# Managing remote team members: 7 potential pitfalls (and how to avoid them)

By avoiding the pitfalls below, you'll be miles ahead of most managers — even if you're miles away from some of your direct reports.



"We're playing teleconference."

## Pitfall No. 1: Assuming building relationships with remote team members won't be any harder than it is with local team members.

## How to avoid it: Openly acknowledge and address the interpersonal challenges involved in remote relationships.

There's simply no getting around the fact that it's harder — a lot harder — to build effective relationships without the benefit of frequent in-person interactions. All of those random conversations in the elevator, spontaneous coffee jaunts and desk drive-bys you experience with co-located team members may not seem very productive. They are. They lay the foundation for trust, which, in turn, is the foundation for effective relationships of all kinds.

Being direct and transparent about the challenges involved in staying connected will help you set realistic expectations with your remote direct reports (and help you follow through, as well). Here's an example of what you might say when you first start working with a remote team member:

> "You're a really important part of this team, so I think it's worth taking some time to talk through the challenges of getting to know each other from a distance. What can we both do to make sure we build an effective working relationship?"

## Pitfall No. 2: Assuming technical and logistical issues are the only factors when deciding who can work remotely.

## How to avoid it: Evaluate key soft skills before letting someone work remotely or hiring a remote team member.

Just because the essentials of your direct report's job can be performed from afar doesn't mean he or she will *excel* from afar. Working offsite really isn't for everyone.

Smart managers carefully screen out job candidates or current employees who want to work remotely but aren't suited to it. Although what you screen for will depend on things like your management style and the culture around remote work at your organization, keep an eye out for basic characteristics and skills like the following:

- **Reliability.** This is an absolute must. Unless, of course, you enjoy tracking down elusive people in distant locations.
- **Self direction.** A lot of managerial course-correction happens informally. Say you're getting coffee in the kitchen and a direct report who's in there toasting an English muffin mentions an obstacle, so you make a helpful suggestion. Your remote direct reports won't experience that. How frequently will they struggle to figure out what the next step is — and when they do, will they take the initiative and reach out?
- **Killer communication skills.** Long-distance communication is less efficient and more expensive. You need remote direct reports who can articulate their ideas even when the videoconferencing technology is on the fritz; who can write clear, concise emails; and who can grasp what you're explaining without a lot of back-and-forth (don't forget that communication skills are about listening, as well as speaking and writing).

When you're interviewing potential remote workers, ask questions about soft skills like these. For example, to screen for self direction you could ask, "Please tell me about a time when you had to complete a project without much guidance. How did you do it, and what were the results?"

## Pitfall No. 3: Subscribing to misguided stereotypes about remote team members lounging around in their PJs, taking advantage of their "freedom."

## How to avoid it: Trust remote team members unless they give you a reason not to. Also, broadcast remote workers' productivity to the rest of the team.

Do some people who work remotely slack off? Of course. So do some who work down the hall.

Most remote team members, though, are working just as hard as everyone else. Maybe even harder. For remote workers, home and work can easily get conflated, which sometimes results in longer hours. Plus, managers aren't around to spot signs of burnout.

Managers aren't the only ones who succumb to the misguided "out of sight, out to lunch" stereotype. In a fascinating study summarized in the *Harvard Business Review,* researcher E. Glenn Dutcher found that although teams with a mix of on-site and remote workers were less productive than those with all on-site workers, it wasn't because the remote workers were slacking off. They weren't. It was because the on-site workers *believed* their remote counterparts were slacking off, which caused *the on-site workers* to slow their pace.

So what can you do? First, fight the temptation to be a paranoid control freak with remote team members. Focus on their performance, not the fact that you can't *see* them performing. And in light of Dutcher's study, you may also want to counteract any negative perceptions the rest of the team holds toward your remote teammates. You can do that by regularly communicating their achievements and progress to the whole team.

## Pitfall No. 4: Using distance as an excuse to avoid the fundamentals of management.

## How to avoid it: Trust that the fundamentals are "fundamental" for a reason.

Should you bother holding 1-on-1s with direct reports whom you can't meet with face-to-face? Should you give tough feedback even though it's even more awkward doing it over the phone? Does gathering the whole team for a video chat on a remote direct report's birthday really make a difference?

Yes, yes and yes.

Just because these tasks might be more difficult from a distance doesn't mean you should ditch them. If anything, you need to work *even harder* at the fundamentals given the challenges of remote management.

## Pitfall No. 5: Over- or underestimating the importance of technology.

## How to avoid it: Use technology extensively, but not as a replacement for regular (or at least occasional!) in-person meetings.

Technology makes remote working possible. On the other hand, it's just not the same as being together.

Effective managers of remote teams are comfortable with this reality. They're the first to jump on the latest communication tech tool and add it to their arsenal. They find out which ones work best for their remote direct reports, or mix it up until they hit on a good combination.

They might IM one day, post on an internal Wiki the next, and yes, even throw in an old-fashioned phone call from time to time.

They're also the first to allocate part of their budget toward monthly or quarterly in-person get-togethers. At the very least, they bring new remote team members to the mothership as part of their orientation so they can meet and mingle with the whole team — and leave plenty of time for the informal get-to-know-you stuff. They do this because teams are built on trust, and trust grows when people interact with each other, not screens.

## Pitfall No. 6: Expecting communication to "just happen."

### How to avoid it: Set clear expectations and guidelines around communicating with remote direct reports.

There's no need to wonder how much progress your remote direct reports made in the past week if you've agreed they'll email you updates every Friday, share their calendars and IM or call once a day.

Do you have to go rule-crazy? No. But agreeing on some basic guidelines will keep you and your remote direct reports from going just plain crazy.

You may even want to include the whole team in a session on team communication. People can share their communication preferences, which will make it easier for your remote direct reports to connect with their peers.

## Pitfall No. 7: Falling into the proximity-over-talent trap.

### How to avoid it: Delegate tasks and provide opportunities based on who's the best choice, not who's the most accessible.

A new project comes your team's way. You want to get going on it immediately. You walk around the corner to Lisa's workspace and are relieved to see she's free. You ask if she's up for a new opportunity and start describing the project. She's excited to take it on and says she'll start working on it that afternoon.

Back at your desk, it dawns on you that Mikhail, one of your remote direct reports, might have been a better choice. Oh well, you figure. It's already 5:30 on the East Coast where he's based, and he's probably off work. No big deal.

Actually, it *is* kind of a big deal — especially if you fall into a pattern of delegating based on little more than what's fast and convenient for you. The more you delegate to someone, the more opportunities that person has to win your trust. Before long, you could start believing

that a direct report you see regularly is the better choice for assignments or even a promotion, when really, he or she has simply had more chances to *get* better.

Long story short: Give your remote direct reports more than a remote chance to succeed.

For more on managing remote teams, see our article How to run a really good meeting with remote workers.

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