

Supporting Your Team Remotely



How do you continue to effectively lead employees from home amid a global pandemic that's creating anxiety and uncertainty everywhere?

Leading while practicing social distancing

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic workplaces across Australia and the world have seen major disruption and significant changes to the way they operate. In a matter of days, organisations across all industries have sent millions of employees' home to work remotely. As a result, managers have been put into the challenging position of leading virtual teams, many for the first time. During times of crisis people look to their leaders as a signal that their life will be OK and that there is some element of certainty.

Heightened uncertainty, social isolation, lack of structure, and constant change make the task of managing and supporting a team more challenging and daunting than ever before. For the foreseeable future, leaders will have to reset expectations for how work gets done and adapt their management style to this new context.

In this Tip Sheet we outline some ways to support the emotional wellbeing of your employees while meeting the business needs.

Provide certainty

Human beings crave certainty where possible, uncertainty fuels anxiety. The more you communicate and share, the less likely people are to come up with negative assumptions about what is happening in the business and their future. Communicate regularly even if you don't have new information to share. Maintaining transparency through a crisis with frequent updates is the ultimate expression of good faith, empathy, and demonstrating genuine concern for your team.

Manage expectations

Most teams are used to working together, in the same location, under the same conditions, with the same work schedule. With a drastic change in working conditions, managers must help their teams shift immediately to working in physical isolation. This might involve reassessing when and how tasks are accomplished and allowing team members to accomplish their responsibilities on their own terms. In other words, providing freedom and flexibility with accountability. Involve your team in agreeing on how and when tasks will be completed and make sure that everyone is clear on who is responsible for what. Schedule more frequent touch points to check in and share how everyone is tracking.

Stay connected

Just because you are not seeing your team face to face it doesn't mean that you can't communicate. Make your interactions frequent but brief. Research has shown that that shorter communication cycle times are more effective in building and sustaining morale and engagement. If possible, use instant messaging or video conferencing to stay in regular contact. Don't let an employee go half a day without checking in. Hold a team huddle twice a week, ideally by video, perhaps rotating responsibility for who leads it. Set the expectation that everyone be present and not distracted.

Set up peer support

Trying to attend to every team member's needs will quickly exhaust the capacity of most managers. To distribute that responsibility and encourage communication, organise team members into pairs with everyone assigned as a buddy and peer coach to their assigned colleague. This encourages shared leadership and creates an additional layer of support, reducing the risk of loneliness and emotional isolation. Ask the buddies to check in daily and assess overall engagement and wellbeing.

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Establish healthy boundaries

When working from home it can become habitual to start working from the moment your hand touches your phone in the morning until the late hours of the evening. This may help people feel connected and in control but it normalises overworking which may lead to burn-out. Model and encourage good technology hygiene, including only working from your designated workspace and not your bedroom, lounge room, or dinner table. Let your team know that although working from home they are not expected to be available 24/7.

Observe changes

It's harder to read the emotional cues of your people when you aren't seeing them face to face. Instead of relying on non-verbal data and body language, you have to rely on indicators such as text, voice, and video communications. Try to pay close attention to patterns in the tone of written communication; rate, volume, pitch, and inflection of voice communication; and any physical gestures in video communication. If you know your people well, changes in these patterns will help you identify early warning signs that might indicate that a team member may need additional support.

Assess stress levels

From the outset, make it clear to your team that your primary concern is their wellbeing. During regular check-ins take the time to monitor their engagement and how they are coping. To assess this you can ask team members two quick questions. First, on a zero-to-10 scale, rate the level of stress you currently feel. Second, using that same scale, rate your level of overall engagement. If they report a low number discuss ways to increase these and offer support where possible (e.g. EAP).


Role model optimism

Just like anxiety and fear, optimism is contagious. Research shows that leaders who demonstrate hopefulness and confidence in the future are better able to help their team members find meaning and purpose in work, especially under stressful conditions. Fear on the other hand, reduces initiative, limits creativity, and yields compliance instead of commitment. Try to model and encourage the sharing of positive stories – random acts of kindness, things you are grateful for - any positive news you can focus on will improve mood, increase hope and shift the emphasis from fear and uncertainty.

Practice self-care

Far more powerful than telling your people what to do is role modeling helpful behaviours. You are also a human being that is struggling with the same fears and uncertainty. Make sure that you look after your own health and wellbeing by maintaining exercise, social connection, a good diet and getting enough sleep. Reach out to your organisation early and ask what additional supports are available to you and your staff if anyone is struggling. Establish a peer support group with other managers in your organisation so you can share your challenges and what is working well. Be open and honest with your team, by being vulnerable you increase trust and encourage others to be open about how they are feeling.

Find out more

-  [Tip sheet 14 – Staying Mentally Healthy While Working From Home](#)
-  [Tip sheet 16 – Take the Panic out of Pandemic](#)

Visit the Aspect Mental Health website at www.aspectgroup.com.au/aspect-mental-health/ for more information about our best-practice tools and training to enhance mental health in the workplace.

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