

## 10 Top Tips to Leading Remote Teams

As the speed of communication increases and the technology to enable that becomes more accessible to everyone, organisations have much more choice and freedom in locating and engaging the best workers. This was never more evident than in the lockdown situation during the Covid 19 pandemic. For managers that presents a series of new challenges.

Here are 10 top tips for leading remote teams

### 1. Know your team

Any good manager or team leader will try and know as much as they can about their team members to ensure they have the specific strengths and ability to do the work they need to. This includes personal strengths, weaknesses and skill sets. Only if you have a balanced team with the right personal, technical and professional skill sets can you ensure they can complete the tasks and objectives required.

This is even more important if the teams are not actually present in one place and where the manager or leader can see them on a regular basis. In addition to the general skills required, remote team members need to be able to work on their own with minimal supervision and be able to manage time with all the distractions working remotely can have.

In an ideal world you would start by recruiting virtual team members from scratch. Virtual team member skills can then be incorporated in the essential and desirable characteristics for the job and be assess through interview etc. In addition you can get to know people easier and quicker. However, most situations involve changing existing teams into remote teams rather than starting from scratch and so it is vital that you get to know them to assess their skills, strengths and gaps.

Start by developing and sharing a skills/competency matrix for all team members, including yourself. Look at professional skills such as qualifications, technical skills, and task specific skills. But don't stop there, include personal or soft skills, outside interests and hobbies that might have transferable skills useful to working remotely such as IT and social media skills etc. but that also shed some light on to the personality of the individuals and how they will react to working remotely.

Create and share personal and professional profiles with all members so they can see what skills each has and who they might be able to go to if they need specific help. Team dynamics are as important in virtual teams as in any team and it is important you assess everyone's capabilities correctly to ensure you have the right mix to allow the team to function as well as possible. Consider doing a Belbin analysis and share this with the whole team.

## 2. Technology is great, when it works!

Virtual teams rely on technology to operate so you need to ensure you have the right technology and that it is up to scratch.

It is not fair to expect team members to provide suitably high spec equipment themselves, the organisation needs to supply each virtual team member with the equipment they need to do their job within the team.

You need to get computers that have enough memory capacity for users to be able to have a number of documents, presentations and folders open at once whilst at the same time updating documents etc. as required.

They need to have suitable email capacity to ensure team members can receive large volumes of emails and download emails with large attachments in multiple formats such as Word, Excel, PDF, JPEG etc. The machines also need to have enough capacity and suitable sound and graphics cards to be able to handle webcams, webinars and video conferencing applications such as Zoom or Microsoft teams, in high quality.

Ensure wifi routers and broadband/fibre speeds available at the remote site can cope with the demands put on the computer mentioned above, it needs to be fast and reliable, and the organisation needs to pay for any upgrades required. In addition you need to consider cloud storage capacity for easy document sharing.

Computers need to have up to date programmes and security software with automatic update facilities. You can get 2 or 3 year licence deals for multiple devices so 1 licence could cover all your team members equipment.

Don't forget to include high levels of security software with regular updates to protect from malware and viruses as well as servicing contracts. The latter should be for same day or next day fix on site if at all possible to reduce the downtime of the equipment as much as possible.

Remote team members should be issued with a multi purpose printer so they can print and scan directly to the computer to be sent via email etc., and preferably a designated mobile phone so they can be contacted through that and not their home phone or personal mobile.

Finally, always have a back up plan of landline phones and office access, such as third party providers or local community facilities, just in case of a major technology failure.

### 3. Focus on ensuring things go right, not stopping things going wrong

In the last section we looked at how to get technology right, the same principles apply to making sure you have the right processes to ensure remote working works for all concerned. All too often people say you can't do remote working because you will need too many policies and processes in place to ensure things don't go wrong and employees aren't skiving off.

Of course need to have specific remote working policies and procedures on data management, health and safety issues, appropriate use guidelines, performance management, contact protocols etc. but you need to develop ones that are there to help people work remotely and are not putting restrictions on them such as data access and clocking in.

Justify the presence of every team member (to you, them, team, and others) and create a team culture, with social 'space', team time, and team rewards as remote team members can often feel lonely and left out and less engaged in the process. It is always good to let team members meet face to face – at least once, ideally at the start, and whenever possible, quarterly or annually at least.

Map each person's stakeholders and other commitments / priorities and make sure you all know how each fits to other teams. Team leaders also need to be prepared to defend members from other managers.

Try as far as possible to enable each team member to have real time access to progress and performance data, and up to data project plans

Don't forget to agree lines of communication and accountability so that everyone knows what is expected of them and where to go to get help or discuss issues. Share information such as preferred contact details, means of contact, rules for cc: and bcc:, everyone's normal hours/days, reporting channels, agreed templates / formats, filing and sharing protocols.

All these will help to ensure that employees feel they are safe to work remotely, including working from home, and the organisation is taking responsibility for them as though they were under normal working conditions. They will also understand what their limits of responsibility are and what is expected of both them and the organisation.

#### **4. Focus on outputs and not time keeping**

One of the key arguments people give for not using remote teams, especially those who work from home, is that virtual teams are not visible so how do you know they are working and not watching daytime TV? This is the old clock on clock off mentality and even in a normal work situation these days is not healthy, but it is even less healthy with remote teams.

During the Covid 19 pandemic we heard of employers requesting employees fill in detailed time sheets itemising exactly what they did for each hour of the working day. That kind of overseeing does nothing to develop trust (see Top Tip 5) and certainly does not get the best out of employees.

The key is to look at exactly what you want the team members to do, what do you want them to have done by a certain time? From that you can agree specific outputs with specific, but flexible, deadlines. Remote teams working from home in particular, can be a lot more flexible. They may like to work very early in the morning or late in the evening. You need to change your mindset and accept if their agreed outputs are met does it matter if they watch Bargain Hunt or don't start till 2pm?

However, it doesn't mean that you don't manage them, you still need to ensure that they are doing the work agreed. For this you need to make sure you communicate with them on a regular basis, but not every hour, or even every day, unless there are issues.

A weekly phone or video conferencing chat to get progress on the work that week and also discuss the important issues in the week ahead is good as it will highlight any performance or resource issues which can be dealt with quickly.

You should also consider a monthly conference call with all team members regardless of whether or not they are working independently so that all can see the bigger picture and the part they play within it. Hold a face to face get together either once, twice or 4 times a year so people can reconnect.

Remember to consider individuals mental health and wellbeing when working remotely. It can be pretty lonely and isolated and many people can't take this kind of arrangement as well as others. Do not penalise them, try and find solutions.

## 5. Develop and maintain multi-way trust

In the last section we mentioned one of the reasons people shy away from remote teams is that they can't be sure they are doing the work. What they are saying is they don't trust them to do the work and we looked at how to combat that. The issue of trust goes much further than trusting them to do their work but also about them trusting that you will let them do that in their own way and support them when they need it.

It is also about you trusting them to keep to the organisations policies and procedures, including health and safety, and about them trusting you to ensure the right policies and procedures are in place to protect them and that if things go wrong you will be there for them.

Trust needs to be earned by all sides and in remote team this can be multi-faceted involving individual team members, team leaders and management. Each needs to trust that the others will do what they are supposed to do and in turn will back each other up as required.

Here are some pointers to help develop and maintain trust within any team, but particularly when working with remote teams:

**Always be fair and honest.** This is so that they know where they stand with you. There is nothing worse than someone saying something to your face and then something totally different to someone else behind your back.

**Involve team at all stages.** This shows you respect their opinions and ideas which in turn develops shared ownership and greater engagement.

**Maintain confidentiality.** People work best when they feel safe, they feel more confident about saying things and coming up with ideas if they know they are not going to be ridiculed or have their personal life or mistakes shared with all and sundry.

**Demonstrate commitment and interest.** Doing this lets them will know you are on their side and care about them as people not just employees.

**Support the team in conflict and deal with it quickly.** This will show that you are backing them up and supporting them, even against management.

## 6. Communication is king

Communication, communication, communication - is vital in any team, but particularly so in virtual teams. Not seeing someone face to face to take into account tone of voice or body language can lead to mis-understanding, especially when dealing with international teams where cultural differences come into play. So communicating precisely and regularly is essential, but it needs to be purposeful. In any work situation we all receive too many pointless communications which waste our time. We all need to stop and think more about what we are communicating and how often. If a communication doesn't have a purpose then don't do it.

Communication is a two way process with a sender and a receiver(s). In a normal work situation it is often quite easy to go and speak to the sender to clarify what they have communicated or ask questions. For remote teams this is more difficult, especially if there are time differences, so it is best to shorten lines of communication and agree the communication structure within the team and organisation in relation to the remote working.

E-mail is obviously the most common form of business communication, we send 2 million e-mails per second, and people make judgements about us based on them. E-mail is especially important for remote workers due to its ease and speed, however, care needs to be taken. E-mails lack cues like facial expression and tone of voice, making it difficult to decode meaning. Also instantaneous communication creates an urgency that makes you think and write quickly, which can lead to carelessness.

Here are some pointers in relation to emails;

- Think before you write: what am I saying? who is the reader? do they want or need it? how will they interpret it? how could they misinterpret it? what might they do with it? what if this was published in the newspaper or forwarded?
- Read before sending – pause, reflect, and check the address.
- Avoid jokes, don't send anything that could be construed as offensive so read and follow your company policies
- Dnt ovrabbrvt
- Don't use all UPPERCASE - That's the e-mail equivalent of yelling.
- Go easy on the exclamation marks, too, overuse dulls their effectiveness!

## 7. Clarify, clarify, clarify!

It is important to ensure that at all stages of any project you check that all participants are clear as to their role and their outputs, it is even more important with remote teams. The medium is likely to be different such as emails, skype calls or on-line platform virtual meetings, but you also need to be more proactive in communicating with the team.

It is vital to have a whole team meeting face to face at the start of working remotely so that everyone knows everyone else, and you can lay down how the remote working is going to work and what is expected of each team member.

Before the first meeting you need to identify how much do they and you know and try and identify their buttons which will encourage improved performance, or cause conflict. You also need to preempt their questions as much as possible so when they ask them you have all the information at hand to answer fully.

During the meeting you need to make the objectives clear, identifying what you want them to do, what you want them to know, what you are trying to achieve. Don't give all the answers you have prepared, leave plenty of time for them to ask the questions. People are more engaged if they feel they have some control. If they don't ask the questions then by all means raise them yourself. At the end of the meeting check they have understood everything such as getting them to say individually what they are going to do, what their targets are etc.

***“Tell'em what you'll tell 'em.”***

***“Tell 'em”***

***“Tell 'em what you told 'em”***

When working with remote teams you must include regular catch-up sessions, but don't be breathing down their necks. These catch up sessions can be done remotely and should include assessing progress to targets and deadlines and discussing any issues or changes needed. If catch-up sessions are done via virtual meetings or phone calls, it is always a good idea to confirm what was discussed, decisions made and actions required in an email with a confirm receipt. This way people can't argue specific points.

## 8. Facilitate not impose

One of the hardest things for many managers or team leaders is to step back and let the team get on with things. This is even more difficult with remote teams as there isn't the facility to pop down to see what they are doing, things are going on as though they are behind closed doors a lot of the time.

The temptation is to set down a whole raft of rules and procedures and task people to stick to them like glue whether they want to or not. This is a disastrous way to do things with any team but especially for remote teams. They can't always stick to the procedures that would be suitable in on-site teams and they will often find new ways of doing things which work better for them whilst still managing to achieve targets and outputs.

There do need to be procedures and policies but these shouldn't just be imposed on the individuals. You need to involve them from the start to help develop the policies and procedures and agree the outputs before the team starts working remotely. That way team members will know where they stand and that you are there if they need you.

Some people may not want to work remotely at first and it is the manager or team leaders job to try and win them over by showing them how positive the new way of working can be and how it fits with the organisations vision. You need to find out what they need, what they want and what they expect and then work out what you can deliver, how you can change their perspective and how you can surprise them. And then share it all with them.

This doesn't mean that you let them dictate things, you still need to be strong but also engage active listening and include their suggestions, ideas and new thinking. If you have to say no, explain why and if assumptions are creeping in challenge them. This way they will feel empowered, engaged and will be more willing to adapt positively to the new way of working.



## 9. Don't shy away from performance issues

As with any work situation you need to develop goals, activities and review/evaluation points. These should include what aspects of performance need to be measured and what the end state looks like. They should also include the general performance expectations and specific performance objectives agreed with individuals.

You then need to develop systems to monitor and evaluate these which should be communicated to all those involved. The emphasis should not be about punishing those who don't perform but more about helping employees to perform well and continually improve their performance.

A good system will:

- Ensure they are on track
- Ensure they **know** they are on track
- Ensure **you** know which track they are on
- Allow time to discuss problems
- Allow time to review progress and provide constructive feedback
- Recognise and reward good performance

Regular contact throughout a project with specific agreed outputs should prevent people taking advantage of the virtual system, but if you think people are then you need to deal with it quickly and fairly in order to protect the team as a whole. Here are some pointers for when things go wrong;

- Attack the problem not the person.
- Be factual not subjective and focus on reasons not statements. You need to know specifics which can be 'seen' or quantified.
- Ask questions to gain as much information as possible and summarise (a lot) to ensure both sides understand.
- Be open about thoughts and feelings. Give yours first and then **listen** to theirs, it may change your viewpoint.
- Get them to say yes to something. Agreement on one small thing is a step in the right direction.
- Establish your best alternative to agreement. Most of life is about finding the best alternative so have in mind what you would be happy with.
- If necessary agree to disagree. Sometimes people's views are so different that they will never agree, accept it, it is a fact of life and move on.
- If you are wrong, say so quickly and clearly.
- Be prepared to take it outside (to coffee)! or bring in outside help.

## 10. Know when to call it a day

Virtual teams only work if everyone knows what they are doing, knows their role and responsibilities and understands the outputs required. You also need to have the right resources, equipment and technology to allow processes to work and for easy and regular communication to take place. You also need to have the right people who have the right mindset to be able to do their job under virtual circumstances. Finally all those involved including team members, leaders, manager and Directors need to be positively engaged in the concept and want it to succeed.

For some teams and projects virtual just doesn't work. The project may just not lend itself to remote collaboration if it involves a single site process or activity. There is no point trying to make something remote if it doesn't need to be or just can't be.

Sometimes management isn't totally behind the concept and won't release additional resources to accommodate the new way of working. If team members see that management isn't supporting them then they will not engage positively themselves.

If the right technology is not available, made available or it is unreliable, it might be better to wait till it is. This can be particularly problematical when team members are working from home with poor internet or phone connectivity.

Some people who have been in a particular job for a long time find it very hard or even impossible to adapt to remote working. As said previously you need to try and bring them round to the positives but some people just won't be able to adapt to the new technology or isolation that can come from remote working. If this is the case, try and re-deploy wherever possible.

Sometimes despite all the planning, resources, engagement and willingness remote teams just don't work. Accept this, call it a day and bring things back in-house and under normal management. There is no use flogging a dead horse and wasting time and money if things just work better in-house.

Always do a de-brief session to find out what went well and what didn't work so you can be better prepared for next time.

At Pet&r we have many years of experience of helping teams of all kinds develop and work better and this includes helping teams make the transition from in-house to remote working. We have developed 1 and 2 day training courses designed to give new and established remote team managers the skills and knowledge to successfully lead these diverse and challenging teams. Developed through discussion with senior practicing Virtual Leaders, and supported by academic research, the courses allow consideration of practical operational matters that cannot be ignored as well as wider strategic choices that organisations now have. We look at managing people, maintaining trust, resolving performance issues, and enabling personal development as well as looking at mental health and wellbeing within the isolation of working remotely. For more information contact [lynne@petandr.co.uk](mailto:lynne@petandr.co.uk).