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Setting Your Employees, Teams and Managers Up for Success in a Remote-First Environment

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The way people work is ever evolving, and today—more than ever—businesses are being asked to consider how to care for employees working remotely. Recent responses to COVID-19 have certainly accelerated the adoption of working virtually, but the way the world works has long been under transformation and is not likely to revert. According to Gartner, "by 2030, the demand for remote work will increase by 30% due to Gen Z fully entering the workforce."[1]

Creating an effective remote-working team goes beyond IT logistics. Make no mistake—the tools are important. Remote employees need to have access to, and an understanding of, the tools needed to do their job each day. But keeping your team engaged and working well together remotely requires an understanding of—and a plan for—the key influencers of your organization's unique remote work dynamic.

Throughout this series, we'll focus on supporting and sustaining success in a remote-first environment.

Overview
When we think about supporting a remote employee (or several remote employees and teams), we often think about the tools or technology first. Although having the right technology to provide access and connection is paramount, your tools are simply channels. An equally important consideration for your team's success is your plan to help employees stay engaged and feel supported. Consider the following, and explore how to coach and cultivate each of these influencers of the remote work dynamic for your organization intentionally:

1. ***Culture:*** Culture is both the spirit of your organization and the environment that individual remote employees must navigate to feel engaged and successful. A positive remote-working culture includes acceptance, trust, consistency and openness.

2. ***Individuals:*** A remote employee faces different daily working circumstances than someone who shows up to the office. Seeing the whole person when employees aren't at their desks calls for evolved and intentional tactics.

3. ***Managers:*** Managers play a leading role in successful remote-work cultures. They must actively engage with remote employees and set the example with others across the organization for best practices on interaction and support.

4. ***Teams:*** Team dynamics can be simply thought of as the daily manifestations of your culture. How people work within a team and with other teams greatly influences how they'll approach remote working and whether they make remote employees feel part of the whole.

   Tools: Another key element of your remote work dynamic is a clear understanding of the reliable tools that are easily accessible and help remote employees work collaboratively to do their job each day. The tools topic is a comprehensive one, including capabilities and governance, and this series will not address it in detail.

Culture sets the context
Organizational culture sets the tone and expectations for everyone. Working remotely requires working differently, which may mean adjusting for specific people and circumstances. In a positive remote-work culture, those adjustments will be interpreted—based on organizational values—as necessary actions to ensure that your remote team members feel integrated and set up for success. If working remote is new to your organization, it will take some mental shifts to embrace this new norm.

The most critical component for a remote employee to feel supported is trust. In this context, trust is believing in the competency and capability of all employees. They need to feel they have the trust and support of managers, leaders and colleagues to do their jobs well, even when others can't physically see the employee sitting there doing a job. In building trust, managers are key to making sure their teams have the clear communication and direction they need to follow through as expected.

> **One action to take:** To build trust, flex the muscle a bit. On your next team huddle, discuss a recent organizational judgment call that was made. For example, if you prioritized one program over another, talk your team members through the considerations for doing so. Help build the foundation of understanding; talk through the thinking, risks and trade-offs you made in that decision-making process. Having a casual conversation about the outcomes of a decision will demonstrate that you trust employees enough to talk candidly, and they'll build a better understanding of how you approach problems.

Although trust is a key ingredient, leadership is also responsible for embracing remote employees and the value they bring across the organization. Only leaders can remove any stigma or negative associations with remote work and acknowledge the equal value that workers of all kinds contribute. Leaders must also think critically about the cultural norms they establish for communications across the organization.

Striving for consistent, open and honest communication can make remote employees feel engaged and add clarity. Specifically, think about how to loop remote teams back in after the quick, drive-by conversations that happen on-site have progressed the thinking or moved an initiative forward. As a leader, be sure to reinforce that communication with remote employees is just as high a priority as it is with their colleagues in the office.

Also, think about how to extend the spirit of those "spark" interactions between teams in the office— water cooler conversations, morning chats as you settle into the day—to your remote teams. Give teams permission to bring other natural touchpoints to life for their extended members. Whether it's chitchat over Zoom calls or GIFs in Slack messages, these little touchpoints and interactions can be the heartbeat of your culture.

> **One action to take:** Build in a touchpoint for teams to gather casually. For some teams, this could look like a morning kickoff to talk about topics that aren't related to work. For other teams, a 4 p.m. Zoom call happy hour might be appropriate. In either instance, use this time to demonstrate the importance of remote employees as individuals. Provide space to let the team ground in some behavioral norms that build up your company culture.

Individuals count

You must pay special attention to individual remote employees to keep them connected. Just as the best managers individualize the coaching they provide to their team, it's also critical to individualize the approach taken in caring for remote employees.

Mitigating potential feelings of isolation or loneliness is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Understand the conditions in which your remote employees perform best. Build in systems and support—whether you schedule one-on-ones, regular check-ins or time blocks on their calendars. Make sure they get the chance to feel heard and engaged as individuals on teams, projects or meetings. In this endeavor, managers should play a leading role to ensure that the remote employee feels connected.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, remote employees are also more susceptible to burnout. In a DigitalOcean survey, remote workers reported slightly higher levels of burnout than in-office workers.[2] The same flexibility gained by having no commute, a built-in kitchen, and the ability to change a load of laundry or start dinner fast can also lead to a never-ending workday. Some may feel more indebted to an employer because they've been given flexibility in working remote. Others may not have distinct boundaries between home and office. Regardless of the reason, remote employees may overwork themselves, so managers must stay in tune.

> **One action to take:** Independent of a project or list of deliverables, establish emotional well-being check-ins with remote employees. To make sure this conversation doesn't feel forced and the employee feels comfortable sharing, use a loose framework for the conversation. For example, use a consistent handful of questions to start each check-in.
>   • How connected to the team are you feeling?
>   • What have you noticed in terms of your own work behavior?
>   • Are you sticking with the hours we originally anticipated?
>   • Are there specific challenges you'd like to discuss?
>   • Are you taking regular breaks?
>   • Are you scheduling downtime (non–screen time) for yourself?

Managers set the example
It's clear: Managers and leaders are key to a culture that embraces remote work. Their behaviors, interactions and the way they treat others will set the tone for the perception of remote working organization-wide. Employees will internalize the behaviors demonstrated by their leaders; it will shape how they're feeling.

When it comes to fostering strong remote team members, managers must understand the importance of their role. Top leaders can help these managers fully embrace the opportunity to foster strong remote teams by providing clear communications and expectations to them. And, in turn, managers must look to working with their remote employees as a two-way street; they can employ a few best practices to navigate this successfully:

- Develop clear expectations for delivery of work
- Be an example for how others can best operate and treat remote employees
- Watch out for the emotional well-being of remote employees

Managers should work with remote employees to set clear expectations on how employees are expected to show up each day and deliver their work, including tools, work times and processes. For example, if an East Coast remote employee is expected to shift his or her working hours to align with the West Coast office, this should be clear and agreed on at the start.

When it comes to establishing a strong practice of remote meetings, managers also set an example. They should be the first to make sure meeting best practices are followed. For example, turning on cameras whether you're in the office or not is a great place to start, or being the first in the room to give space for everyone on the call to speak.

> **One action to take:** In meetings with your team, ask everyone to take turns designating a remote advocate. A remote advocate listens for the comments coming in through the call and takes a moment to pause and ensure everyone shared. This will reinforce that you believe in the equal role of a remote worker and can help the remote employee feel more included.

As we know, remote team members have varied emotions and perspectives to contended with. They may also question the impact their work has. In caring for your remote employees, you must make sure that they feel that their contributions are about more than delivery of work; take time to understand their health and well-being as a person. Managers need to remind individuals of the value they bring to the team and that their efforts are truly appreciated.

Take extra effort to show public recognition for your remote employees. Their contributions often fly under the radar. For example, it may feel as if a report just showed up, when in fact, a person spent many hours working on that report. Support remote employee recognition and mitigate the likelihood that life at work becomes a series of unrecognized deliverables.

> **One action to take:** Whether it's in your next team huddle or a major project touchpoint, give a shout-out to acknowledge contributions from employees who are remote. Be sure to mention their name and the work they did specifically; this will ensure that the broader group has at least some perspective on the person behind the work.

Teams succeed together

Remote employees must feel just as much a part of the team as any other individual. However, research consistently shows that remote employees tend to feel excluded from their teams. In a work connectivity study, 80% of those who said they would have better relationships if their team communicated with them more often work remote. Furthermore, of those who said they never get face time with their team, 39% are remote workers—and a full 43% of those said that more face time would help them build deeper relationships with their team.[3]

Not only is it critical for the well-being of individuals to feel that they are able to build relationships and collaborate with their team, but a successful business depends on it as well. According to Gartner, "Through 2022, 75% of organizations with frontline decision-making teams reflecting a diverse and inclusive culture will exceed their financial targets."[4] Getting full engagement from remote employees will only strengthen the diverse set of perspectives and input in solving the problems facing your business.

Team dynamics set the stage for this. Remote individuals must feel supported, engaged and safe to collaborate. The team, whether remote themselves or not, can influence the remote work dynamic as much as the individuals who are remote and the managers working alongside them.

Healthy, remote-friendly team dynamics just don't happen, however. For the team, it's all about the balance between structure and freedom, creating clear guidance (not to be confused with a burdensome book of rules) so that the teams can operate with each other more fluidly and effectively.

> **One action to take:** Create a few ground rules for communication norms with your remote employees. For example, are there any acronyms—such as 4HR, signaling a request to respond within four hours, or NNTR, meaning no need to reply—that you could introduce to bring urgency to certain topics and de-escalate others? Remote employees often miss some of the social context around what's going on in an office; helping assign priority can mitigate against potential confusion.

Establishing communication norms will help clarify team members' role and place so they can feel comfortable jumping in as appropriate. For example, define the use of direct messaging versus email, discuss when a quick call versus a scheduled meeting makes more sense or determine whether you can put signals in place to indicate the importance of an issue. Discuss cadence as a team so that remote employees understand what's expected of them as part of the team.

It's also critical to have a foundational understanding of people and personalities. There is immense value in letting individual personalities shine, and this stems from relationship building. When relationships are strong, trust and collaboration naturally follow—and we know the most consistently effective and innovative teams come from collaborative environments. A report from Slack cites that training team managers to be relationship-oriented can help reduce institutional barriers to healthy collaboration.[5] So the question is, how do you build these relationships virtually when natural office interactions aren't as prevalent?

Playing games or having a free-flowing conversation around a piece of content are two creative options for helping break through the potential awkwardness of getting to know a team member through a computer screen. For example, imagine two colleagues playing a video game together; neither is an expert, but they're both trying it together—and it's fun. Activities like this break down the barriers to conversation and help establish trust, which we all know is key to any relationship.

One action to take: Set up a meeting with the group dedicated to a project. Make sure everyone is on the video call, cameras on. Ask a series of random "this or that" questions—for example, "Pepsi or Coke?" When people seem extra passionate about one of the questions, allow time for organic conversation and debate to bubble up. Everyone will get to know each other and the communication styles and passions a little bit better. Here's a list of 75 this or that questions to get you started.

Create a culture that goes the distance

As you work with your teams to build the right remote work practices within your organization, be mindful of the culture and the people responsible for bringing that culture to life. To support genuine employee engagement, take care of the unique needs of individuals—wherever they work, make sure managers understand their pivotal role, and create spaces that allow teams to connect and thrive.

Notes:

1 Gartner Press Release, "Gartner Identifies Six Trends for Chief Human Resources Officers That Will Impact How Organizations Experience the Future of Work," February 5, 2020, https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-02-05-gartner-identifies-six-trends-for-chief-human-resourc

2 DigitalOcean, Currents: Remote work edition, July 2019, https://www.digitalocean.com/currents/july-2019/

3 WorkplaceTrends, "The Work Connectivity Study," November 13, 2018, https://workplacetrends.com/the-work-connectivity-study/

4 Smarter with Gartner, "Diversity and Inclusion Build High-Performance Teams," September 20, 2019, https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/diversity-and-inclusion-build-high-performance-teams/

5 Slack, "Good collaboration, bad collaboration: A new report by Slack," Jennifer Phillips, Slack blog, March 13, 2019, https://slackhq.com/good-collaboration-bad-collaboration-a-new-report-by-slack

When not off playing in the mountains, Mariah works as a marketing strategist for Ogilvy's Employee Experience practice based in Denver, Colorado. She enjoys digging deep into the human psyche and analyzing market trends to make brands matter from the inside out, starting with the employees — the arbiters of a company's vision and mission. When not deep in the weeds of research and strategy, she enjoys getting active, rock climbing, reading and live music.