THE REMOTE LEAP

By CloudDevs

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Whether it's your first time managing a remote team or you're simply getting started at a new remote workplace, there are a few important differences you need to be aware of.

There's a physical barrier between you and your team.

Seems obvious right? Unless every person in your company had an office, there probably weren't too many physical barriers between you and your team. You could see them and they could see you. You could walk over to them, pull them into a room, or have lunch together. You could pick up on physical cues and actually see what kind of mood your team members were in without asking them outright.

Physical barriers are the inherent reality of a distributed team. There are literal brick walls separating you from them. Usually, video calls are the only way to see one another, and the person who shows up when the call starts isn't always the same person as when the camera is off. And for most of the workday you won't be able to rely on any visual cues to tell how your team is doing.

On the flip side, barriers between work and home life are suddenly stripped away. The physical office creates a natural separation between your job and everything else. The loss of this separation can have consequences on you and your team.

Contact isn't a given

Since you don't have physical barriers while working in an office, contact is inevitable. Your reports likely sit close to you, if not next to you. You probably see them in the parking lot, the lobby, or the lunchroom. Maybe you both stick around for Friday beers. Contacts happen almost by default. And you don't realize how important they are until they're gone. When managing a remote team, all contact needs to

be intentional.

You'll never just run into a colleague on a Zoom call. "Funny seeing you here!" Every interaction you have will be the result of either you or your reports reaching out to one another. And, so you don't go days without actually communicating with your team, you will need to put in the work to facilitate those touchpoints.

Collective routines are replaced by individual routines

Even in very flexible workplaces, people tend to eat lunch around the same time, and start or end work around the same time. There's an element of social pressure involved in building these routines. You may notice that your colleagues are heading to a restaurant for lunch and decide to join. Or you start around 9:30 because you don't want to be the last person in the office.

With a distributed team, the same social pressures don't

exist by default. You can't automatically know if your reports started work at nine or at eleven.

And they may decide to have lunch at 2pm instead of noon, so they can eat with their partner or roommate. Each person on your team will likely build their own routine. That isn't necessarily a bad thing — it's one of the things people like most about remote work. But as a manager, you need to be more proactive in making sure you're aware and okay with those routines, and that they align with your expectations and needs.

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"ONE OF THE BIGGEST MISTAKES REMOTE TEAM LEADERS MAKE IS TRYING TO CREATE AN EXACT REPLICA OF THE IN-OFFICE EXPERIENCE AND CULTURE, VIRTUALLY. OFTEN, IN-OFFICE TEAMS BUILD A COMPANY CULTURE THAT IS MOLDED OVER TIME BY A SERIES OF RANDOM INTERACTIONS AND IDEAS — WHICH ISN'T NECESSARILY THE OPTIMAL APPROACH."

DARREN MURPH, HEAD OF REMOTE AT GITLAB

The difference between in-office management and remote management can create some challenges for newly remote managers. None of these are impossible to overcome. But you need to pay particular attention to these common issues:

The struggle to set boundaries between work and home life

One of the stereotypes about remote work is the idea that people will spend more time watching TV or eating while at home than they actually will working. In fact, research has shown the opposite is true.

A surprising 23% of employees are willing to work longer hours from home and the number one challenge remote workers face is unplugging after work ends. With no physical barrier between work life and home life, the lines tend to blur. Whether your team is getting distracted or they're working too much, this can negatively impact their mental health and well-being. And since you can't see them, these problems are even harder to detect and address.

Fragmented communication

With no spontaneous contact, you and your team will rely on tools to communicate. This could be everything from the phone, to video call tools like Zoom and Hangouts, to chat apps like Slack or Microsoft Teams. It could be emails, or text messages, or the comment section in your project management tools. That's kind of the problem -- without any face-to-face contact, communication tends to fragment between all of these channels. Or people just don't communicate at all, since it requires more effort. This can become hugely problematic.

Work becomes invisible Often the result of fragmented communication and tool silos, first-time remote managers might find themselves scrambling to see what work is actually getting done. Team leaders lose visibility into how things are progressing, what work is behind schedule or over budget, what issues the team is facing, or even what work is complete and what successes the team has had. It's all just happening in little pockets that can be hard to penetrate and gather into a single, digestible view. This is a time-consuming issue that makes the manager's job really hard.

Team members feel isolated

Isolation affects everyone in different ways. You may have team members who love working from home, and are happy to get up, do their work, and go to bed, all from the comfort of home.

But many people cite loneliness as their top issue with remote work, and isolation can lead to a general disconnect of the individual from the company and team. People often won't express how they're feeling, and managers then feel powerless to help them.

It can also just mean people feel they aren't being included in projects, discussions, or meetings that they may have while in the office — basically work FOMO. Either way, isolation can wreak havoc on personal and team well-being.

Emergence of tool silos
In a similar vein, as teams shift remote and build their own routines, they tend to naturally fall into their favorite tools. Maybe in the office, everyone worked on a single project management tool, but now, from home, they're just going to set themselves up however they're most comfortable.

There's nothing inherently wrong with that, but as people spread out over more and more work tools, information and data can quickly become siloed within tools. These silos increase the chances of information getting lost or people working in isolation on projects that should be collaborative. This in turn leads to a lack of team alignment and puts key initiatives at risk.

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"WHEN COMPANIES ARE THRUST INTO A REMOTE SETTING, WHETHER INTENTIONALLY OR NOT, IT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR MANAGERS AND EMPLOYEES TO STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN WORKING HOURS AND NON-WORKING HOURS."

DARREN MURPH, HEAD OF REMOTE AT GITLAB

**CHAPTER
THREE**

TIPS TO
EFFECTIVELY
MANAGE YOUR
REMOTE TEAM

Remote work might introduce some new challenges, but managers who address these head on can create an environment in which a distributed team can excel. Yes, you need to adjust your way of doing things. But you'll come out the other side better for it.

Here are nine keys to effective remote management. Print these out and stick them to your monitor or throw them up on the fridge door. They'll be your guiding light to get you through any remote challenges you might encounter.

Fully commit to remote

One of the biggest mistakes a manager can make with remote work is not actually committing. Your team is going to follow your lead. If you have one toe dipped in remote work but you're clinging to the processes and systems you had in place in the office, your team is going to follow suit. They won't make the changes that they need to

make for a remote system to work. You need to buy in completely, and create a remote work culture. Make sure your company values reflect what you need from your remote team and then embody those values as an example for your team to follow.

Capitalize on the advantages of remote work

You can't ask your team to go remote and then deny them all the advantages of working remotely. Remote work really lends itself to flexible schedules (GitLab calls this the "non-linear workday") and setups (both software and hardware). Don't set really strict working hours for your team or have them punch a virtual card when they start or end work.

Don't expect them to answer chat messages within one minute. And definitely don't ask them to be on camera for their entire work shift. Let people

go for runs in the afternoon if it's nice. Let them pick up their kids from school or put in a few hours at night. As long as you're following the principles of transparency and overcommunication, and have established team routines, none of this should be an issue.

Value the asynchronous

Embracing remote management means embracing the asynchronous. Video calls can be exhausting, and spending all day on Slack creates a ton of distractions. Amanda Morochko, Head of Strategic Partnerships at the famously remote Buffer, says "We really lean into asynchronous communication. We felt really strongly that not everything needed to be an IRL [in-real-life] meeting and that it was killing productivity. You can't get things done if you're in meetings all the time."

Managers should identify what can be done asynchronously by each person on their team. This doesn't mean that work is siloed. Asynchronous work should be transparent and should be shared with the rest of the team as mentioned above. You should get into the habit of questioning whether you really need a video meeting to accomplish your goal before you plan one. You'll find that oftentimes, the same purpose could be achieved in a project management tool, document, or on chat.

Overcommunication & complete transparency

It's so easy for things to fall through the cracks when nobody knows they exist. You need to embrace transparency by default in order to succeed as a remote manager. Share what you're working on. Host documents and files in public folders. Post in public slack channels instead of private messages. Share mistakes and wins widely throughout the company. This

transparency, once it becomes the norm, really breaks down silos and ensures everyone who needs to know does know. It gives you, as a manager, the visibility you need to spot issues or make decisions. Similar but not the same.

Overcommunicate. If you're unclear on something, ask and then ask a second time. Repeat your expectations of your team over and over again. Double and triple check that they understand. Follow up more quickly when you don't get a response. This isn't overkill — it's an essential part of keeping teams aligned and moving forward towards your company goals. Considering 70% of remote employees say they feel left out, a little bit of extra communication can go a long way.

Trust your team

Overcommunication doesn't mean micromanagement. Many managers respond to the lack of visibility that comes with a distributed team by trying to force everyone to supply constant updates or jump onto endless video calls.

Instead, trust that your team is doing their work. Believe that they're motivated and that they're equally-driven to achieve company goals. A twoyear study by Stanford University actually showed a significant boost in productivity in remote workers. They produced as if they had a full extra day of work per week — the equivalent of a 20% increase in output. Forcing them to "prove it," over and over again is a surefire way to interrupt that productivity, and reduce team happiness.

Ask them if they're okay and ask how you can support them but don't constantly poke and prod for updates. If you do a good job of building a remote culture and instilling the values of transparency and overcommunication, this information will come naturally. If you need to

know what your team is doing at every second of the day, your team issues stem from more than remote work.

Creating (flexible) structures & building new routines

Of course, trust comes from having the right structures in place. You don't want to remove the freedom and flexibility of remote work (more on that below), but you do want to create structures that will help them succeed. While you don't need to work on the same schedule, ensure that you and your team have overlapping office hours during which you can schedule meetings.

Create regular meetings with repeated formats — team check-ins, project update meetings, 1on1s — so your team knows when to expect them and what to expect from them. Build your own management routines.

Check in on Mondays to ask each report how their weekend was. Ask the entire team in a public channel once per day if there's anything you can help with. Do a mental health check on each team member at a regular interval. Schedule team lunches or activities and mandate "no work talk allowed" to strengthen those personal bonds. You may not all be arriving to work together or eating lunch at the same time in the office, but you can share routines that will keep you and your team connected.

Be proactive and intentional

Nothing happens by accident with a distributed team. Every interaction, conversation, observation, and meeting, requires you or your team members to take the initiative and actually make it happen. As a manager you need to be proactive and intentional. You need to think through the needs of your team and of the company and then do whatever is required to make them happen. You

need to normalize video calls, include Zoom links in every invite, and give people the work management and workflow management tools they need to succeed.

You need to schedule repeated 1on1s and team or company-wide check-ins so people have opportunities to interact and share with one another. You need to reach out to your team on Slack, see how they're doing, ask questions, document everything, and share it all.

And you need to step up and embrace all the rest of these keys to remote management. You can't just create guidelines and hope people follow suit. It's on you to take the reins.

Document everything

This may be the simplest principle to implement, but the easiest one to forget. When working remotely, documentation is everything. It is the key to efficiency, scalability, and productivity — by reducing the number of unnecessary communications. When you are providing instructions to a report, write them down. When you make an observation about a project or team member that you'd like to share, write it down. Build written guidelines for tools. Document your processes in writing.

Take detailed notes during video calls. Transfer important emails and chat conversations into your project management tool or Google Suite. By writing everything down, you provide your team with resources they can use asynchronously, and you simplify the onboarding process for new hires.

Focus on outcomes

Why do so many newly-remote managers struggle to trust their teams and embrace flexibility? It's because they're too focused on processes instead of the end result.

"We measure and manage our team based on the

outcome," explains Janet Mesh, CEO of Aimtal, a fully-remote digital agency. "If we're moving towards a common outcome, I don't really care if you're doing the work you need to get done at 10am or 10pm."

According to Mesh, managers should have a clear conversation about intended outcomes of any task or project, and then let their teams go about the work as they see fit. Trying to force people to be as regimented as they would in the office is a losing battle. Giving them the freedom to do the best work of their lives in their preferred way will bring you better outcomes, and do more for the business.

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"I FIND WHEN PEOPLE HAVE MORE OPPORTUNITY AND MORE FLEXIBILITY TO INVEST IN THEIR OWN PERSONAL LIVES THEN THEY SHOW UP AS BETTER PEOPLE AT WORK."

JANET MESH, CO-FOUNDER AND CEO OF AIMTAL, A REMOTE-FIRST DIGITAL AND CONTENT MARKETING AGENCY

Project management tools

A good project management tool can help increase transparency on tasks underway, project progress, and blockers, while helping both you and your team remain productive. Remote managers will want a project management tool that is easy-to-use (easier for onboarding team members, less time spent dealing with technical issues) and easy-to-scale (workable for projects both big and small, and can be adapted to the needs of everyone in the organization from the top down).

Top picks include:

Trello

asana

GitHub

Chat tools

A chat tool is your best replacement for the quick coffee machine conversations you had while in the office. It allows managers to get rapid updates about work when needed, but more than that it allows you to check in on your team. Ask them how their weekend was, make sure they're feeling good about that last meeting, and generally ensure they're in a good place. Chat tools help with transparency and should be built into your remote routine.

Top picks include:

Microsoft Teams

slack

Calendaring tools

Your calendar provides your coworkers with a window into your day. It also allows you to build a routine and establish those barriers between work life and home life. As a manager, you don't want to restrict your teams schedules necessarily, but you do need to know when they're available. Remote managers should consider making calendars public, in the interest of being completely transparent about where your time is being spent. And encourage your team to book their lunch hours, family time, and off hours so no one books them. And don't forget to include that video conferencing link in each meeting invite.

Top picks include:

Calendly

Google calendar

Specialized remote management tools

In addition to the tools listed above, specialized tools can be used to support aspects of remote management. The tools listed below can help you run better 1on1s with your team, allow you to collaboratively code with your developers, or survey team members on their happiness, job satisfaction, impressions of the company, and more.

Top picks include:

Visual Studio

FELLOW
YOUR WORK CO-PILOT

officevibe

Video conferencing tools

Face to face contact is essential for remote managers. It humanizes you to your team, and vice versa. Looking people in the eye allows you to read visual cues and interpret body language, to better gauge how your team is performing and doing. It also helps people fight isolation and gives people an opportunity to voice things that can't be properly communicated in a typed message.

Managers should always utilize video calls for team meetings and 1on1s, and consider using them for non-work activities like team lunches or happy hours. At the same time, establish clear best practices for the use of these tools — surveyed remote workers cited interruptions and being talked over as the biggest challenge of virtual meetings.
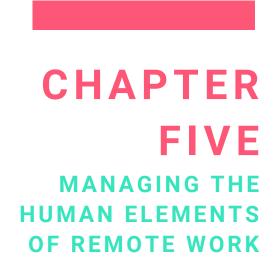
Top picks include:

Google Hangouts

zoom

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"LEAN INTO THE CHANNELS
THAT YOU ALREADY HAVE,
OVERCOMMUNICATE, HAVE
CLEAR OBJECTIVES FOR
YOUR QUARTER OR YOUR
WEEK. [...] BE AWARE AND
TUNED IN TO WHAT YOUR
EMPLOYEES ARE FEELING."

AMANDA MAROCHKO, HEAD OF
STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS, BUFFER

CHAPTER FIVE

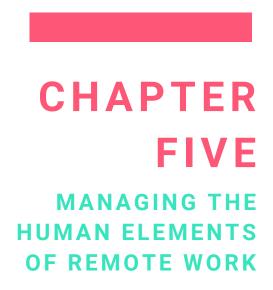**MANAGING THE HUMAN ELEMENTS OF REMOTE WORK**

When working remote, most of your communication will not happen face-to-face, which really changes the dynamic between you and the members of your team. You might be more direct in requests or feedback in writing than you would have been in person, for example.

Managers need to take care to always remember the personal in addition to the professional. This means choosing words carefully, showing appreciation regularly, checking in to make sure everyone is okay and has the support they need, and asking about things other than work. It also means showing vulnerability yourself, and sharing how you're feeling with the team.

With isolation being such a common challenge faced by remote workers, you really want to spend the extra effort making sure people feel that sense of belonging and camaraderie, and that they know they're not alone.

If members of your team are parents, have a conversation about how that will affect their ability to work from home. Let them eat lunch with their family or pick the kids up from school in the middle of the day. The same goes for any team members who are going through personal struggles or issues. Your reports may not have an in-person support system, so offer what support you can (or that they ask you for) and then give them the flexibility to take time off, change their schedule, or seek help if they need it.

Finally, being away from your team doesn't mean they're any less interested in career advancement or mentorship. Continue to have those conversations about career growth and document a career plan. Then, create opportunities for them to do training and development, meet with and learn from internal and external experts, and pursue their personal goals.

When should you cover all of these points with your team members? The best place to start is in your 1on1 meetings, which you should have at least biweekly.

Some questions that should come up in all of your check-ins include:

• What do you want to talk about?
• How are things outside of work?
• How are you progressing on your goals?
 • Is there anything I can do to help?

"68% OF MILENNIAL JOB SEEKERS WOULD BE MORE INTERESTED IN A COMPANY IF THEY OFFERED THE ABILITY TO WORK FROM HOME."

What to do each day:

☐ Let the team know you're online via chat. Maybe ask them how they're doing or let them know when you'll be available that day.

☐ Check your project management tool for team tasks due that day. If needed, leave a comment or tag the project owner asking if they're still on track.

☐ Fill out an asynchronous daily scrum to let people know what you're working on. Share in a dedicated Slack channel or in your project management tool of choice.

What to do weekly

☐ Hold a weekly team meeting to align on big projects and goals. Have people log progress updates in a central project or board that you can use as an agenda.

☐ Meet with other team leaders, perhaps in a weekly management sync, to go over crossfunctional projects.

☐ Set open office hours where anyone can book you to discuss pressing issues or ask questions.

☐ Consider having a weekly team lunch, happy hour, or non-work chat session to personally connect as a team

What to do long term:

☐ Have your team (and maybe the entire organization) log their long-term goals in your project management tools. Check in on these goals multiple times each month in team meetings and 1on1s, and offer help or guidance where needed. End each quarter revisiting those goals as a team in a video call, highlighting wins and sharing learnings from what wasn't achieved.

☐ Schedule bi-weekly (or at a minimum monthly) 1on1s with each of your reports. Don't skip these. Have a template and ask your team to contribute to the agenda. Keep notes and track happiness levels, wins, and blockers over time.

☐ Make calendars public by default, so everybody knows when everyone else is free or booked, and what they're up to.

☐ Build a remote work guide for employees.

☐ Create a remote onboarding system for new hires.

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REMOTE WORK INCREASES THE OUTPUT OF EMPLOYEES AND MAKES THEM 50% MORE LIKELY TO STAY WITH THE COMPANY.