leading a digital workforce.

Maybe you’re already familiar with remote work, or perhaps the new reality has you working remotely for the first time. Either way, the next few weeks are a glimpse into the future of where work is headed – more people working together from disparate locations.

With the loss of body language, subtle facial expressions, and informal water cooler conversation, we’re all going to find communication is more difficult over the next few weeks (hopefully that’s the extent of it). That means each of us needs to hone our digital communications chops.

Many distributed companies like InVision, Basecamp, Gitlab and others are entirely remote. All their communications happen on digital, synchronous, always-on global platforms like Slack, Asana, Teams, Trello and Zoom.

So, how can you continue to develop your team in these conditions? How do you cultivate meaningful workplace relationships in an increasingly digital world?

Turns out, most of us don’t know. In fact, we don’t even know how we come off to others on these digital platforms.

But we’re starting to find out.

In the digital workplaces of today, forward-thinking companies are beginning to build self-awareness amongst employees and better develop their leaders.

Your email messages, online meetings, Slack, Trello and other tools have absorbed an ever increasing share of workplace communications. And right now they’re virtually our only means. With these digital tools you must manage the health of your workplace relationships.
Things like tone and communication patterns matter now more than ever. This requires an investment in self-awareness to ensure your communication fosters the working environment your remote team needs to be successful.

At Cultivate we enable managers to see exactly how they’re communicating with their teams, so they can maximize engagement, happiness, and effectiveness. In this ebook we will share best practices and insights on five of the key behaviors Cultivate monitors, that managers should keep in mind when working remotely.

- Communication Frequency
- The Praise Bank and Giving Difficult Feedback
- Engaging Your Team
- Handling 1:1s
- Let After Hours Be After Hours

Once you’ve read it, hop on over to our Digital Behavior Quiz to benchmark where you think you stand on some of these signals now. It’s the best way to start your journey to self awareness. Of course, if you want actual data on how you and your team are performing, let’s talk.
communication frequency.

If you’ve ever been a parent, you already have a slight edge in building and encouraging a remote team. Every parent knows that the quickest way to get into trouble is to “play favorites,” or to treat one child differently than another, even if the child in question is a legitimately special child.

When your team is remote, it’s easier to ignore that problem child, the one with the bad attitude, or the one who wants to keep you tethered to Slack all day (to make you know he’s working). We’re all feeling our way toward the right communication etiquette for these digital channels.

While it is important to manage your time carefully when remote (not letting every push notification destroy your productivity), the seemingly minor daily touchpoints you have with your direct reports can have a big impact on your team’s bottom line. Gallup has found that engagement is highest among employees who have some form (face-to-face, phone or electronic) of daily communication with their manager.
COMMUNICATION FREQUENCY

So how do you make sure you’re communicating frequently enough, and with everyone on your team?

1. **Awareness.** To make sure you’re not saving your rapid response skills for your own manager rather than your team, pay attention to how you are responding and interacting with colleagues during the day. Simply paying attention to differences in how often you communicate digitally with each team member can help you become aware of anomalies and biases in your behavior.

2. **Make sure you’re choosing the right tools.** Email is like sipping through a straw; only a small portion of the conversation gets through. If you have Slack or Teams, those are better for sharing information and also for having informal water-cooler conversations, which you can enliven with emojis.

3. **A better solution is to get off these altogether and pick up the phone.** Although phone is more interruptive, it is more intimate, and it allows another dimension to your communication – tone of voice. And because phones are more interruptive, they are more likely to be taken seriously and remembered.

4. **The best tool is video conferencing.** In fact, you might want to start each day with a stand up Zoom meeting, where each person can say what they’re doing that day. Too many meetings can of course strip your day of any meaningful time to write or do the work, but it also provides important check-ins with team members. So schedule wisely.

The best leaders of virtual teams are the over-communicators. If you want your team to outperform the others, coach early and often. As often as a dozen times a day.

Don’t worry about too much communication. Worry about too little.
the praise bank & giving difficult feedback.

Let’s say you’re managing someone who’s a bit uncertain of himself and his role at your company. Maybe he’s experiencing “impostor syndrome,” or maybe you’ve actually given him a few performance reviews suggesting that he’s not quite measuring up. Bottom line: you’re walking on eggshells here.

He’s just sent over drafts of some customer outreach emails, and sadly, they’re all wrong. You need to provide feedback, and you can’t do it in person, so you are doing it digitally via Slack, Teams or email.

Sound familiar? What’s the best way to motivate this team member while also delivering the honest truth?

If you’re like most managers, delivering negative feedback is the least favorite part of your job. In a Zenger and Folkman study of 2,700 leaders, the majority of managers reported they avoid giving feedback – especially when it’s corrective or negative.

And 43% of leaders said they found giving corrective feedback a “stressful and difficult experience.”

So, let’s make it easier.

First, in the words of Leo Babauta, author of the popular blog “Zen Habits,” the best way to motivate and train is with praise, because “shame is a bad teacher.” Whenever you’re giving negative feedback, try to check in with yourself first and see if you’re thinking about using shame.

If so, stop yourself before you start. Shame doesn’t work.
In fact, it’s been proven by psychologists Dr. John Gottman et al that you need a ratio of at least 5 positive to 1 negative statements to create a successful relationship, whether in your personal or professional life. Praise is basically putting money in the bank so you can make debits later. So another self-awareness tip: be on the lookout for every opportunity to add to your bank balance.

As for how you deliver the negative feedback, a few tried and tested techniques:

1. “I like, I wish, I wonder” comes from design thinking methodology. You start with a comment about what you like about the work. Then go on to express how you wish something were different, and finally, close by asking for a change in a non-threatening way. Example: “I love the structure of this email, but I wish the CTA was clearer. I wonder if we could lead up to offering a call with our VP of Product?”

Notice that feedback is given, but no negative words are used, and the work situation is de-personalized

This is much better than just saying “This email goes nowhere” Or, “didn’t you remember this is a nurture campaign, and needs to lead to a CTA?”

2. Use video. Another great tip for providing negative/constructive feedback digitally is to do it with a Loom video. This way, you can walk through the edits or suggestions, and your team member learns WHY you are making the changes you are, and gets the gist that your tone is coaching not shaming.

Both of these techniques work to present negative feedback in a way that is constructive and doesn’t shut down the recipient’s mind in self-defense.

Just remember: fill that bank account. You’ll be glad you did next time you have to deliver difficult feedback.
The higher you get in an organization, the less likely you are to hear the cold, unvarnished truth. But if your whole team is suddenly remote, you have no time for this. Your team norms must favor employees speaking up, sharing their opinions, and bringing problems to you as soon as necessary.

How do you set this as a team norm?
ENGAGING YOUR TEAM

According to *Harvard Business Review*, it will take a “cultural change that alters how [employees] understand the likely costs (personal and immediate) versus benefits (organizational and future) of speaking up.” And to reduce these costs as a manager, you should “explicitly invite and acknowledge others’ ideas.”

We analyzed over 10,000 digital relationships (email and IM conversations) between managers and their direct reports. We looked at how often they showed they valued the opinions of their direct reports, and in turn, how often their employees shared information.

**Digital behaviors indicative of valuing opinions included:**

- Explicitly asking for opinions and feedback – “*Do you think this would work*” instead of “*Let’s do this*”
- Responding encouragingly to ideas – “I like that idea, what do you think about twisting it 15 degrees to x?”
- Quick response time

**Digital behaviors indicative of employee information sharing included:**

- Giving opinions or ideas
- Sharing information
- Making assertive statements of any kind

No surprise here, we found that managers who respond quickly and encouragingly to the opinions of their direct reports will stimulate a higher rate of information sharing from their teams. The incoming/outgoing correlation is strong.

![Graph: Effect of Valuing Opinions on Information Sharing by Reports](image)
## Engaging Your Team

So, if you’re suddenly remote, here are a few checks you can ask yourself as a manager, and how you might alter your behavior to increase the odds your team will speak up.

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<tr>
<th>FROM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you let that email or Slack message with a “hair-brained idea” go a few days without answer?</td>
<td>Encourage and respond quickly. That will positively impact their participation. Maybe write back, “Hey, I love this. Can we brainstorm it some more?” then offer your opinion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you offering your own opinion too soon?</td>
<td>Your tone matters. You can potentially spur team participation by being more positive or friendly if you aren’t currently.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you frequently tell employees the answer instead of actively soliciting input from them?</td>
<td>Try using this language, “Had an idea, and wanted to brainstorm it with all of you. What am I missing? How could it be better?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there something cultural going on that is lowering motivation to speak up?</td>
<td>As a manager, consider ways to reduce the perceived cost of speaking up and/or increase the perceived benefit. Do you put good ideas to practice when it makes sense, and acknowledge them when it doesn’t?</td>
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Handling 1:1s.

If you’re plunged into a remote work situation, the first thing you should do is set up a weekly 1:1 with each team member.

Regular 1:1 sessions provide a valuable opportunity for team members to ask strategic questions and give feedback, while also indicating to them that you value them. *HBR* says they are one of the most important management tools in your toolbox.

In fact, employees whose managers hold regular meetings with them are almost three times as likely to be engaged, according to *Gallup*, as employees whose managers don’t hold regular 1:1 meetings with them.

These meetings are your chance to strengthen the relationship, especially with employees you no longer see daily in the office halls. A few things to remember about them:

1. **Be on time.** Do not frequently reschedule or miss them, because it sends a message that they’re not important to you. It’s OK to cancel if you have nothing to check-in about, but don’t make this a weekly practice.

2. **Remember, 1:1 meetings are not your time.** They’re the employee’s chance to check in, get strategic input, and ask questions. So give your teammate the floor and let him set the agenda. You should be mostly in listening mode.

3. **Don’t give feedback during a 1:1.** The 1:1, as mentioned above, is not your time. The time to give feedback is immediately after an incident, in a short burst. Not during this relationship-strengthening 1:1 session.
4. **You should be using this time to ask questions about how you can help clear obstacles or better support the employee.** Consider using this framework:

- Anything on your mind a lot this week? What’s bothering you?
- How’d you feel about your job this week? How happy?
- Did you feel you were productive? What did you get done, not get done?
- What feedback can you give me? How can I help you?

Bottom line, the 1:1 is a great way to make sure you’re giving each member of your team an equal opportunity to give you candid feedback about their experience working for you. They also give you a chance to show team members that you really care what they think and that you will respond non-defensively to their feedback. There’s always something you can be doing better, and if you’re not being told, you’re either not asking enough, or you’re not showing that you value the candor.
Let after hours be after hours.

The digitally connected workplace represents many challenges. We weren’t meant to be available to our employers 24/7, and no one expected us to work after hours unless we got paid overtime. But here we are in the information economy.

We can be Slacked, emailed, or texted anytime a colleague thinks of something for us to do. And in today’s workplace, there are many good reasons why a leader might sometimes feel the need to send an after-hours message.

Regardless of the reason, research shows that a boss’s after-hours messaging behavior affects the behavior of his team. Even if managers might not expect a response, sending an after-hours email or Slack creates “a near guarantee that their direct reports will feel compelled to read and respond to them.”

This is dangerous, we’re finding, from the standpoint of employee well-being.

We’ve just come off a decade of admiring Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who worked 18-hour days, hustling – and now we’re trying to be more mindful of what’s our “free” time and what time is “on the clock.”

Clearly communicating norms and expectations around after-hours messaging can mitigate this effect – saying, “I don’t expect you to respond to my after-hours messages” – but it won’t stop employees’ phones from buzzing at 11pm.
Is it realistic to expect that employees, especially millennials who say their phone never leaves their side, to “avoid looking at their phone” on the weekend or after-hours? And that managers, in a workplace that is both increasingly digital and also untethered from physical spaces, can avoid sending an after-hours email from time-to-time?

Why do we think the solution to after-hours messages is reversing people’s behavior to look at their phones? Do we really think we can change that? Our workplace relationships are as real-time as our text-based personal relationships. That is a function of technology and the way we communicate.

There are, however, a few things you can do to reduce the stress it puts on your team when you do send those after hours emails.

1. **Just catching up on emails and don’t need a response right now?** Consider scheduling the message to send later or leaving it in your drafts folder to send in the morning.

2. **Need to send after-hours messaging sometimes?** Set expectations with your team around responding after-hours ahead of time so they know when to respond, and when they can step away and unplug.

3. **And stand down yourself.** The brain works better with rest. Burnout is a prime reason for attrition in fast-moving companies, and neither you nor your team need to be part of that if you can help it.
LEADING WITH EMPATHY

the remote manager pledge

01  I will maintain a 5:1 pos to neg ratio in messages to my team (i.e., I will not act like a jerk).

02  In 1:1s with my team I will listen, ask, support, and not criticize.

03  I will ensure a dog barks or kid screams on every call.

04  I will hold check-ins or stand-ups with my team and make sure everyone participates.

05  I will ask for and listen to my team’s opinions before offering my own.

06  We will decide as a team what should be a chat, email, call, or Zoom.

07  I will actually pick up the phone and speak to at least 2 humans each day.

08  On video calls, I will expect to see spouses walking by in PJs, cats jumping on keyboards, and laundry piles on couches.

09  I will set (and not reschedule!) weekly 1:1s with each team member.

10  I will set clear team working hours and minimize after-hours Slack and email.

And one final Bonus pledge will always hold true, no matter where you’re working:

“I pledge allegiance, to the cup, that holds my caffeine. And to the drink, which it contains, one container, full of coffee, indispensable, with energy and caffeine for me.”