Coronavirus Could Force Teams to Work Remotely

Executive Summary

With the coronavirus spreading, managers should be preparing for the possibility that their teams may have to work from home. This articles offers nine strategies for helping team members continue to collaborate effectively and meet deadlines. They involve spelling out the goals and roles repeatedly as circumstances require changes, making an extra effort to stay personally connected with people so they don't feel disconnected and lonely, and acquainting team members with each other's work environments and their constraints.



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With the growing threat of coronavirus hitting the United States full force, the prospect of having to work from home is becoming increasingly likely for a wide swath of workers. If that occurs, normal work patterns, modes of communication, and team dynamics will be disrupted. The increasing uncertainty and anxiety about the personal dangers from the epidemic and its impact on the economy will make the challenge of adjusting to these work changes even greater.

Here are some strategies that leaders can employ to ensure their teams continue to collaborate effectively and maintain momentum in the business.

Spell Out Goals and Roles

Teams that suddenly change work patterns — particularly moving from co-located to distributed — need to rethink how to accomplish their tasks and ensure that everyone understands his or her role.

Clarify and re-clarify goals and roles. The move to home-based working is a great opportunity for a team to revisit the basics in order to ensure everyone understands the team objectives, their individual roles, and how each person contributes to the outcome. Clarifying roles among the team helps people understand when they can turn to peers instead of the leader, which prevents the leader from becoming a bottleneck. This increased communication throughout the group also helps peripheral members stay engaged.

A disruptive event like coronavirus will generate new and competing tasks across the business. As a result, leaders need to continually clarify goals at the team and individual level to stay focused on key priorities. Watch out for an ever-expanding list of tasks. And when you do re-prioritize goals, think carefully about who gets the assignment and make sure the changing goals are communicated to the entire team.

Map skills and capacity. Most people today work on multiple teams and projects at once. In these volatile times, it is highly likely that another project that involves some of your team members will face an unexpected shock, which could affect your group's projects. To minimize the impact, think now about where you have skills redundancy built into your team or how to access capacity from outside.

Because of the number of new tasks that arise during a crisis, many of your team members are likely to be pulled in multiple directions. Don't add even more stress to your workers by expecting them to handle these tensions on their own. Make it clear that they can count on you to help manage the claims for their time.

Changing priorities may also require you to bring new resources onto your team, such as an operations expert to assess how the epidemic might disrupt your supply chain or a marketing expert to figure out how to launch a new product if a

trade show gets cancelled. Unfortunately, onboarding a new team member while everyone is working from home can make it difficult to build team cohesion and trust. So invest the time to formally introduce new team members, focusing on the personal and professional.

Emphasize Personal Interactions

People suddenly working from home are likely to feel disconnected and lonely, which lowers productivity and engagement. Leaders, especially those who are not used to managing virtual teams, may feel stressed about keeping the team on track. Under these circumstances it is tempting to become exclusively task-focused. To address these challenges, making time for personal interaction is more important than ever.

Keep everyone in mind. Inevitably, leaders have favorites on the team — people they are more likely to turn to in times of stress. Those tend to be people who are demographically like them — what researchers call homophily. Conversely, research in cognitive bias shows that some kinds of people will be "out of sight, out of mind": women, minorities, and others who are on the periphery of a team are less likely to have access to information or resources and influence on the team leader. To combat this tendency, make a list of the current core and extended team members with their photos and keep it in front of you while you're working each day to help you make more conscious decisions about allocating responsibilities and information.

Schedule regular meetings. Set times for the team to come together virtually; it is easier to cancel if the meeting isn't needed than it is to pull together last-minute conversations without creating additional disruption. If you only meet on an ad hoc basis, you risk excluding some people who are either too busy to join or are out of sight, out of mind.

C*reate the virtual water cooler.* Set aside time on the agenda for personal updates, the kind of small talk you might start an in-person meeting with. This preserves the sense of camaraderie. In addition, set norms that people should regularly call one another as needed rather than wait for scheduled meetings.

Humanize communication. Instead of relying exclusively on e-mail, which tends to limit the depth of debate, switch to richer, real-time media such as FaceTime, video conferences, web chats, or even phone calls. These forms of communication

are more personal, allow team members to read one another's emotions, and help to boost morale. They also improve decision making by more fruitfully bringing alternative voices into the conversation and allowing people to debate ideas more effectively and completely.

Normalize New Work Environments

Working from home creates new distractions and the potential for misunderstandings. The more the members of your team know about each other's environment, the better they will be able to make sense of one another's behavior. Teams often ignore the advice to orient each other, because the idea seems hokey or a waste of time. But the practice has a strong basis in social psychology: Fundamental attribution error is the tendency to explain another person's behavior as a personality trait while discounting the impact of situational factors ("He never speaks up, he's uncommitted" instead of "He's trying to stay on mute to avoid the background noise at home").

Take a virtual tour. At the start of a project, encourage each person to take a few minutes to show the team his or her home workspace and share some personal context. What are the possible distractions — like barking dogs, noisy passing trucks, or kids coming home from school? The aim is to help colleagues develop an understanding of each person's work context so they can be more sensitive to each other's constraints.

Acknowledge non-traditional workspaces. Michael, a millennial working in New York City, lives in an apartment with multiple roommates and doesn't have private office space for working at home. If some of his roommates are also working remotely, he is likely to face the challenge of people walking or talking in the background during video calls. Let Michael know you appreciate his challenge and are open to discussing alternatives like flexing work hours so that calls happen when it's quieter for him.

Keep your assumptions or stereotypes in check. Sarah, an executive participating on a conference call, received a text message from a colleague: "Mute yourself. We can hear your baby crying." She replied: "My baby is napping. That's Matthew's son you heard." The ambiguity inherent in in having team members working from home can lead to biased assumptions about focus and commitment to work.

Threats like the coronavirus will create disruption. But you can use strategies to respond effectively and continue to deliver against your business goals. Disruption also creates opportunity. Use this time to explore new ways of working and revisit old assumptions that will likely benefit you in the long run.
