

# Remote leadership - manage output, not presence

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Under normal circumstances, performance management can be an excruciating experience for both managers and employees, which makes the process of assessing performance even more challenging when done at a distance in today's "new normal" of remote work.



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The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated trends towards technology-enabled remote work and meetings, teleworking, and automation, with a survey of South African firms finding that at least 38% of the country's active workforce were working from home in 2020, compared to 4% pre-pandemic.

Remote working is not expected to go away any time soon, as lockdowns continued into 2021 and employers in the same survey estimated that 33% of their employees would still be working from home in three years' time.

The impact of the pandemic and successive lockdowns hit business hard – with liquidations in the 4th quarter of 2020 up by 20.5% on the final quarter of 2019, and 2.2-million jobs shed in July-September 2020 as companies were forced into retrenchments or closures – and the focus now for those that have survived needs to be on sustainability in the “new normal”.

2020 for business was about adapting and surviving and hoping for a ‘return to normal’ but clearly that is not yet likely in 2021 and business is now compelled to focus on moving from survival to sustainability. Talking about sustainability implies a need to focus on productivity, and measuring and managing the performance of individuals and teams in alignment with the business's goals is central to this.

## Traditional methods no longer apply

Performance management has its pro's and con's, but most companies continue to use traditional methods of goal-setting, measurements, reviews and ratings. Research has shown that performance management is most effective when “managers have a clear purpose on why it needs to be done, and the purpose and process are communicated with employees openly and transparently”.

While remote work can become a situation of online meeting overload, the need for open communication does not always have to mean another online meeting or formal email. Casual check-ins on progress and how the employee is coping with remote work is sufficient.

Online, collaborative progress tracking tools can also be applied to track delivery of individual contributors, ensuring meetings are focused on qualitative discussions as opposed to activity tracking.

That kind of open communication is not easy to achieve in virtual meetings and emails but it is critical if performance management in a future of remote working is going to be effective. Research at the USB during lockdown showed that while employees experienced many positives in working from home, they missed the interaction and support of an office environment, and so it's important that performance management methods continue to be done in a way that promotes connection and interaction, rather than disconnection and disengagement.

## **Keep it simple and compassionate**

A simple and engaging process with fairness and compassion at its centre is a key element in performance management, particularly under the current circumstances where remote working presents employees with multiple social, family and financial challenges in addition to the pressure of working from home in an environment not always designed for work.

On the plus side, this 'new normal' of working arrangements is an opportunity to really focus on actual output as opposed to mere presence and visible activity in the office as a measure of performance. Trust has been found to be a key element in managing virtual teams, and is built by setting accurate, mutually-understood expectations.

Remote working arrangements are an opportunity for managers to build trust by 'letting go', not making stereotypical assumptions about working at home being an excuse to slack off, and showing that they trust their employees to get the job done without the control that applies when employees work in co-located spaces.

Best practice performance management systems should support achievement of the organisation's strategic objectives and specific goals, and answer the questions of "what business problem needs to be solved", what must be evaluated to show achievement of the business goals.

Managers of remote teams cannot afford to ignore under-performing employees whose lack of contribution negatively impacts or influences the team.

## **Here are some tips to managing poor work performance remotely:**

- Revisit expectations and make sure that they are clear and consistent. Clear expectations, priorities, standards and criteria for success provide a clear yardstick and fairness, especially in situations where an employee doesn't share the manager's view of under-performance.

- If the employee lacks skills or experience to do the job, consider support mechanisms such as training, mentoring or coaching. Ensure that you understand the exact source of the challenge and put support in place in partnership with the employee. Set up the support remotely – training, mentoring and coaching are ideally suited for online and virtual modes – rather than waiting for a time when everyone is working in the same office again.
- Don't make the employee feel attacked as they will be forced into defensiveness, making it difficult to provide support and turn the situation around.
- Avoid one-way communication – allow the process to be employee-driven by inviting feedback and finding ways for the employee to track progress.
- Enable the employee to take ownership of their own development and how to improve their performance, by ensuring expectations are clear and mutually understood, having regular, informal conversations and providing ongoing coaching.
- Invest in the person – understand their life goals and challenges, especially what may be their unique circumstances and challenges related to remote work, and show compassion. Understand their level of engagement with the work, team and organisation, and address problems they may have there.

Research furthermore shows that generally people avoid difficult conversations. Especially after a tough performance discussion, the leader may be tempted not to engage, to allow the employee time to think, but this brings a risk of the employee feeling overwhelmed and insecure.

Check in with your team informally, and encourage them to do the same with each other – don't 'ghost' your people. Managing performance calls for managing delivery, leading and inspiring people and coaching the individual.

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