

How to Manage Your Team Remotely and Maintain Productivity

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis, but an economic one as well. It has had far reaching implications on business survival, based on how agile they are, in the fundamental shift of how they operate. One such shift resulting from the pandemic, has been making working remotely a reality - a concept that many organizations, especially in Africa, had resisted until now.

According to Brookings, an international research group, many regions globally have observed that the number of remote workers has doubled since the onset of COVID-19. Ideally, a lot of work, time and effort would have gone into ensuring organizational preparedness for such an endeavor. However, organizations were not afforded this luxury due to the sudden on-set of the pandemic.

This has seen the business space experience many challenges that have the potential to negatively impact the performance of an organization. Managers need to understand these challenges and demands of employees, if the effective required systems are to be put in place to successfully survive the storm.

Individual Challenges

- 1. *Insufficient support from supervisors:*** Traditionally, supervision has relied heavily on face-to-face interactions between staff members and line managers to provide direction and support. This gap is now being felt as supervisors are not as readily available as they were in an office setting. Staff members therefore feel left to their own devices in solving problems and ascertaining the way forward in various situations. In addition to this, employees still need visible and active top leadership to keep the focus on the vision and strategy, and maintain cohesiveness and teamwork in working towards one goal. This remains a challenge.
- 2. *Access to information and collaboration:*** Information and support that was easily obtained from co-workers requires additional time to be obtained in the current working-from-home environment. With the largely asynchronous communication now in play, getting information is now dependent on when colleagues are available to attend to the different requests. This can lead to frustrated work relationships thus hampering collaboration.
- 3. *Distractions at home:*** The physical office and school set-up provides a natural boundary between work, school and home activities. These boundaries have collapsed in the face of COVID-19 where all three (work, home and school) happen simultaneously, demanding people to play two to three roles at any given time – employee, teacher, parent, etc. This diminishes the focus required to perform and excel at work.
- 4. *Technical infrastructure:*** Working from home demands that one's technical infrastructure is adequate enough to ensure consistent communication and access to organizational systems and repositories. Within Africa, key challenges in this area include consistent internet connection with sufficient bandwidth and continuous power supply. Unfortunately, on both fronts with the diminished

workforce and increased demand, providers in this space are facing challenges in ensuring the standard of services required are kept to support a nation-wide working-from-home model.

- 5. Isolation:** Isolation and loneliness are key characteristics of a working-from-home model if not handled properly, especially within this crisis where the transition has been abrupt, pulling people from the interactive office environment that they were used to. The impact mentally not only compromises one's health, but one's productivity level as well. Harvard Business Review points out that the impact of loss of 'watercooler' and 'cappuccino' conversations with colleagues is highly downplayed in a remote working scenario. These conversations provide a forum for release from the pressures of work and are a key component of a healthy working environment.

The good news is that these challenges can be and must be mitigated. As stated by Mckinsey, if done right and well-planned, working from home can boost productivity, motivation and morale. However, if not properly managed, inefficiencies and damaged work relationships could lead to demotivation and a deep dip in productivity.

The benefits of a properly designed working-from-home model are significant. They include:

- The model enhances operational alignment to strategic goals, enabling a 'well-oiled machine' mechanism.
- It builds leadership competencies through self-discipline in each individual. In addition, it has the capacity to encourage the right individual behaviors that underpin the company values. And we definitely cannot discount the reduction in cost due to reduce office space should it be adopted.

Organizations thus need to provide a strong framework in which employees can participate cohesively in the process and productivity cycle. And even though we were basically thrust into this working model, all is not lost. There are a number of key learnings that organizations can employ to enhance the remote working environment.

Organizational response to enhance effective remote working management

1. Technology infrastructure:

Organizations need to get the infrastructure right. It is true that the speed with which the shift to working from home happened denied organizations the opportunity to adequately plan for this.

However the situation can still be salvaged. A number of questions must be top of mind in ascertaining a robust infrastructure:

- Do employees have the required technology – laptops/devices?
- Can they access the organization digitally?
- Do the systems/applications support volume connections?
- Can the software support communication and collaboration?
- Is the security component addressed?

Employees must have the infrastructural support to communicate, engage and deliver within a safe, secure space. Direct managers have to quickly ensure that no direct reports have been left behind in this endeavor.

2. Communication and employee engagement:

“Communication yields engagement” (Adam Hickman).

Communication and employee engagement are key factors in organizational productivity. A remote environment calls for more intentional channels from leadership where frequent conversations are a part of working life. There are a number of ways in which communication can be enhanced online;

- Strive for daily check-ins – Starting the day with a 20 minute team check-in enables employees to understand the expectations of them and how they can best contribute to the team effort. It also enhances a sense of belonging which is a big motivating factor.
- Virtual town halls are a good forum to hear from top leadership and continuously align staff members to the strategic direction being taken. Leaders are able to demonstrate visibility and direction as passion, focus and a call to action are displayed.
- Encourage two-way communication and involvement where feedback from employees is sought. It is important to show empathy and an interest in how staff members are faring on in this new environment. What are their challenges? Where do they need support? What ideas do they have for improvement?
- Enable social chat forums that allow for light discussions and sharing among employees. People will thus still feel connected to the wider team and feelings of being isolated or alone will be lessened. Forums such as WhatsApp do well for this purpose.
- Determine platforms that enhance collaborative efforts. In addition to emails, video conferencing, chat forums and project software that allow employees to communicate and work on initiatives together must be a part of the wider infrastructure.

Engagement yields motivation and passion; a desire to achieve. Communication and engagement not only build team cohesiveness, but allow for employee focus on key strategic areas that build into the organizational goals.

3. Accountability:

“Remote or not, employees can only be accountable for what is expected of them” (Gallup).

This is especially true for remote workers in that the expectations may not be as apparent as in the office setting, where continuous reference is made to these expectations by ever-present leaders. Managers therefore have to be very clear and collaborative in communicating the expectations of employees, and to what extent their contributions count.

Performance measures and responsibilities have to be explicitly and succinctly communicated and interpreted. Furthermore, the periodic reviews have to be more frequent – monthly as opposed to quarterly, weekly objectives as opposed to monthly objectives and so on. The aim is to tighten individual accountability through individual ownership.

4. Supervision and management:

In these uncertain times, employees need, not only direction, but support from managers. Whereas previously, supervisors could get away with simply monitoring progress and performance of tasks (as employees had numerous places that they could quickly get support from such as colleagues), a lot more on the direction and support aspect of their mandate is called upon in the remote working space. Supervision competencies will therefore have to factor this in. On the other hand, managers find it challenging to follow up on individual performance of work tasks.

To mitigate this, clarity around the frequency and channels for communications should be provided by the managers. For example, should we have an early morning or end-of-day team check-in? Additional mitigations include incorporating a 10 minute weekly individual call with each team member to monitor progress and assess challenges. Have an end-of-week meeting with the team to review achievement against weekly objectives. Let the team know when and how they can reach you should they require support. These elements provide a platform on which management and support of team members can thrive.

5. Protect your workforce:

The COVID crisis has brought about a high level of anxiety where health concerns are at the top of everyone's mind. People are concerned not only for themselves, but for their families as well. There exists a sense of loss of control. We cannot discount the potential negative impact this can have on organizational performance. In a working society that has lived by the principle of 'leave your problems at the door' for so long, this poses a challenge for managers. Daniel Goleman implies that emotional intelligence is required during times of crisis. Employees take their cues on how to handle the crisis from leaders. Thus leaders need to acknowledge the stress and anxiety but provide affirmation, confidence and support. This is a time when empathy for employee concerns is called for from managers.

- Protect your employees. Working from home policies already demonstrate that you care for their health. Strengthen this by providing support through advice or otherwise, to ensure that they have sufficient updated information on the crisis trends and how they can protect themselves.
- Provide a wellness forum for emotional and physical support and encouragement. This can be done through counselling services, physical and nutritional direction, and personal financial and career development advice that will allay fears and enable a sense of gaining back control of their (employees) lives.

All in all, remote working has now become a way of life and is bound to continue somewhat in the post-COVID era. The extent to which we embrace it as leaders and organizations as a whole, sets the tone in determining our chances of coming out of this economic crisis alive. We need to be prudent. As circumstances dictate this as a mode of operation, organizations need to grab the opportunity to make the model work for them by giving it the best chance possible for success.

About the Author



Marilyn Were is an accomplished strategy and change management practitioner with over 15 years' experience in people led change, with emphasis in technology implementations in the Financial, Energy, Utilities, Telecommunications, and Manufacturing industries within the African Region, inclusive of Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Ethiopia. Marilyn is also a Partner with Afribusiness LLP and the Strategy and Change Management Lead.

AfriBusiness is a Management consultancy based in Kenya and Uganda that provides consultancy solutions to organizations in various East and Central African Countries