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Best Practices for Remote Team Leadership

The Virtual Problem

Remote Teams

As technology advances, more and more businesses are converting from the traditional physical office to a system which allows employees to work remotely. While there are many benefits to fielding a remote team, they bring along with them distinct challenges that managers in a physical office may not have to overcome. Getting work done across multiple areas while keeping up productivity and morale is more difficult than it seems, and traditional methods of team-leading are often incompatible. By taking into consideration the new challenges that virtual field teams present, and understanding the need for new leadership tactics, managers can step into their role with confidence and give their entire team a boost.

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It's not too late!

If your organization has already made the transition to field-based teams, there is always time to re-work your managerial strategy. Field teams develop and evolve over time, and great managers evolve with them.

Communication

As is the case with non-virtual teams, communication is the glue which holds an organization together. Without a shared vision and effective means to communicate, there cannot be a team of any kind. Before leaders can even begin to manage and help their teams, they must ensure that every employee understands and shares a consistent goal. Once the team has established a goal, and each member understands the role they play, maintaining communication is vital. In Gamze Karayaz's 2006 study on virtual team effectiveness, she found that communication played a large part in the effectiveness and success of a team, and was vital to clarifying objectives and maintaining task focus. Effective leaders will build a system of communication by looking first at the opportunities that are available in a traditional office and converting them to the virtual platform.

For example, in a traditional workplace it is very easy for team members to walk over to the team leader and ask for advice or chat. This small convenience allows the team to know where their leaders and fellow members are at all times, and to consult them quickly and efficiently. In the case of a virtual team, where team members are often dispersed across large areas, it is impossible to know exactly where the team leader is at all times. Creating a system that allows team members to check-in and see if their team leaders are available gives the entire group cohesion, and makes team members confident that they have backup. Field Activity Management software that offers messaging or announcements between employees is a fantastic solution for this problem, and is often very affordable.

Once the field team is united towards a single goal, it is important to hold each member accountable for their workload. Without team members physically around them, it becomes easier for team members to rely heavily on others, not feeling the social pressure of a team physically around them. Motivating each member of the team to focus on long-term goals is a difficult but necessary tactic to ensuring the continued success of the team and organization.

Establish Trust

It can be simple for leaders to monitor accountability in a physical workplace—simply walk over to employees and ensure that they are staying on task, and working towards established goals. When working with virtual teams, this accountability can be much harder to keep track of. Team members can very easily fly under the radar and become demotivated, leading them to underperform or use company resources ineffectively.

To avoid these pitfalls, and ensure that everyone on the team is pulling their weight, it is vital that team leaders establish a strong system of two-way trust. This means that team members should trust their leader to support them and make hard decisions, and the team leader trusts remote employees to stay on task and perform to their best abilities. According to this 2012 study on the impact of leadership on virtual teams, leaders who are supportive instead of commanding have greater trust and increased participation from virtual teams.

Trusting remote employees does not mean that leaders should never check in just to make sure that their employees are performing. Rather, leaders should check in regularly to offer support to employees and find ways to help them reach their goals. According to a 2008 case study, "Pitfalls in Remote Team Coordination", monitoring the team excessively will make employees lose trust with leaders and has the negative effect of decreasing productivity. Trust can go a very long way towards motivating virtual employees, as many of the traditional social interactions of the office are non-existent in their day-to-day routines.

Give the Team Decision Making Power

Handing control of important decisions to employees can be frightening to many team leaders who are accustomed to the management styles of traditional workplaces. Empowering team members to make important decisions on their own while working remotely is not merely a suggestion for team leaders, it is a necessity. With a team dispersed over multiple areas, it is impossible for a micro-management style of leadership to succeed. Giving virtual employees not only the authority to make big decisions, but also the correct tools, will go a long way to ensuring that the team is performing to their best.

"If the members of a virtual organization or a virtual team are not empowered to make decisions, the technology that enables their collaboration will add little value, and the competitive advantage associated with rapid responses to demands in the market place will be lost"

--Horwitz, Bravington, & Silvis, 2006, The promise of virtual teams: Identifying key factors in effectiveness and failure.

Use the Right Tools

With technology being the tool which allows virtual teams to exist, it should be apparent that utilizing the correct technology is one of the most important variables to the success of remote employees. There are thousands of different technologies available for empowering teams working in the field, but understanding which of those technologies best meets the needs of virtual employees is not a simple task.

While the exact needs of an organization will differ from team to team, there are basic criteria which leaders should adhere to when deciding on the optimal software for their virtual teams. Leaders should give employees not only the tools that they need to perform their day-to-day tasks, but also those tools which eliminate their more menial tasks and boost productivity. For example, for employees working in the field, manually filling out paper forms or physically submitting reports to their supervisors interrupts workflow and wastes company resources. Technology which automates repetitive tasks and is customized for each employee will not only raise productivity, but will also boost morale as team members can work towards their long-term goals more effectively.

Virtual employees are not the only members of the team to consider when deciding on the best technological solution for a business. Effective technology takes the input of both the team members and the team leaders and produces material which is useful to both parties. Managers and leaders should be able to track virtual employees, analyze their work, and effectively communicate with them.

In this case study of popular cosmetics company L'Oreal, managers needed an effective way to track sales operations in real time and analyze results from individual customer visits made by their virtual employees. By utilizing field management software which met all of these needs, management was able to increase sales volume and reduce response times, greatly increasing virtual team efficiency. While this is only one example of an effective use of technology integration, finding one solution which meets all the needs of team leaders and members is vital to the success of any virtual team.

Building Bonds

The water cooler, lunch time chats, and discussions had around the coffee pot are often overlooked interactions which build bonds between employees. Casual conversation and finding mutual interests build trust between team members, and virtual employees are no exception. According to OD Consulting's whitepaper *The 8 Most Common Challenges of Leading Virtual, Dispersed and Remote Teams* "Without regular communication team members can easily lose their connection with the team and then lose their motivation for working towards team goals." Finding ways to bring employees together is important to fostering team growth. Whether this means physically bringing virtual employees together for an event or meeting, or simply giving these employees the tools to communicate with one another regularly, building strong relationships between team members means that everyone is working towards the same goal. While it should never take precedence over the work of employees, managers should not cut out general conversation between team members.

Set Clear Goals

Without a central work location, it can be difficult for a company language to develop among employees. For virtual employees, this could mean wildly different interpretations of the same goal or task. It is up to virtual team leaders to simplify the goals of their team members, and make sure that everyone is on the same page. Beyond the team's goals, individual employees should understand the role that they, and the other members of their team are expected to carry out.

Setting up a system where weekly or even daily goals are clearly defined for each employee is a fantastic way for employees to stay consistent in their work. Using scheduling software can help to give more structure to virtual employees and enables them to more easily look ahead at their tasks and identify areas where they need clarification. If the goals which are being set by leadership are not clear and understood by every member of the team, this will be reflected in the work of the team. Avoiding disarray and low morale is easy when everyone know exactly what their target is.

Lead the Individuals, Not Just the Team

While team building and leadership is extremely important with virtual teams, individuals should be paid as much, if not more attention than their office-counterparts. Checking in on employee status, analyzing their work, and giving them feedback and constructive criticism should be one of the most regular things that team leaders do. Keeping individual employees focused on the long term goals of the team and business is not easy, and consistently reinforcing that goal is a leadership necessity.

Virtual employees often perform tasks which do not immediately produce feedback. Giving these employees the reinforcement that they need to perform every day is something that team leaders should keep at the forefront of their mind when developing leadership strategies for teams in the field.

"Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn."
--Benjamin Franklin.

Innovating and Evolving

"What's dangerous is to not evolve"

--Jeff Bezos, Founder and Ceo of Amazon

As hard as it is to develop an effective system of leadership for virtual teams, managers should never rest on their laurels when things are going well. Utilizing new technologies as they become available, and looking at different ways to integrate the culture of the business with virtual employees is how effective leaders keep their competitive edge. Leaders should constantly look for feedback from virtual employees about the systems that are in place, and look to make them more efficient. By following the practices outlined in this guide, and evolving with the competition, managers can ensure that their virtual employees maintain high morale and performance.

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