FAST COMPANY

The Emotionally Intelligent Manager's Guide To Leading Remote Teams

There's no videoconferencing platform more powerful than a dose of empathy.

BY SUZAN BOND   6 MINUTE READ

Earlier this year IBM followed other big companies like Aetna in turning back to more traditional work arrangements. The tech giant drew criticism for telling thousands of remote employees to re-acclimate to office life or else find work elsewhere. According to Gallup, the remote workforce is actually growing despite moves like these, with 43% of U.S. employees working remotely at least some of the time over the past year, up from 39% in 2012. Gallup researchers found not only that this trend is progressing across virtually all industries, but also that employees who spend three to four days a week working offsite tend to report higher "engagement" in their jobs.

But for remote work to pay off—both for employees and their employers—one crucial factor needs to hold true, and it's a familiar one: teams need to have great working relationships with their direct supervisors. No amount of technological wizardry or personal autonomy negates the fact—which has long been true for office-bound workers as well—that job satisfaction is still closely tied to having an effective, emotionally intelligent boss. With that in mind, here are a few ways managers can continue to be the same thoughtful, compassionate leaders of remote teams as they've learned to be in the office.

DON'T CREATE TWO CLASSES OF EMPLOYEES

Perhaps the biggest challenge managers face is a "mixed mode" team, with some in the office and others located remotely. That's a really common circumstance, and it takes extra vigilance for managers to avoid playing favorites or accidentally making their remote folks feel like second-class citizens.

There are simple things you can do as a manager to avoid this trap, says John Wulff, SVP Software Development at CUSO Financial Services. "If there's a meeting and even one person is remote, have *everyone* attend as if they're remote using the same tool, so there's no inequity in how people are participating." This not only normalizes the remote experience, it also forces you to find an approach (technological as much as methodological) to remote meetings that isn't disproportionately painful to the people offsite.

While staying informed is a day-to-day concern for remote employees, so is the fear of that their careers won't progress. In one recent survey remote workers reported having 25% fewer conversations with their managers about career growth than their colleagues in the office. All it takes is a little empathy for managers to rectify that. Anticipate your remote team members' anxieties about not being recognized and schedule a quarterly career-development meeting to check in and talk about their progress and professional goals.

LEAD WITH TRUST, NOT CONTROL

Micromanaging your team is dangerously easy when you work in an office: You can simply walk around and look at their screens. But when you can't physically see what your employees are doing at every moment, nervous managers may resort to other ways to look over their remote employees' shoulders–none of which are likely to be terribly productive.

"Micromanagement comes from trust issues," says David Haney, an engineering manager at Stack Overflow. "The biggest thing you can do is create trust. You can't buy trust, you have to build it," he points out. "If you don't trust the people you're working with, you have a much bigger issue than just people working remotely."

This may sound obvious enough, but too many managers mistake delegating for trust. Just handing your direct report an assignment and saying, "hop to it" isn't the same thing as *entrusting* them with a task they feel sufficiently supported to tackle on their own, and this mistake is one reason remote workers can sometimes feel adrift. On the flip side, moving from control to building trust can feel tricky for bosses who are used to playing an active role in their employees' day-to-day work. Fortunately, a dose of emotional intelligence helps solve both problems.

The best starting point is simply to empathize with your team members, which according to Guillermo Rauch, CEO of the mobile computing company Zeit, means understanding "the context" of others' work experience. Rather than focusing on what your team is doing at every moment, ask yourself how they're likely to feel about accomplishing the goals you've set for them: Will they be challenged? Empowered? Stressed out? Confused? Then self-reflect on your role in bringing about those reactions, Rauch suggests: "In a remote environment, as a leader, you have to be a lot more introspective."

Rauch has found that by working to become more empathetic and introspective himself, his remote team has learned not only to trust him more but also one another—making everybody more productive. And since trust often starts with a personal connection, which virtual teams lack, it's important for managers to set aside work and spend time just getting to know each other—including remotely.

A few years ago, tech founder Randy Rayess and his team "started holding personal check-ins rather than just discussing work on our usual calls," he told *Fast Company* in 2015. "We made sure to talk about hobbies, interests, and family at least once a week" and quickly found that the habit built trust and led to stronger collaboration.

LEARN TO LISTEN BETTER, AND ASK MORE QUESTIONS

In a traditional office environment, it's easy to rely on physical cues to sense when a team member is getting ready to quit. But when you lose that casual, in-person contact you can miss important clues. "You have to spend a lot of time drawing people's feelings out of them. Otherwise you run the risk of someone getting detached, getting frustrated, and leaving," explains Nickolas Means, VP of Engineering at Muve Health.

Listening is a skill that's at the core of emotional intelligence, and great listeners are also effective questioners. As a manager of remote team members, that's your ticket to filling in any missing information you'd otherwise get in person. Rather than just constrain your one-on-one meetings to being quick status reports, use those interactions as a time to connect and dig deeper with your remote employees. Ask your team members questions about what's most important to them and the challenges they face—don't just wait for them to bring up those issues themselves. You'll not only better understand what motivates them, you'll make them feel more valued, too.

TALK ABOUT THE TOUGH STUFF

Communication is harder when team aren't co-located, especially when it comes to giving direct feedback and heading off conflict. Lack of daily, physical presence can make it easier to sidestep uncomfortable conversations, but that's not exactly the most emotionally intelligent approach. According to Katie Womersley, director of Engineering at Buffer, the most successful leaders of remote teams *embrace* conflict. When managers "don't want to hurt feelings or step on toes, artificial harmony can creep in," she says.

Womersley prevents emotional gridlock by taking preventive measures. If there's a new team or a new phase in a project, for instance, she calls a meeting whose sole purpose is to focus on conflict. Womersley asks her team members to take turns talking about their conflict styles, and designates one person in the meeting to look for potential areas where team members are likely to clash. This helps get everything out in the open, where people can discuss *potential* points of friction, before they encounter it unexpectedly later on, once everyone has hit the ground running.

As these four tips suggest, your own emotional intelligence as a manager is critical when you're leading a team of remote workers. But that's the key to developing those same skills attributes—empathy, trust, listening, and comfort unearthing disagreement—in every one of your team members, no matter how far-flung.

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