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Effectively Managing Remote Teams: 10 Best Practices for Your Success

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The Challenges of Remote Teams

Today's workforce is more geographically distributed than ever before. Thanks to digital collaboration tools, email and teleconferencing, companies are able to use the best talent from around the world and manage those teams in house.

Technological innovations have also brought new challenges for managers facing the task of making their teams productive and efficient despite geographic distance. Managers will need to adapt to keep remote teams motivated and effective. This guide will provide you with tips and solutions to manage your remote teams effectively, creating positive results through productivity and camaraderie.

What is a Remote Team?

**A group of people who must work together,
but can't frequently meet face-to-face
due to some of the following factors:**

**Different Location
Different Time Schedule
Often Out of Office
Part Time Team Members
Frequent Travel**

**Shift Work
Multiple Projects
Reporting to Multiple Managers
Work from Home
Work Remotely in Another Office**

1. Identify Team Type



There are many types of remote teams, and they all face different challenges. Different permutations of location, shift, and culture will all create unique groups.

	Yes	No
Working Same Hours?	Synchronous	Asynchronous
Working in Same Location?	Collocation	Distributed / Virtual Team
Shared Culture?	Homogenous	Heterogenous

It's easy to tell if a team is synchronous or not, or if they are collocated or virtual. Culture is more difficult to determine, but has one of the biggest impacts on your business.

Homogeneous groups share a common culture, have clearly established norms and expectations, and clearly understood roles.

Heterogeneous groups are more individualistic, do not have shared norms or expectations, and may have different views on roles.

2. Set Clear Roles



Virtual Teams can easily fall apart if management doesn't clearly communicate the roles and expectations within the team. Who can team members turn to when they have questions or need help on an urgent project?

Virtual teams are susceptible to delays and conflict when members of the team don't understand each other's roles.

Role clarification should come each time the team reorganizes, begins a new project, shifts responsibilities, sets new priorities or adds a new member.

Discuss which responsibilities are shared across the team, as well as individual roles.

3. Build Trust



All teams require trust and support from management to accomplish their goals.

Set the tone at the Start – Language in written and verbal communication needs to show respect and trust of team members. Show confidence they can accomplish the tasks.

Trust your Team – Really. Assume everyone is trustworthy from the start. No micromanaging. Be Encouraging.

Communicate Freely and Openly – Teams often believe “no news is bad news” especially when they have limited contact with managers. Your team should never guess what you’re thinking. Use multiple types of technology to communicate and set clear expectations about your availability.

Follow Through & Be Open – Do what you say you’ll do and make your actions visible. Show that you are responding to team actions and suggestions.

Be Accessible & Responsive – Set regular time to be available to your team members so they have opportunities to bring issues to your direct attention. Respond promptly to emails to keep the work flow on schedule.

Make Team Interactions Consistent & Predictable – Build trust by setting expectations for meetings, email correspondence, and other team interactions. Bridge cultural divides in a way that everyone can agree to.

4. Empathetic Listening



The potential for misunderstanding and poor communication increases when working with a virtual team. As a manager, you can practice empathetic listening to better resolve issues with your team members, and create positive working relationships even at a distance.

Empathetic listening helps the other person feel heard and understood.

Make Your Team Feel Understood

- **Repeat** what the other person says until the other person is satisfied that you understand them
- **Use paraphrasing**
- **Perception Checking** – recognize feelings in the other person by saying things like “I sense you feel frustrated, is that true?”
- **Inviting** – asking for more information
- **Relating** – make the effort to feel what the other person feels
- **Acknowledging** – show you are listening, but allow the other person to speak
- **Summarize** – Come to a consensus on what was discussed. This doesn’t mean you have to agree with the person
- **Avoid Defensiveness** – model forthright and honest opinions to your team

5. Virtual Buddies



Who should team members turn to with questions when you’re unavailable? Assign Virtual Buddies or Subject Matter Experts for specific processes to be a resource for the entire team.

Team Members can be unsure of who to go to with questions, especially when a new member joins an established team. A Virtual Buddy can be the go-to-person as the new member acclimates to the new project.

6. Create familiarity



Use photos or other visual reminders to help your team members get to know each other a little bit. When teams can't be in the same location or time zone, small visual reminders may be one of the only personal contact team members have with each other.

Celebrate milestones from a distance – birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, etc. can all be a way to bring the team together and create a sense of camaraderie.

7. Be Efficient & Effective in Meetings

Often meetings take place during odd times for virtual team members in other time zones. Be cognizant of your team's location and local time, and rotate meeting times to avoid inconveniencing one group every time

Prepare minutes ahead of time and send to the team in advance. Expect team members to prepare before calls to keep meetings quick and only when necessary.

While creating team bonding opportunities are important, they need to be scheduled as dedicated time, not informally added to every meeting held. Let your team know what to expect, then follow through with what you've told them you'll do.



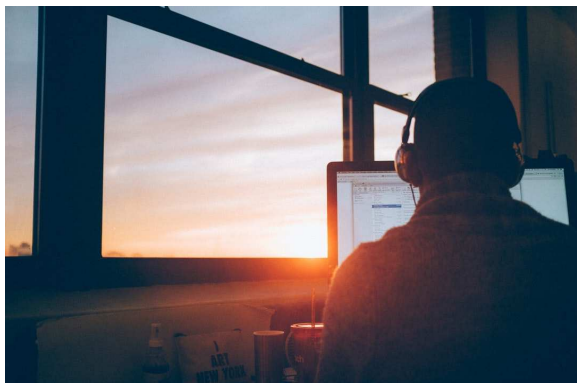
Carefully prepare the agenda

- Set protocols
- Then follow them during the meeting

Assign meeting roles

- Phone Leader
- Recorder
- Timekeeper
- Participant

8. Set Communication Expectations



Establish team protocols for email & instant messaging.

As Team Manager, you model work/life balance to your team.

Email & Instant Messaging

- Establish team protocols
- Check messages regularly, don't allow pile up
- Use subject line to establish info before opening
- Use a no scrolling rule to keep emails short
- Keep group lists up to date
- Remove unnecessary attachments
- Avoid group replies

Effective Videoconferencing

- Remember you're on camera. Don't do anything you wouldn't do on live TV
- Fill up the video frame - be close to the camera
- Don't limit to talking heads. Include sharing of documents/presentations/videos, etc.
- Create video use protocols with the team - video manners
- Limit video conference to a max of 2 hours
- Give participants control over technology - ie they can select what they see
- Respect privacy

Effective Teleconferencing

- Prepare before the meeting. Carefully prepare agenda, set the protocols, then follow them
- Assign meeting roles - the leader prepares the meeting and facilitates it
- Use people's names to avoid confusion. Everyone should introduce themselves
- Remember that silence doesn't mean everyone agrees. Solicit input from the entire team
- Use good manners. Be on time, don't hold side bar conversations, listen carefully
- Avoid background sounds such as music, street noise, coughing, eating, etc. Use the mute button

9. Master the Art of Feedback



Give feedback early and often – and not just in response to negative behavior. Virtual teams need feedback to keep them engaged and motivated. Positive feedback about things that are going well are just as important as negative feedback.

Feedback can be:

- Positive, negative, or continuous improvement
- Give feedback as soon as possible to have the largest impact. Feedback is to help the recipient and coaching should be given when it is best for the team member, not the leader
- Never hold back feedback and give it all at once. Most people can only take 1 or 2 pieces of feedback into account at the same time
- Use language focused on the behavior or issue
- Provide feedback face to face, in a video conference or over the phone.
- Written communication can be misconstrued if the tone isn't clear. Remember this feedback could be difficult for the team member to hear.

10. Build Team Culture from a Distance



Team Building activities can be of particular importance when team members have limited interaction. The goal of team building is both to build relationships and to make teams more effective. Try one of the following ideas using the charts on the following pages and customize based on your team's challenges.

Relationship Team Building

Two Truths & a Lie - Basic

Every team member has to provide three facts about themselves (hobbies, likes, etc.) Two of the facts are true and one is false. The other team members each guess which one they think is a lie.

Discuss Favorite Jobs & Vote On What to Incorporate into this Team - Intermediate

Everyone gets 5 votes to distribute as they choose across positive elements of team functionality. Team members share their experiences and preferences.

Sociogram Analysis - Advanced

During a meeting or other session, assign one person to draw a map of team interactions. Center circle is labeled "All" and each team member has their own circle around the perimeter. As each person speaks, draw an arrow from their circle to their audience. Analyze the diagram together and create a plan to address any issues.

See Sociogram Map on page 9.

Task Effectiveness Team Building

Cross Training - Basic

Ensure your team understands each other's roles, process flows, and be able to assist each other better by conducting training on each member's job function

Project Debrief - Intermediate

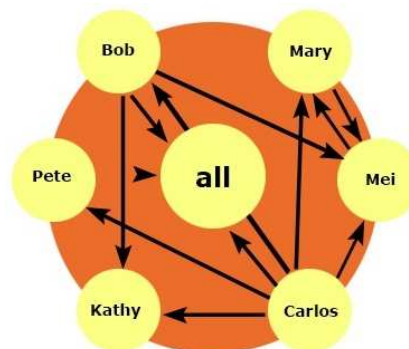
Use the Stop, Start, Continue Tool to address the impacts from a recent project. See an example Stop, Start, Continue Diagram below.

Stop, Start, Continue		
Stop	Start	Continue
Using technical jargon when talking with clients.	Confronting issues directly with others instead of talking behind their backs.	Sharing technical knowledge/and concerns with the team.
Being defensive when you receive feedback from others.	Expressing appreciation to people for their accomplishments.	Doing whatever is necessary to get the job done.

Process Improvement - Advanced

Use Variance Analysis to review the entire sequence of steps and determine where the variances (problems) are occurring or are likely to occur. List all steps in order. List all variances at each step. Create a chart with variances across the top and all major sequences of work down the side. Determine what the biggest impacts are. Discuss if redesign is required or if this analysis will be able to fix the problem.

Sociogram Map



Conclusion

As more teams are spread across the globe, having a proficient management strategy in place is paramount to ensuring a productive and engaging experience. By implementing effective communication, building rapport, and setting measurable goals, your remote teams have the potential for incredible productivity, innovation and performance.



About Eclaro - Eclaro is an IT and business consulting firm with over 1,100 employees and 15 offices located in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and the Philippines.