



Manager's Guide to Leading Remotely Through Covid-19

Keep your team engaged and productive from home

PUBLISHED BY
HR Advancement Center
advisory.com/research
programinquiries@advisory.com

RECOMMENDED FOR
Managers of remote teams

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Lead an engaged and productive virtual team

Covid-19 has introduced unprecedented challenges for managers who may now be managing a remote team or a team adapting to ever-changing circumstances amidst the pandemic. Leaders need new tools to keep their team productive, engaged, and aligned.

Focus on what you can control as a leader. Here's what your team needs from you right now:

1. **Clarity** – Clearly communicate the most important priorities. In check-ins and conversations with staff, state what needs to get done, why, and by what date. Help your team prioritize, especially as you pivot to accommodate changing circumstances—and manage urgent requests more closely.

Tools: One-on-one check-ins, Team weekly check-ins

2. **Autonomy** – Be flexible about when and how the work gets done as long as deadlines are met. Staff need your encouragement to exercise autonomy when making decisions about work-life balance and their working preferences.

Tools: Individual working preferences assessment, Establish team norms for the new normal

3. **Connection to mission** – Remind team members of the “why” behind their work and recognize team members when they exemplify the organization’s mission and values.

Tools: Tips for recognizing staff, Connect the team to the missions through storytelling

4. **Sense of belonging** – Create space for team collaboration and feedback with effective and engaging virtual meetings and social events.

Tools: Weekly team huddle guide, Tips for recognizing staff, Virtual team-building activities picklist

Special Report: Virtual Onboarding Tool

Tool: One-on-one check-ins

Overview

Use your ongoing one-on-one check-ins to maintain productivity and morale. Focus on understanding how your team members are faring, removing roadblocks, and setting clear expectations about their priorities.

Time: 30 minutes

Depending on the size of your team, one-on-one check-ins may not be feasible. Consider taking a virtual rounding approach allocating about 5-10 minutes per team member to touch base. See virtual touchpoint questions below.

To prepare:

1. Ask for materials to review in advance to give feedback. Limit giving live feedback, especially if you know you need time to digest something first.
2. Send any materials to review for new projects you plan to assign.

During the check-in:

1. **Assess morale and support emotionally distressed staff.** While you shouldn't assume the role of a therapist, you should check in with your staff emotionally, invite them to discuss their concerns, and, when appropriate, direct them to additional support services.
 - a. How are you feeling? (*Note: Encourage them to label the emotion rather than just respond "fine" or "OK." – use this [feelings inventory](#). Do not feel the need to "solve" the emotion. Simply listen.*)
 - b. How have you been staying connected to the rest of the team?
 - c. **Optional:** Consider having staff rate their mood on a scale from -3 to 3 and explain their choice.
2. **Understand their workload.** Ask your team to create work plans for major projects so they are in control of their timelines and can report back if they are on or off track.
 - a. What are your top priorities this week—and how are you allocating your time across them? (*Note: Push team members to be clear about what they're working on and how much time things are taking.*)
 - b. What's something that's taking up a considerable amount of time? (*Note: Aim to rebalance priorities if things are overwhelming. Give staff permission to take less time on a certain project.*)
 - c. **Optional:** What's something you're working on that you're excited about?
3. **Give feedback on projects.** Tell your staff what they are doing well and where they can improve so that they can push their projects forward.
 - a. Share praise for something they are working on that they are doing well—even if it's small.
 - b. Offer feedback on how they can improve their work product. Ensure the feedback you provide is actionable.
 - c. **Optional:** Invite them to share their experience with the project, including what they enjoyed or what was frustrating.

4. **Assign new projects (as needed).** Take extra time when assigning new work to provide clarity on your expectations.
 - a. Explain what the project is, and any history or previous conversations that set the groundwork for the project.
 - b. Help them scope the work from the outset. Help them define a clear goal for the project. Talk through what they should not be doing. Set expectations about how much time they should spend.
 - c. Ask them to create a work plan for the project and keep you updated on how they are progressing.

Virtual touchpoints

If you only have 10 minutes or less with each staff member, ask these 3 questions:

- How are you feeling?
- What's your top priority?
- What's one thing I can do to support you with that?

Additional tools to support one-on-one check-ins

Compassion Fatigue Assessment: Compassion fatigue is a condition that occurs when caregivers are overwhelmed by stressors stemming from either the clinical or interpersonal components of their role. Individuals affected by compassion fatigue are unable to deliver highest quality care and are at risk for burnout. Our Compassion Fatigue Assessment tool helps staff recognize the visible and invisible signs of compassion fatigue, investigate the root causes, and seek additional help, if necessary. *(Note: You can use this to assess your staff or yourself.)*

Individual Stress Assessment: Identify how you typically cope with stress at work so you can recognize it and react productively. *(Note: You can use this to assess your staff or yourself.)*

Recognition Preference Assessment: This tool helps you assess your staff's personal preferences for recognition so that you can reward them in an impactful way. *(Note: You ask staff for feedback about how they like to be recognized, it's important you follow through and recognize them in the way they prefer. Otherwise, staff may feel like you asked for their input, but then didn't act on it.)*

Tool: Establish team norms for the new normal

Overview

As your team is working amidst a pandemic, you may need to revisit your team norms and make sure that everyone is operating from the same list of assumptions and rules to protect the team's time and maximize individual productivity.

Time: Approximately 30 minutes, depending on the size of your team

In a team meeting, have each team member share their answers to the following questions to help all team members get on the same page about flexibility and preferences. Consider sending staff these questions in advance so they can prepare their answers, or, depending on the size of your team, conduct the individual working preferences assessment with each team member before hosting this team meeting. During the meeting, go category by category, ask the associated questions, give staff a minute to contemplate their answers, and then ask each team member to share with the group. Record answers on a shared document throughout.

1. Protected work time

- a. When do you want to have a 'no meetings' zone on your calendar to protect your most productive work time?
- b. Would it be helpful to coordinate consistent 'no meetings' days or times of the day for the team?

2. Communication preferences

- a. How do you prefer to be contacted for urgent needs?
- b. What's the best way for us to maintain contact throughout the day for social or non-urgent communication (e.g., text group, chat group, email, standing 15-minute huddles)?
- c. Are there subject line abbreviations or other email practices we can all agree on to streamline inbox management?

3. Preferred working hours

- a. What hours of the day do you prefer to be offline to attend to your personal needs?
- b. How are you creating separation between the work day and your personal time?
- c. How are you building in time for breaks?

Follow-up:

Create a shared team calendar that outlines times that are set aside for meetings and times that are protected teamwork time. Encourage team members to block their individual protected time or OOO hours on their calendar and turn on their away messages during that time.

Ensure all team members have access to the shared document with team agreed-upon communication practices and each team member's preferences. Ask for commitment from all team members that these preferences will be respected.

Optional: Set team ground rules

Laying out a set of rules or operating principles to guide interactions amongst team members can help fuel productivity, collaboration, and mutual respect in day-to-day work. In order to facilitate an effective conversation in a comfortable setting, pose the following questions to the team, give them a couple minutes to write down their answers, and then have each report out. Keep track of their recommendations on a shared document, and have the team refine and discuss until they've settled on a final list. Consider asking staff to sign the list to demonstrate their commitment to honoring the ground rules to the best of their abilities. (Adapted from the [Center for Creative Leadership](#))

- Think about the worst team you've been on. What made the experience so terrible?
- Think about the best team you've been on. What made the experience so great?
- Based on those experiences, what values or ground rules would you recommend we stick to as a team?

To see an example, check out [Northumbria NHS Trust's Staff-Driven Code of Conduct](#).

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