

Managing Around the Sun: Tips for Successful Virtual Management

By Stephen Parker

Stephen is Senior Vice President of BlessingWhite where he leads a remote team of regional sales managers, consultants, and client service staff in both the Eastern region of the United States and Europe. His extensive experience includes working with senior teams and wider employee populations to implement and sustain high performance cultures via organizational values, leadership, and employee development initiatives.

Stephen is as comfortable on the playing field as he is in the boardroom. He has played rugby at an international level and owns a racehorse with several of his friends. He lives in Princeton with his wife MaryBeth, and children Liam, Bridget and Dominic.

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So you think managing is tough? Try doing it when your employees are located around the globe. Alma Vigo-Morales, Director of Global Collaboration at Agilent Technologies, knows what it's like firsthand. "I don't get to see my employees' amazing work in action. When we talk, I only hear the highlights, so I really extend myself to get an accurate picture of what they are working on."

So what do managers like Vigo-Morales do to handle their unique remote management challenges? We've talked to managers in various organizations who have made remote managing succeed. Here's what they have learned:

Small talk? Not at all

What can you do when you can't just walk down the hall and check in? For starters, you can be purposeful in ensuring that your telephone conversations are more personal.

"I communicate about other issues rather than just critical work," notes Vigo-Morales. The Vice President of the Commercial Banking Development Program at LaSalle Bank, N.A., Natalie Kruger, agrees: "Without crossing the line, I let them in on my personal life, too. That helps my direct reports to see me as a human being."

Technology helps. E-mail, instant messaging, web meetings, and net meeting software facilitate more informal and friendly virtual interactions. Denise Ascheri, Vice President of Corporate Training and Development at Union Bank of California, adds, "A boss of mine had a virtual water cooler - it was like having instant messaging, but it was not necessarily for work. My manager spent a lot of time at the 'water cooler' at first to encourage people to participate. He was able to build a virtual community that encouraged us to connect with each other as well as with him."

It's not just about the work

As a successful leader you manage performance, of course, but you also must pay attention to your remote employees' satisfaction. Kathy Arizon, Content Development Team Manager at Autodesk, asks engaging questions that address satisfaction, such as: "What did you really like about that interaction?" or even "How's the ski season in Utah?" Ascheri also notes "Different people get the same job done in different ways. If I coach my direct reports only for the result, I might not coach the way they want to be coached."

Knowing about the culture of your remote employee's country and geography is also crucial. For example, Vigo-Morales says, "managing someone in Romania can be much different from managing someone in India. The key is not just identifying these differences, but also being comfortable with them."

The Trust Factor

When employees feel that they are trusted, they are more likely to contribute at a high level. "I reassure employees about what is expected of them, and then trust that they are going to do what they say they are going to do," notes Ascheri. And it's a two-way street. In the virtual world, a remote manager must rely on employees to share both the things that are going well as well as areas of unease and dissatisfaction. "I must be more intentional about what I do or say

because I don't have visual cues. I'm not there to take my employees to lunch, and I can't walk around and observe them," Vigo-Morales explains.

Communicate and Connect

If you manage remotely, communication must be consistent, purposeful, and predictable. Many remote managers schedule regular calls to both check in and catch up. Arizon, who has both local and remote employees across many time zones, says she fosters consistency by doing three things:

Having regular team meetings over the phone so that everyone is hearing the same information.

Posting central spreadsheets that record decisions, chronological listings of everything discussed in meetings, and important items communicated in emails.

Providing a web portal, which is a one-stop shop for schedules, contact info, yearly planning, and even photo albums.

Kruger offers her support by contacting her employees often by email and instant messaging in order to gain insights into their work style. She also has a conference line readily available for phone conversations. "That kind of proactive communication pays major dividends," she noted.

Hire the best, no matter where they are

Being cognizant of how you hire remote employees is often more critical than hiring direct reports at your same location. You must make sure they have the qualities and skills they need to work in a virtual environment. With that said, are there benefits to working remotely? "Absolutely," says Arizon. "When I hire, my selection pool is not just a 40 mile radius around headquarters - it is the planet!"

Virtual, but not alone

Just as your employees are challenged to be productive and focused in a virtual team, you, as a remote manager, must also reach out periodically to others for guidance and coaching. To be the best possible remote manager, you need to know your limits and when outside help will be useful. Arizon offers this tip: "To ensure success in our virtual environment, we conducted an online survey to see where our 'hot spots' were." As a result, she uses the survey results to focus on the team's most pressing challenges.

Leading a remote team can be tough yet rewarding. The opportunity to create a high-performing team without geographical limitations often results in increased innovation, creativity, and higher performance. And managers who can navigate through time zones, cultures, and unique work styles are often rewarded with motivated, connected employees, no matter where they live.

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