

Breaking Down Barriers — and Silos: Addressing Leadership Challenges in a Remote Environment

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Are you tired of the “new normal,” logging into yet another virtual meeting and hoping your internet will hold out for your key presentation? Or do you love being remote so much that you’ve thrown out all your business pants and shoes, replacing them with loungewear and comfy socks? Either way, it’s time to admit that even after the COVID-19 shutdowns end, remote work settings are likely here for the long haul. Given this change, it is key for management to adapt their training and interactions with teams while striving to keep the organization’s culture.

Based on the tone at recruiting events throughout 2020 and 2021 thus far, it is clear that the next group entering the workforce expects location flexibility and demands a vibrant corporate culture. Meanwhile, the need for productivity and efficiencies has not changed, as nonprofits are continuously expected to do more with less. Effectively managing a remote team is a matter of being intentional and adaptive.

Be Intentional

In a remote environment, there isn’t an opportunity to run into someone in the breakroom or other communal areas and spark a conversation. In the past, inter-department communication often depended on those chance encounters. A fund development officer might start

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telling the CFO about a great art piece that was part of the most recent bequest. This off-handed comment would allow the CFO to discuss how this should be accounted for and if any tax forms would be required. Without this chance meeting, would the CFO ever know about the gift? Maybe not. To avoid these potential gaps and others in a remote environment, [communication needs to be intentional](#). Create a virtual “meeting space” where, on a recurring basis, team leads meet to discuss what is happening. Create an agenda to discuss wins, challenges and other developments that allows each department to catch everyone up on what is happening. This meeting should be frequent enough so that it’s not too long and relevant information is shared in a timely manner. Consider having these meetings with videos so you can still maintain face-to-face interaction.

Leaders also need to be intentional about reaching out to their team members. [Pulse of HR](#), a website partnership between Josh Bersin Academy, CultureX and Waggl, maintained several surveys during the pandemic asking employees and HR professionals questions about policies and procedures during the last year. One of the questions was “What is one thing your organization has done in response to COVID-19 that has positively impacted employee engagement?” The top three answers all included increases in communication. So, how can management communicate more in a virtual environment? Be cautious about sending more and more emails. Inboxes are full, and group-wide emails are often ignored. Try building a strong intra-network page as the landing page for your team members when they start the day. This is a great way to pass out key information to all staff. Some offices may want to start a monthly newsletter to keep the team informed of exciting personal or professional happenings. This is also a great place to keep up personal interactions between colleagues with games and other virtual hangouts.

Leaders must be responsible for driving the intentional communication, but should also think about how to involve the whole team in helping write and circulate the information. This could be a great project for an intern who was hired remotely to help teach them about the corporate values and culture.

Be Adaptive

In addition to intentional well-planned communication, a remote leader needs to drive [organizational adaptation](#). Remote work requires evaluating and updating potentially antiquated or “office-biased” policies and perceptions.

For example, how has the organization adapted to providing the tools and equipment needed for teams to work remotely? Do you have a checklist of what equipment team members need at home to complete their working tasks? Have you created a policy on how much the organization will provide and how much may be at the expense of the employee? Some organizations provided stipends during the year to assist with working from home requirements. Is this something that needs to be budgeted now for new hires? What onboarding or training procedures will need to be revamped to equip your team members for success?

Does the organization need to consider updating or revamping how to measure employee success? Oftentimes, organizations are focused on time inputs. An employee’s time is tracked and those that show up and stay at their desk are often labeled successful. What if the organization created more output metrics? Track project assignments and completions. Eliminate the need for tracking keystrokes or checking to see if the team is online during the old “office hours.” If you remain focused on intentional communication, it may be possible for remote teams to set their own working hours while still coordinating group projects.

Be Flexible

Another concept prevalent for embracing a remote workforce is [asynchronous communication](#), which allows teams to communicate through applications, such as Teams, Slack, email and others, without an expectation for an immediate response. The traditional in-person meeting can still take place through these chat room functions at the convenience of the team. Allowing a shift to more asynchronous communication empowers the employee to work efficiently with fewer interruptions and on their own schedule. It can even foster more honest communication, as the employee is given the time and space to formulate a response. In addition, sometimes employees feel they can be more direct through written word in the chat room than face-to-face. Consider how many meetings could be shifted to this model to

encourage productivity, honesty and breaking down the silos.

It’s likely that the shift to remote work settings for most organizations will change the way employees work forever. By being intentional, adaptive and flexible, organizational leaders can help ensure that the current workforce is both productive and satisfied while continuing to recruit and retain top talent.

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