

6 keys to managing up remotely

Managing up is hard enough. When you add in physical distance, it's even harder to foster the good communication and collaboration that build your boss's trust in you—and give you and your team what you need to excel.

Whether you have recently gone remote for the first time or have been working remotely for years, these tips can help.



1. Amp up your updates.

When your manager is working remotely, they may not even realize how much context they miss out on without those quick "How's it going?" hallway check-ins or seeing progress tracked on someone's white board. If you don't fill this information void, you may create a situation where they fear that things aren't getting done or that your team's doing something differently from what they expect.

You can fight against this potential for distrust with one small and mighty force: A really good weekly update (or whatever timing works best for your manager). If you already give regular updates, put more effort into them so that your manager feels fully informed and has peace of mind from afar. And if you don't do regular updates, start now.

Be sure that your updates:

- **Are in the communication style most helpful to your manager.** This could mean a regular email, chat-channel post, phone call, or their preferred method. And stick to the level of detail they want: Some managers want data and all the particulars, while others prefer only a high-level view.
- **Answer the questions they typically ask.** Great remote communicators take time to think through what information the other person needs and deliver it without having to be asked. Does your manager tend to want to see more numbers or to hear about key customers or to get your take on the team's morale? Whatever their typical questions, be sure your update includes details in those areas.

- **Focus on outcomes.** You might feel tempted to rattle off a long list of completed tasks to prove how hard your team is working, but updates like those turn into mind-numbing laundry lists—and don't show how you're making progress toward important goals. Instead, highlight the impact your work is having. For example:
 - Poor: "We completed 30 client interviews."
 - Better: *"Our extensive client interviews have led us to insight X. As a result, we're going to try new approach Y."*
- **Stick to a simple, repeatable format.** Choose categories that make sense for you so you can easily fill them in each time and your manager knows where to look for the information they crave. For example, you could include sections for:
 - Progress on our top three priorities
 - Biggest win
 - Obstacles
 - What I need from you

For more, including a sample template you can use, see [Revisit how you update your manager](#).

2. Check in periodically on your manager's communication needs—and adjust your approach to meet them.

Especially if your manager is new to remote work, they might not consciously consider their communication needs and how they have changed. If you don't proactively identify their needs and meet them, you could end up in a situation where your boss feels vaguely dissatisfied with your work because they're missing out on the important information they need.

Don't just check in once; your manager's needs can shift depending on their priorities and how things are shifting in your organization. Periodically raise the issue by asking questions like:

- *"How is the level of detail in my updates working for you? What would you like to see more or less of?"*
- *"Now that we're remote, what's the best way for me to share urgent information or questions with you (e.g. email, text, call, messaging app, etc.)? What about nonurgent ideas and questions?"*
- *"What topics do you wish you were better informed about?"*
- *"Is there anything you would like me to change about how I communicate with you?"*

3. Be explicit with your manager about *your* communication needs.

When you're in person, you can hear tone and see body language to help you read your manager's message or you can pick up company news and critical context in passing or during those five minutes before a meeting starts.

But when you're remote, you might sit there wondering what your manager meant by "OK" in a chat ("Perfect, that's what I was hoping for" or "Fine, if you insist"—or something else?). Or you might wait for your manager to volunteer all of the critical information they learn in high-level meetings. This passive approach leaves you starved for the information you need to guide your team's work to meet your manager's and company's goals.

Instead, take the initiative to ask for the clarification, details, and feedback you need:

- In the moment: *"To be sure I understand what you're asking for, let me recap Do I have that right?"*
- Casually during check-ins: *"Is there any high-level information you've heard this week that could impact our team?"*
- In an explicit conversation you ask for (if you have a poor working relationship or aren't getting the information you need): *"Would you be open to discussing in our next 1-on-1 some ways that I can stay more informed? Since we started working remotely, I sometimes feel like I miss out on important information. For example, I just heard from marketing about what features we will be building next month. The earlier I hear information like that, the more likely we will be successful meeting those needs").*

Keep in mind, too, that your manager can't—and shouldn't—be your only information source. Think about how you might tap peers and colleagues for the information you need.

For more, see [A conversation guide to help you get what you need from your manager](#).

4. Dedicate time and space with your boss for regular strategizing and collaboration.

It's fairly simple to develop a remote communication routine with chats, status updates, and project meetings for day-to-day work. What's not so simple to do remotely? Have multi-hour strategy sessions where you cover a whiteboard with new ideas. Or have spontaneous conversations with your manager that start with them saying, "By the way, in the executive meeting, we just talked about focusing more on X," and evolve into a freewheeling 45-minute discussion that yields new possibilities or clarity on a problem.

When you're remote, you need to be deliberate with your manager to make sure these critical exchanges happen. To do so:

- **Dedicate part of your 1-on-1s to big-picture discussions.** This is easier to do if you send comprehensive regular status updates (see No. 1) so you don't have to spend precious 1-on-1 time explaining what you've been doing. Before each 1-on-1, send your boss an agenda with recurring items like "Review department goals and priorities" and "Strategic questions." While you won't be able to cover everything in your 1-on-1s, at least you'll get a good idea of what topics need more time—and can schedule that time as needed.
- **Determine how you'll collaborate for virtual strategy sessions.** Creative sessions can be hard via video call, where silence is extra awkward and it's hard to keep track of ideas. Stay engaged by using visuals like a shared doc or [virtual collaboration software](#). Or, so that you're not starting from scratch or trying to group edit a new doc on the fly, prep a thinking document ahead of time for your manager to react to. For more, see [Checklist: How to run great remote meetings](#).

5. Strategically draw your boss's attention to your team's accomplishments.

If you're not vigilant, especially in the out of sight, out of mind world of remote work, your manager may never understand how your direct reports are pushing themselves and growing, what your team is achieving, and the full value your team brings to your organization. Let this knowledge gap persist, and you could end up hurting your team's—and your own—chances of getting important assignments, raises, or promotions.

To keep your team's important work front and center:

- **Add a section to your weekly updates for people's standout work.** For example:
Standout work: I also want to highlight that [name of high performer] took on _____, which was key because _____. Their growth in the past X months is evident in these ways: _____. They're ready for new challenges, such as _____.
- **Look for opportunities to showcase your direct reports' expertise.** You could draw attention in regular conversations (e.g., "*Jasmine was just talking about that the other day as an important way we can improve customer retention. She found in her research that ...*"). Or ask to bring them to important meetings so they can speak for themselves (e.g., "*Would you be open to my bringing Jasmine to Thursday's meeting? She's really our customer research expert. She could explain her findings and answer our questions*").
- **Redirect credit to high-performing team members when your manager compliments your work.** You could point out specifics of an individual's next-level contribution. Or simply highlight the group effort, "*Thank you. The team worked really hard on that. I'll be sure to pass your compliment on to them.*"

For more, see [Strategically draw your boss's attention to your top performers' growth and achievements](#).

6. Set expectations with your manager for when you will respond.

It's easy to fall into the common remote-work trap of letting work hours bleed into home time or responding to work requests 24/7, especially from your boss. These remote-work habits rob you of precious recharge time and set a terrible example for your team.

Instead of responding to late-night emails or interrupting your lunch to take a call, set clear boundaries so that your manager knows when you are and aren't available to respond. During work hours, this might mean blocking out time in your calendar for lunch and breaks or setting your online status to "lunch" or "back soon" in a messaging app. For off-hours, communicate your boundaries in a way that protects your time but also shows that you care about addressing your manager's needs. For example:

"In order to make more time for my family in the evenings, I won't be checking email after 7 p.m. That means if you send me something later than that, I'll respond to you first thing in the morning."

For more, see [Set and communicate a work/life boundary this week](#) and [4 steps to set better boundaries—and stop work from taking priority over your life](#).

Was this article helpful?

© 2023 FranklinCovey, All Rights Reserved