

How to manage remote team members more effectively

It's only fair that you manage your remote direct reports the same way you do those who are co-located, right? Actually, that would be *unfair*.

Remotes' situation is different — and you'll need a different approach in order to help them thrive. In most cases, you'll need to work extra hard on your management fundamentals (like be even more proactive about giving feedback), plus make some special, remote-friendly adjustments. Here's how:



1. Have early and ongoing conversations with remotes around when they should — and shouldn't — act without you.

Remote team members often face a longer lag time when seeking your input. They can't catch you between meetings or swing by your desk to get a quick approval. And if you're in completely different time zones, half a work day (or more) could evaporate before you even have a chance to weigh in. If you insist your remotes wait for your input at every turn, you could kill their productivity. On the other hand, if you tell them to "run with it," they could inadvertently run in the wrong direction.

To avoid these potential snags, proactively run through some possible scenarios your remotes might encounter — for example, fielding a customer request that requires making an exception to company policy, or when a bug requires a quick fix without time for your review. Discuss each remote's competency and confidence in handling these kinds of situations. Be direct about your preferred level of involvement, too (e.g., *"Please go ahead and publish blog posts if I haven't provided feedback by the deadline"*). And come to agreement on the level of autonomy you both think is reasonable. For more, see [Clarify the level of autonomy you want direct reports to have for each project you delegate](#).

2. Proactively block off time to be more accessible to remotes.

Most managers are so busy they have a hard enough time noticing when something's going on with a team member who sits a few desks away — Jian-Yang is quieter than usual, Dana's complaining a lot to colleagues — never mind a remote team member who's far less visible. Unfortunately, the chances are greater that you won't see or hear about your remotes' challenges until they've grown into full-blown problems.

The solution? Don't just tell your remotes, *"I'm here if you need me."* Block off availability to *actually* be there for them — which may even mean being available at a time inconvenient for you, if they're in a different time zone — and explain why you're doing it. For example, you could:

- **Give remotes longer 1-on-1s.** Tack on an extra 15 minutes or more to help make up for the lack of spontaneous news sharing and conversations that happen when people share the same space.
- **Redistribute remotes' 1-on-1s over multiple days.** For instance, schedule two 30-minute meetings a week rather than one 60-minute meeting, so that there's less time between meetings and an extra chance to pick up on brewing issues.
- **Hold online-only office hours for the whole team.** Doing this online helps ensure that your co-locateds don't get priority simply because they can walk up to your desk. You could kick things off with a chat: *"I'm here for video chats for the next 30 minutes. Anything that you don't want to wait until our next meeting to talk about?"* If no one responds, you can always turn to other work.

3. Specifically allocate a bit of 1-on-1 time for casual chatting with remote team members — and probe if you sense issues beneath the surface.

Isn't chitchat a waste of precious time? Only if you overdo it. On the other hand, if you skip it entirely you're missing a great opportunity to build rapport and two-way trust with your remotes, signaling to them that you don't see them as work machines. Plus, asking a simple, *"How's it going?"* can provide a window into your remotes' emotional state.

Plan to spend at least the first five minutes or so of each 1-on-1 with remotes seeing how they're doing or learning something new about them. Also, be sure to share back a bit. You don't want your remotes to feel like they're being interrogated. If you get a curt, "oh, fine" answer but think there might be something troubling them that they're not sharing, ask follow-up questions (e.g., *"Can you say a bit more about that?"* or *"What are you finding most challenging about this task?"*). Better to uncover and address a small issue now than let it balloon into something bigger. For more, see [Make small talk that has a bigger impact](#) and [How to encourage direct reports to open up in 1-on-1 conversations](#).

4. Double-check your delegation decisions: Do you give remotes enough important assignments?

Research suggests that managers tend to give remote workers smaller, less important assignments, often unconsciously — regardless of the remotes' productivity and suitability for the job. Since co-located team members are physically closer, perhaps they seem like

the more obvious or convenient choice for important work. If you succumb to this tendency, assignment after assignment, you'll stunt not only remotes' careers but also your team's performance, especially if a remote is better equipped to do the work.

Make it a habit to compare the importance, complexity, and scope of assignments you plan to delegate to each team member (our [Delegation prep worksheet](#) can help). If you rationalize giving the bigger projects to co-located team members based on what's worked in the past, or if you feel too strapped for time to put much thought into delegation, consider: Are you doing what's best for the team, or what's easiest for you?

5. Make up for the sparse and shallow feedback most remotes receive.

Communication logistics can make feedback conversations with remotes easier to put off, especially when you have [redirecting feedback](#) to share — an activity that many managers dread and delay for too long, even with co-locateds.

Plus, remotes miss out on subtle feedback cues like body language. For example, a co-located team member might pick up on your crossed arms or other closed body language as a cue that you have concerns about the idea he or she is proposing. Not so with a remote team member (sorry, chat tool emojis are no substitute).

Given these built-in barriers to the amount and type of feedback remotes get, if anything you should make *more* of a conscious effort to provide ample feedback to them. Dedicate 5 to 15 minutes of each remote's 1-on-1 to [giving carefully considered feedback](#). You could also [set a quota for the number of times you give feedback to each direct report](#) to ensure remotes get their fair share (or even consider raising the quota for remotes so you're sure to meet their needs).

6. Frequently ask for remotes' input during virtual meetings.

High-quality meetings often have back-and-forth discussion, ideas that feed off one another, and the energy of full group participation. Ask yourself: Are your remote team members actively contributing to the creativity and progress of the team? Or are they just a face on the wall or an invisible voice in the speaker, struggling to jump into the conversation?

To be sure remotes get ample air time, you could assign them to lead a portion of your [meeting agenda](#) or use facilitation techniques to quiet other participants (*"Great ideas, Caleb. I'd like to be sure that those joining remotely have a chance to weigh in on the project now."*) and ask for remote team members to speak up (*"Emille, we haven't heard from you today. What are your thoughts on the project?"*). For more, see [How to wake up your meetings and get everyone participating](#) and [How to run a really good meeting with remote workers](#).

7. Help your remotes face and overcome professional-development disadvantages.

Your remotes aren't right there for impromptu coaching conversations. They can't pick up tips by listening to your top salesperson closing deals in the next cubicle. And they can't thumb through the professional development book you left in the lounge.

While everyone is, to a certain extent, responsible for their own development, that doesn't mean the disadvantages remotes face are all their problem. Unless you're the only manager in the world who doesn't want a smarter, better team, those disadvantages are your problem, too. Start by telling remotes the truth: Being remote really can put them at a professional-development disadvantage. You'll both need to work harder to make sure they get ample learning opportunities. For your part, you might:

- Make a point of weaving development-oriented coaching into your day-to-day interactions (see [5 coaching questions you can ask to drive your direct reports' development](#)) and giving remotes stretch assignments when appropriate (for more, see point No. 4).
- Pair them with a more experienced colleague who is interested in sharing his or her knowledge for work projects or even virtual mentoring sessions.
- Pass along intel about guest speakers who visit headquarters and other internal development opportunities that, for whatever reason, aren't promoted in a remote-friendly way.
- Suggest they seek learning opportunities that don't rely on their being on-site, like local meetups or online courses.
- Make networking connections and share lessons from your own career when it's relevant and potentially useful to them.

For more ideas, see [11 ways to help your direct reports succeed in their careers](#).

8. Advocate for your remotes so they are more visible to the rest of the organization.

In [one study](#), a group of Stanford economists found that remote workers at a call center were a whopping 50 percent less likely to be promoted than co-located team members — despite the fact that they were 13 percent more productive (and wanted promotions just as much as their peers).

Could you be contributing to this dreary statistic by letting remotes' hard work and aspirations go unrecognized? If so, you're not just doing them a disservice. You're also hurting your organization (talent is a terrible thing to waste) and even yourself (a strong track record of managing successful remotes makes you look attractive to the growing number of remote-friendly companies).

When a remote breaks new ground, or just impresses you, let your manager — and, depending on the accomplishment, maybe even the entire unit or department — know. Be sure to put the person's achievement in context to remind those who don't regularly interact with your remote of his or her value to the company: *"I want to make sure Wei-Lin gets the recognition she deserves — since she works remotely her contributions are not always as visible. I think we should consider her for a larger role when the time comes."*

And if promotions for remotes are rare or not feasible at your organization (perhaps for logistical or political reasons), make sure to clarify that up front with your remotes, when first interviewing them and later during career and performance talks.

Next: [How to help remote and co-located direct reports work as a team](#)

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