MANAGING REMOTE TEAMS

1   INTRODUCTION

With WHO's announcement of a global pandemic of the Coronavirus on 11 March 2020, the world and specifically Australia, have put measures in place to combat the spread of COVID-19. As a result, more and more workplaces are asking their staff to work remotely.

This paper has been written as a guide to assist those responsible for managing teams remotely. The paper covers some of the issues facing those who manage these remote teams, as well as tips and pitfalls to avoid.

2   WORKING REMOTELY

2.1   Why is Working Remotely Such a Big Deal?

Assuming employees have been set up with the appropriate technology to do their job, what could possibly go wrong? The answer is many things. The technology is the least of the issues facing those working remotely.

Let's start with change. Most individuals, unless they have run their own businesses from home, have worked in an office. There are particular social mores in behaving in a work environment and fairly standard ways of managing and leading people. Many of these 'rules' or protocols disappear when an employee works remotely.

Most people don't like change. Working remotely, usually from home, is a very big change. Those with a low tolerance towards ambiguity, a low level of flexibility and having little willingness to change, suffer the most. These types of people like routine, and dislike change. They are the people who will find it the most difficult to adapt and will need the most support from their manager.

2.2   When Routine is Broken

Let's look at a typical person's daily routine.

The person gets up at the same time each morning and commutes at the same time each day. They get to work. They have a ritual when they arrive, be it getting a coffee first thing, having breakfast when they get into the office, etc. They see the same people each day who know them and interact with them. Their day is often structured with deadlines to submit work and or get it signed off. In short, they experience a routine. For many, it is year in and year out.

Suddenly they are asked to work from home. Their routine is broken. They do not have a work from home routine. Even those who have worked from home on a regular basis can struggle and productivity takes a dive. So what can you do as a leader to support and help transition your people?

2.3   What Leaders Can Do to Support Their Team Members

The first thing you can do is help them quickly settle into a new routine. Help them to think of their home as the office. Recommend they have a particular area in which to work from and that is the same place each day.

If the staff member doesn't have a study or a desk in a bedroom, suggest they clear their dining room table and from 8:30 am to 5:30 pm or whatever time they normally work and that the area is their 'desk', just as it would be at work.

If they have told their friends they are working from home, suggest they ask their friends to respect they are working during the day and to call after hours. For some reason, many people think if you are home, then you are free for a 'chat'. The staff member needs to act as if they were still in the office.

2.4   Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

As the manager, you will need to check in a lot more than you would normally in the office. Even if it is just to check on how they are going with the change. Show that you care and engage with them.

2.5   Managing Output and Having Key Performance Indicators, (KPIs)

As part of your new way of working, assign tasks with very precise outcomes and timeframes. In the past you may have said 'when you get a chance', but you will be doing the employee a big favour by giving them more structure in spelling out what exactly you want and by when. They will appreciate this!

It has been found that many employees waste an enormous amount of time when working from home, especially if they have not put some structure in place. It is important that the employee is clear as to what is expected, by when and to what standard. Having KPI's and or service level agreements, (SLA's), in place, becomes very important.

2.6   It's Your Time To Shine

Managing teams remotely takes a lot more effort on the part of a leader. Holding people to account (HPTA), is actually a competency, (behaviours and attitudes that make the difference between average and superior performance). You need to be exercising high levels of HPTA, while at the same time coaching and mentoring your people.

If this is a stretch for you, there are many books which can help you in this area. Leaders are readers and if you haven't been in the habit of doing personal development, now is a very good time to start.

2.7   Staying In Contact

One of the best ways I have found over the years to have high performing remote teams is to have regular contact at the same time each day or week. Don't keep changing times and days. Initially you will probably need to make contact on a daily basis. Make it the same time each day. Once you have this as a habit, (on both sides), you may decide that two or three times a week works. Obviously, this is dependent on the person and the nature of their job.

3   SUMMARY OF TIPS FOR SUCCESSFULLY MANAGING REMOTE TEAMS

- Have a **Daily Check in**. Whenever possible, this should be one on one, and face to face via video on Teams or Zoom.
- **Communicate** a lot. It probably goes without saying that you should be in regular communications with your **team.**
- **Manage** Expectations.
- Focus on **Outcomes**, not activity. Set up KPI's and or SLA's.
- Be **patient!** This is new.
- Be prepared to have work done in a **different** way than it might in the office.
- Help each member of staff to set up a **daily routine.** Some people have been known to get dressed in their regular work clothes so they 'feel' they are at work.

Good luck!

Hacy Tobias
Human Resources Director
Melbourne Anglican Diocesan Corporation
18 March 2020