

# An off-site direct report feels left out

## What could be going on? How to handle it:

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Few things can undermine a remote direct report's motivation and performance like feeling left out. Not only that, it can also create ill will that infects other direct reports — or even the whole team.

Is it possible to counteract this corrosive feeling? In many cases, yes. Here's how.



### What could be going on?

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- The person is lonely working from home every day.
- You're not accessible enough for the remote.
- You delegate mostly independent assignments, making it difficult for the person to collaborate and connect with others.
- You and/or the team forget to communicate instructions, feedback, or announcements to the remote.
- You and/or the team don't actively solicit the remote's ideas, making him or her feel like an afterthought.
- You and/or the team have been accidentally leaving the person out of group celebrations.
- The team doesn't have or regularly use effective communication tools.
- A language or cultural difference is compounding the person's physical remoteness.
- The person isn't putting enough effort into being included.

### How to handle it:

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#### 1. Initiate a conversation to clarify the extent and cause(s) of this feeling.

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Your remote might feel left out for any number of reasons — from simply working without enough human interaction to resenting the team's headquarters-centric culture. If you narrow down the possibilities in a 1-on-1 video chat, you won't waste time trying anything and

everything while your remote's mood and productivity disintegrate.

Besides, your remote will probably appreciate knowing that you've not only noticed the issue, but also that you think it's totally understandable and want to help:

*“Nadia, it's pretty common for remote employees to sometimes struggle with feeling isolated from the team. I notice you haven't said much in the last few team meetings. Do you feel like you're getting enough interaction? I want to make sure the team and I are doing whatever we can to include you.”*

Listen carefully, ask follow-up questions (hint: don't take a brusque “I'm fine” at face value), and don't shy away from the part you and the team may have played in creating the situation. See [How to encourage direct reports to open up in 1-on-1 conversations](#) for more.

## **2. Suggest the remote frequent a co-working space.**

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For remotes who feel like their home office doubles as solitary confinement, simply working near other human beings once in a while can help stave off loneliness. Suggest a solitary remote rent a co-working space a couple of days a week — and check your budget and company policy to see if you can reimburse the cost.

If your remote doesn't have such a space nearby, or if you need to find a cheaper option, there are plenty: A local coffee shop or library, for example. Or maybe your company has a satellite office where your remote can grab a desk now and then, or perhaps your remote lives near other remotes who can work at each others' homes from time to time.

## **3. Assign or suggest more collaborative projects.**

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Do you tend to give your remote high-concentration, independent tasks or set up assignments in such a way that he or she could complete them in a bunker? If so, you might be inadvertently making your remote miserable — and, in the process, holding back your whole team by siloing your remote's unique perspective and ideas.

Even if your remote's role calls for a lot of autonomy, there are ways to get him or her more involved, such as:

- Ask your remote to be the team lead for a project.
- Build collaborative elements into current assignments — for example, you might suggest a feedback round in which your remote reviews a peer's work and vice versa.
- Point your remote to side projects that involve collaboration (e.g., a project to document a team process or a company diversity or wellness initiative that requires group meetings).
- Factor the potential for interaction into future assignments whenever you delegate them.

## 4. Model and reinforce behavior that includes remotes.

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If you're not showing and telling co-located direct reports that inclusion of remotes is a priority, then how can you expect them to do their part to create a remote-friendly environment?

Start by modeling the behaviors that could help remedy your excluded remote's woes. For example, say your co-located direct reports don't update their online status so remotes know when they're available, or they have little to say to remotes in meetings other than, "Could you mute your microphone?" Be zealous about keeping your own online status current and actively soliciting remotes' input in group settings.

You can also give reinforcing feedback to direct reports when they *do* exhibit behaviors that are mindful of remotes (e.g., "*Mario, good call to ask for Christine's input*") and use redirecting feedback when they don't. For example, if co-located direct reports forget to relay an announcement discussed in the office, you might say, "*That's important for our remotes to know, too. Ada, would you please post an update that the whole team can see?*"

## 5. Find a way to customize recognition for your remote — or include the remote in customized celebrations for others.

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Your left-out remote may yearn for more recognition, perhaps because co-located peers get plenty of balloons and champagne while he or she is stuck with an occasional smiley-face emoji. Or maybe you don't typically give much recognition to *anyone* on the team. In either case, it's within your control to improve this issue.

Start recognizing your remote in ways that he or she will appreciate, whether that means doling out her fair share of high-fives the next time she's in office, going analog by sending a card or party pack from the team, or simply mentioning her contributions in team updates to the department.

Another option that may help your remote feel more connected to the rest of the team, and vice versa: Involve your remote in planning duties to celebrate another team member (or the whole team). If the remote is international, maybe he can even plan something unique to his culture, increasing the team's understanding of his perspective in a fun, low-key way.

## 6. Ensure you have the proper communication tools and that the team is clear on when and how to use them.

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Picture this: Most of your team is in love with your chat tool, while your isolated remote either hates it or can't figure out how to use it. So she just stays off chat, basically severing online ties with the rest of the team. Or perhaps your remote is an avid tool user, but the rest of the team isn't, creating an equally alienating experience.

First, ask yourself if you have the proper tools. If your remote needs more real-time communication, do you have a group chat tool to meet that need? Even if the answer is yes, your team needs to use it well. So train them or delegate training to a particularly active user on the team. Then, use lapses as opportunities to clarify when and how to communicate: *“For discussions like these about our deadline, let’s include the entire team on chat so we hear everyone’s views.”*

## **7. Encourage your remote to speak up and reach out.**

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Your remote might be unconsciously sinking into a victim role instead of proactively speaking up in meetings and online discussions, seeking feedback, and updating others on his or her progress. This is unfortunate but understandable. It’s both easy for remotes to hide in groups and difficult for them to jump in.

You can help overcome such barriers by giving your remote ample encouragement. Point out instances where he or she could be contributing to conversations. And when your remote has questions or wants feedback, don’t immediately default to providing these things yourself. Maybe it’s better to direct your remote to another team member, an approach that could jump-start more regular interaction between them.

## **8. Connect your remote with a peer — like another remote, a coach, or a mentee.**

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Maybe it’s something closer to a friend on the team that your remote is lacking, someone who won’t be clouded by the power dynamic if you were to take on that role. Plus, a peer relationship can foster knowledge sharing, collaboration, and both people’s development.

You could set up these pairings in a variety of ways. Depending on your remote’s skills, goals, and situation, he or she might benefit from having a peer coach, a mentee, and/or a relationship with another remote. Ask potential matches if they’d be interested in one of these roles (it doesn’t have to be a formal arrangement — think virtual coffees or lunches). For example, in approaching another remote at the company, you might say:

*“Hosana, given your experience working remotely, I’m wondering if you’d have any interest in checking in with Marcela every week or so. Maybe you could start by sharing what you’ve learned about collaborating with the rest of the team and dealing with isolation — stuff I know most remotes struggle with at some point.”*

## **9. Give your remote more access — to you *and* to information they may be missing.**

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What about you — are you giving your remote what he or she needs to thrive? Your remote may want more feedback, more coaching, more informal chatting — or a different kind of information altogether, such as context about the direction of the team and company, which can be harder to track down from afar.

Depending on the person's needs, consider providing:

- **More time.** Maybe longer 1-on-1s will do the trick. An extra 15 to 30 minutes won't break you, but could make a big difference for your remote.
- **Less time between talks.** Consider splitting your remote's 1-on-1 time over multiple days, so you're guaranteed to speak with your remote at least twice as often. Or maybe have daily, or occasional, morning standup check-ins.
- **More avenues to contact you.** Consider establishing weekly office hours or a way for the person to have a virtual equivalent of interrupting you for something important (such as texting or calling your cell phone).

## **10. Set recurring check-ins to assess progress and, if necessary, tweak your approach.**

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Overlooking your remote might be what got you into this situation in the first place. Don't undermine any solutions you try by repeating that original mistake.

Instead, make it a point in your regular 1-on-1s to address both the original struggle and the solutions you try, so you'll be able to gauge progress and course-correct if necessary. Ask how the person is feeling. Is Mateo's co-located space working out? Is having Lena serve as a project lead making her feel more included — or just more stressed out by the added pressure of being in charge? Also ask whether you or the team have lapsed on any of your promises. Were there instances where meetings, celebrations, or information either didn't include your remote or didn't include him or her effectively?

## **11. Consider transitioning the person back to being co-located, transferring him or her, or letting him or her go.**

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The lack of in-person team involvement that comes with being remote isn't for everyone. This is sometimes true even of longtime remotes who now want to go back to the co-located life. People change what they need and what they're looking for over the course of their careers and lives.

If you and your remote can't find a way to manage the challenges around isolation and exclusion, it might be because there's not a solution at this time. More extreme options might include moving the remote to your or a satellite office, transitioning the remote to another

team where he or she can be co-located, or as a last resort, even letting the remote go. For these types of measures, be sure you're talking not only with your remote but also your manager and HR.

## **Was this article helpful?**

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