

Remote Teams - Managing teams at a distance

With the corona virus outbreak, we need to alter the way we work together and, in the spirit of working in the Marshalls Way we will need to make some adjustments. This puts different responsibilities on you as a line manager. We are doing this for the health and safety of our colleagues, customers, suppliers, families and for the continued sustainability of our business.

It is expected that teams that are used to working together, at the same site and in the same office will now be asked to work remotely with individual team members working more from home. This is a temporary measure and we will review as the government issues any guidance.

This will have an impact on how we interact effectively – the onus is on all of us to make this arrangement work.

Working from home means just that – working. It is important that your goals, objectives and day-to-day tasks are still all completed. Attendance during your contracted hours still applies and you need to be contactable during these times (as if you were in the office and at your desk).

So what about virtual teams – how do they differ?

The short answer is that virtual teams are still made up of people; what works well face to face will work remotely as well to ensure effectiveness, however, in a virtual scenario you might need to think about the below key differences and how to bridge them.

Where people work remotely...

1. ...it's much harder to assess how people feel, the mood or climate of the team, whether people feel energised or empowered. It's harder to know (and feel) that the team has a common purpose – so **more time needs to be invested to build and maintain trust and relationships.**
2. ... you don't have the opportunity for informal time (eg. Coffee machine chats) you will need to replace these with **regular phone calls, and more formal reviews.**
3. ... it's harder to pick up on misunderstandings, emerging problems, new ideas and discussions. You need to make an effort to **check in on these things more frequently.**
4. ... you can't see people, you can't accurately guess what they're thinking or feeling! About 55% of what we communicate is non verbal ... from facial expressions to body movement. Hence with phone calls or even video links, **you may have to make verbal what you can usually see** ... How are you feeling today? Do you still really feel part of this team? What support do you need?

Managing remote teams – HINTS and TIPS

1. Clarify and re-clarify shared goals, work out clear roles and **agree ways of working** for this period of time – both as a team and individually
2. **Map skills and capacity**; be aware of what skill sets you have in the team and where capacity shortages or surpluses might present themselves in these rapidly changing times. The more aware you are, the more agile you can react to any demands.
3. **Agree ways of communication** up front:
 - a) How information is to be shared
 - b) How e-mail is replied to
 - c) More frequent formal meetings
 - d) Daily contact by phone (if needed)
4. **Use all the modern communication media** you can:
 - a) Video conferencing
 - b) Conference phone calls
5. When you set up to work virtually as a team, take time to **learn about each other's new work surroundings**; take a virtual tour, review possible distractions and agree how you will deal with them.
6. **Share agenda and information by e-mail before meetings** to ensure everyone comes prepared to contribute and has access to key documents even if screen sharing doesn't work.
7. Act quickly if you feel isolated or don't know how what you are doing will affect others – **pick up the phone!**
8. Work hard to **ensure everyone has information**. Formalise everyone's information needs and stick to them. Regularly review with the team how you're doing on this point.
9. **Regularly get together virtually as a team and make time on the agenda for personal updates**. Otherwise rapport will be much more difficult to build, even if it started strongly.
10. Remember, this period of time can be stressful for all of us – **make time to air concerns and worries and make sure you respond to them appropriately**.