

Leading Remote Workforces



Leading remote workforces is more important than ever. For many of us, the global health crisis COVID-19 (coronavirus), has forced us to enable a remote workforce that is not “business as usual.” We're learning there are critical differences in managing in-office and remotely: communication, culture, and flexibility must adjust. But here's the thing: we can tackle the challenges of the remote workforce for long-term success.

To better understand how leaders can capture the upside of remote work while overcoming the challenges, it's important to be aware of the different levels of remote work. One level is the remote-allowed model that approves employees in a company to work some (but not all) days outside the office.

Another level is the hybrid-remote model where a subset of the company commutes each day, paired with a subset of the company that works remotely.

Next, there's the all-remote model. In all-remote companies there is no office where teams work, and there is no effort to align team members to a given time zone. Rather, a bias towards asynchronous communication encourages documentation, discourages synchronous meetings as a default for collaboration, and provides greater flexibility for each member to determine the working hours that best suit their lifestyle.

To make work successful using any type of remote model, leaders who drive communication, knowledge sharing, and socialization present the most powerful opportunity.

In the midst of remote work, people are often more productive and engaged, but there is the potential for people to feel isolated socially and professionally, disconnected from colleagues and the company. Here are three quick tips to overcome these obstacles.

Create structure to communicate.

Practicing effective communication strategies is a critical role in leading a remote work environment. To get there, we learned to communicate in sophisticated ways to enable team members to feel connected to others. Communication is the solution to ensuring that teams don't feel isolated and lost. A subtle touch to nudge someone into attention; a hug or a smile to express empathy, love, or compassion; eye contact to let a person know they're being heard.

First, set up regular meetings to help maintain a connected team and sense of community, even when people are working remotely. Frequent touch points create opportunities to discuss performance, well-being, priorities, and any issues at hand, as well as to celebrate successes.

Second, it can be difficult to keep up with discussions, decisions and actions in a remote work environment. That's why, daily documentation before and during meetings, helps us write down decisions, ideas, or notes. Because teams are distributed, documentation helps team members understand who is responsible for specific tasks or understand the reasoning behind decisions.

And third, when people are not physically located in the same space, there are not ample opportunities to chit chat and carry on conversations outside of formal business settings. Making social connections with remote teams is more important than ever to build trust and confidence. Be intentional about designing informal communication when it cannot happen more organically in an office.

Get comfortable with asynchronous communication, whether through Slack, Microsoft Teams and Google Docs. By doing so, geographically distributed team members in distant time zones can respond at first opportunity.

Sustain a connected culture.

Informal networks are more important than ever in remote work environments. It enables friendships to form at work related to matters other than work. Those who feel they have genuine friends at work are more likely to enjoy their job, perform at a high level, feel invested in the company, and serve others within the organization.

In a remote work environment, informal networks should be formally addressed. First, design an atmosphere where team members all over the workforce feel comfortable reaching out to anyone to converse about topics unrelated to work.

Second, encourage connections with video calls. Ask people to connect and bond as empathetic beings with interests, emotions, fears, and hopes—not just colleagues. Consider nudging people to participate in a few hours a week of social calls organized within immediate teams to get to know each other on a more personal level.

And third, put structure around culture. It's important for us to set the tone, but it's even more important to document what defines your culture. Documentation is a shared benefit, and is

something that should be embraced by all members of the organization. While it may feel inefficient to document nuances related to culture, creating good habits ensures that positive cultures evolve in the future.

Create transparent and easily accessible documentation. Document your workplace knowledge and organizational values in an employee handbook. That way, all team members have access to a working handbook and central repository for how the organization operates.

Protect the well-being of employees.

Building and sustaining culture in a remote environment requires intentionality. Don't celebrate working long hours. While working one additional hour to move a project forward is likely not debilitating when viewed in a vacuum, it can trigger a revised baseline where you must continue to overwork in order to maintain the new status quo.

It's important to prioritize mental health and emotional health. In a remote setting, where in-person interactions are less common, it's easier to fall victim to isolation. This reality makes it all the more important for us to place a great deal of focus on documenting processes for team members who face these difficulties. Consider offering professional assistance and document resources during onboarding and reinforce options in ongoing learning and development sessions.

First, recommend scheduling breaks to interact with friends and family. If government restrictions allow, it may be helpful to schedule walks with nearby friends or enjoy a quick board game with children or significant others.

Second, encourage using video to connect face-to-face and serve as a nice break from the quiet of an at-home workspace. Video calls help us feel connected to our team, friends, and family while staying at home for extended periods of time.

And third, engage with colleagues on non-work topics, via Slack or ad hoc video calls. Build a sense of connection with others over more than just work, the same as you would in typical "water cooler" conversations. Create remote communities of practice. This gives people space to socialize, discuss work, and problem-solve together.

The question is not whether remote work is possible in the long-term but what is needed to make it possible, The short answer: leadership. Leaders can harness asynchronous communication, encourage virtual socialization, and sustain strong cultures enabling remote work to emerge as the future of work.

About Me:

Hi there, my name is Tiffany Newhouse. I have over 20 years' experience leading organizations through successful transformational change.

In our consulting organization, NPC, we have partnerships that span across many industries and have delivered successful change efforts for small, mid-size, and Fortune 500 companies. Please connect with me here on LinkedIn to share your thoughts and ideas about the future of work. I'd love to hear from you.