

Help a Manager: How do I keep my team motivated and productive during this disruption?

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The COVID-19 pandemic is challenging managers in every field, whether their teams are working at home or are out providing essential services. We're all wondering, *How do we keep our teams engaged – and keep their work moving – during this time?*

We tapped our community of leaders for their best advice and here are the standout responses. (We've changed names for anonymity.)



1. Establish a regular touchpoint to keep your direct reports in sync as the situation evolves.

“Our staff comes in on different days and at different times. What’s most helped us work together as a team is having daily morning and evening meetings — to give people accurate information for their upcoming shift and ensure that everyone will be on the same page in terms of programming, expectations, and operations. These meetings include recaps of the previous shift, new information, and most importantly, an icebreaker or team-building exercise. People have been creative in modifying tried-and-true icebreakers to meet CDC guidelines for social distancing.

We’re a large parks and recreation organization running three childcare sites for essential employees who do not have childcare. You can imagine the rush of trying to put camps together with staff from all different levels at new sites at new times. We operate from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m., so there was a lot of adjusting to do! In the midst of uncertainty, these steadfast meetings have really helped bring our team together through communication and the reminder to always have a little fun.”

— *Jeannine, parks department manager*

2. Stay available to your team with regular 1-on-1s and open office hours.

“Before the pandemic, I managed multiple direct reports who worked remotely, but now it’s my entire team. Since I had some experience already, I standardized what worked well for me in the past:

- I have my camera on in every meeting — 1-on-1s, team meetings, etc. It increases the level of collaboration and lets my team know that they have my attention.
- I host open office hours two or three times a week. Since my direct reports can’t simply stop by my desk, I host video meetings for at least 1.5 hours each that any direct report can join to talk about whatever they need.
- Several team members who live alone are struggling to work in isolation. Some have started calling one another with video on and keeping the channel open for hours while they work. A lot of that time is spent in silence, but someone else is there and accessible if they need a desk-mate to chat with.
- I also lead optional resiliency trainings once a week. I am not formally trained, but I want to help people reframe their challenges. Many of my direct reports have said that dedicating time to focus on mindfulness and breathing helps them reset and that these weekly sessions help them deal more effectively with the volume of work and the stress of change and give them permission to be vulnerable.”

— *Cynthia, lead software sales manager*

3. If your team is working from home, make sure they set good boundaries — and take time off if they need it.

“Whereas before we had defined spaces for work and life, that is no longer the case for many of us who are suddenly working from home. It’s very easy to find yourself working more hours than normal, since many of the commitments you had are gone (kids’ sports games, after-work activities, going to the gym, etc.).

If you need to care for children and get your job done, be clear about your availability. For example, my boss is unavailable every day from 12 p.m. to 2 p.m. while she helps her children with schoolwork. If she needs to shift those hours, she lets us know by email. Work with your manager and team to decide when you’ll be available and how to contact you outside those hours in an emergency.

And the best way to stay engaged during this time is simple: Take a day off. Although you can’t go anywhere fabulous, just taking a day off can help reset your equilibrium and give your brain something to look forward to. You could spend the day finding new shows to binge-watch, cleaning, reading, or calling friends. It’s not so much what you do as what you *don’t* do. You’re reminding yourself that you’re human and your spirit needs a break from constant work. My attitude and motivation were dipping, so I coordinated with my manager to ensure coverage, took a Friday off, and came back on Monday reenergized and recharged.”

—*Macy, IT communications manager*

4. Make time for your team to connect as people.

“I lead a team that administers mortgages, and we’re experiencing historic volume right now. Throw in working from home, and it makes for a difficult time.

So, I’ve been hosting midweek virtual happy hours to give us a much-needed way to gather as a team, talk about things other than work, and break up a long week. We’re in meetings a lot together, but missed having chats about our kids, hobbies, lives, etc. It’s very laid back — like sitting at one of our normal happy hours. The only downside is that just one person can talk at a time!”

— *Angela, bank manager*

5. Stay flexible to accommodate a whole spectrum of individual reactions and needs.

“I oversee six schools that have had to transform what they do in brick and mortar operations into virtual environments.

Some of the managers I supervise are learning to reframe their expectations as we talk about how each person on their teams may be handling the new remote environment. For example, some people are effective at communicating remotely, while others are still finding their best mode of communication. Some can keep up with the rapid changes, while others need processing time that isn’t necessarily available. Some enjoy the increase in meetings, while others are feeling meeting fatigue. In addition to the new environment, people may be facing other challenges: being home with children, having technology barriers, or experiencing anxiety due to COVID-19.

To help direct reports who aren’t communicating as proactively as they could be, several of my managers have created task dashboards that include the date assigned and due date and a space for back-and-forth communication. Also, if I know someone is struggling with meeting fatigue, I consider which meetings I invite them to and whether they really need to be present for the entire meeting. The most important thing is to be patient. It can be frustrating when a direct report is not thriving, but it’s our job to support them. Now, more than ever, we need to be graceful and flexible with their needs.”

— *Bianca, adult education administrator*

6. Keep your team focused on their core purpose.

“I want to make sure that I’m keeping our mission and purpose top of mind for the team. *How* we’re getting there may have shifted, but our *why* — our purpose — continues to guide us. I keep that purpose as a consistent drumbeat in all communications — meetings, emails, etc. By being a steward of our organization’s purpose, I’m able to remind my team of our impact: delivering bright spots to our clients during a difficult time. This focus on impact not only helps motivate my team but also helps them achieve a greater sense of meaning and well-being.”

— *Anna, client stylist manager*

“I manage a group of nurses and rehabilitation counselors. Since they can’t go out into the field, they have to find ways to coordinate medical care over the phone for people who’ve been injured — all while dealing with changes in the healthcare system caused by the virus.

I emphasize how important my team members are to one another as colleagues and to the people they work with. They can and do make a difference. I let them know that their concerns are valid and they are not alone. I’ve also advised them to tap their colleagues for feedback, since everyone is in the same boat and experiencing similar anxieties. There’s always an opportunity to help someone during this challenging period, whether it’s an injured patient, a colleague, or a friend.”

— *Alastair, healthcare executive*

7. Support each individual in a way that shows them how important they are to your team and organization.

“I am blessed with a self-motivated team of automotive technicians that has survived several major life events in the past few years, including local wildfires, a hacking incident, and COVID-19 — which has led to a companywide reduction in staff and a massive reduction in available work. Almost everyone’s families are unable to work right now, so everyone has a heightened sense of purpose and cooperation. Most days, my team has incredible resilience, but every so often someone will get distracted by world events or interpersonal issues.

My best advice is to focus on your team and what matters to them to help them get through the day, the week, the month.

I regularly check in to ask about how team members are feeling, their weekends, their families, what’s relevant to them right now, and what needs attention. One of the guys just became a grandpa! Another just put a supercharger on his engine. I make a point to chat with each person (or make myself available to chat) at the beginning of the day, as well as several more times throughout the day for those who need more support.

No job is unimportant, and it's key for every team member to know they are important to the whole. I believe we are all forming stronger connections when we interact on a personal level, and this reveals untapped potential in each of us to meet the challenges coming at us — similar to the way Kevlar works in body armor. Each strand of the material is strong, but they're much stronger when woven together.”

— *Robert, auto shop foreman*

8. If your direct reports are suddenly underutilized, shift their role toward work that's important to your organization.

“The president's nationwide emergency declaration dictated an urgent response from the whole of government — including our office.

At first, I let my direct reports manage their own work assignments, but I found that there simply was not enough work to keep them fully engaged in the new virtual environment. So, I took the work that was being prioritized by our agency and began delegating key tasks and responsibilities to some of the team members who did not have a full workload. I gave them the opportunity to work as a team in a newly established working group to tackle the new assignments. I quickly saw people accept the work and not only engage all their efforts but also communicate about the work to the rest of the team and leadership — who promoted their work and its importance to the agency.”

— *Ernesto, federal government field policy manager*

9. Focus on your team's next steps — and delegate some of the responsibility for getting there.

“Our organization has convened multiple work groups to tackle the tasks ahead. Managers, including me, are acting as work group sponsors, but each group has an appointed lead who is not a manager. This has helped keep projects moving and teams motivated because they are collaborating with peers and have a sense of ownership.

One thing I've learned is that mistakes happen more frequently in this remote environment. We're moving 10 times faster than we normally do, and we don't necessarily have all the information needed to make informed decisions. *That's OK.* When mistakes happen or new information comes along, I work with my team to focus on what's next, instead of dwelling on what happened and who did it. We process the lessons learned and use the experience to inform our future decisions. We routinely update our processes. With so many changes happening in such a short time, the best thing we can do is keep moving forward together.”

— *Bianca, adult education administrator*

10. Track your team's accomplishments — and recognize them often.

“We use our calendars not just for setting meetings but also for tracking where we’re spending our time and what we’re accomplishing. The days and weeks can become a blur, and sometimes those little wins get lost. Documenting them helps people feel productive. It also helps management see what people are doing and not question whether they’re getting work done at home.

We recognize accomplishments on my team using the company’s Building Excellence program, where you can send a certificate to anyone else in the company. The person’s manager also gets notified, and the award comes with points they can exchange for gift certificates.”

— *Lynn, customer success leader*

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