings.

Technology can give us instant access to our colleagues, wherever they are, with instant messaging on telephones, cell phones, pagers, and chat programs on the computer.

The downside of technology is our ability to use it properly. Ensure that your team has the appropriate training and convenient assistance when things go wrong. Make sure that you have the necessary support to both recommend appropriate technology for your organization and your goals, and also to provide technical assistance on a timely basis to keep your team connected.

Tips to Successfully Manage Your Remote Team

Here are some great remote team management tips:

- Try to have an initial face-to-face meeting and incorporate team building activities to build trust as you launch your remote team – this will help you dramatically if problems arise later.
- Establish strong procedures around communication— phone, e-mail, and video conferencing etiquette and corporate guidelines for sending and replying to email and phone calls. Establish how meetings will be scheduled and who needs to attend.
- Determine how work will be managed and information shared, reviewed, and modified (develop a change control procedure).
- Vary the time of meetings so that no one group or individual is consistently having to meet after hours.
- Can't meet face-to-face? Then try distributing photos of team members on a communication list, or attached to their chat identity so that team members will be able to relate to each other personally.
- Put multilingual people in key positions to bridge the language barriers, and make sure the team members know who they are.
- Encourage social interactions between remote teams.
- Test video conferencing equipment thoroughly before each and every meeting.
- At any virtual meeting, have someone make introductions at the beginning of meeting and include what their responsibilities to the team are.
- Make sure everyone participates, otherwise, silence will be taken as agreement.
- Encourage personal communication whenever possible such as face-to-face or over the telephone, as long as it does not interfere with the work being done. Remember—technology tends to be very impersonal and can easily lead to misunderstandings.

- Keep your information tight, such as up-to-date mailing lists, to keep everyone informed of current questions, answers, and general progress on work being done.
- Watch out for cliques that may form that tend to work independently of the team. Cliques tend to seek each other out instead of going through proper channels, so it is in your best interest to keep in the loop.
- Keep your eye on groups that have worked independently in the past, especially home-based employees, to ensure that they are fitting into the team and working well. Keep in mind that these workers function well alone and will tend to gravitate toward that mode of operation.
- Ensure your team is attuned to cultural sensitivities. This may require cultural sensitivity training and should be done as close to the beginning of the team forming as is possible to avoid misunderstandings.

Conclusion

Managing remote teams is similar to managing regular teams, but will require greater emphasis on building trust, fostering communication, implementing team processes, and utilizing technology. Keeping your finger on the pulse of the team's progress and individuals' work will be essential to knowing whether or not your team is on track. You will also need to have a good understanding of technology and excellent technical support to ensure that your team network is performing at its peak.

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About the Author

Steve Lemmex (steve.lemmex@rogers.com) has spent over 20 years providing management and project management training across North America. Steve is an expert in the field of communications and incorporates this topic into the majority of the programs he designs and presents. Being on the road on a regular basis requires Steve to stay in touch electronically, but he has resisted the urge to be tied down by devices and rarely travels with a cell phone!