

How to Lead Remote Workers

Due to the Corona virus, companies are sending employees home in droves to do their work remotely. Honestly, I started freelancing in 1991 and then built [Cooke Media Group](#) around freelancers, so it's really all I've ever known. So, I do find it a bit surprising that so many leaders are panicking over the challenge of *how to lead people from a distance*. The old school leadership thinking was that employees needed to be somewhere the boss could see them and hold them accountable. But that meant there was no trust, and where there's no trust, it's tough to do great work. But the tables have turned, and it looks like a big segment of business, nonprofits, and churches may never go back to the traditional ways of working. But this is the future – it will change work in significant ways.

So, with that in mind, here's some tips from my decades of leading creative teams remotely (and in many cases around the world):

1. Get to know your people. Leadership expert [John Maxwell](#) has always said that great leaders “Walk through the factory.” That means they need to know who's working for them – from his or her top reports to the folks on the loading dock or the mailroom. But outside direct reports, I find that enormous numbers of leaders at churches and ministry organizations don't even know the people working for them. If you don't know the people working in the same building, it won't help when you work remotely. How well do you know your team? Don't forget that “chemistry” matters when working remotely. Good chemistry helps build trust which is the real basis for successful remote work.

2. Know the difference between “organizational” structure and “communication” structure. Organizational structure is important. Who reports to who matters, and when it comes to budgets, project approvals, and workflow, it can be critical? But *communication* structure is different and needs to be more free flowing. If the graphic designer is held up because his boss needs to sign off on the new logo, then his boss, then his boss, then his boss – then by the time it reaches the leader, it's not even close to what the designer had in mind. Make sure that when it comes to communication, anyone at your organization can talk to anyone else.

3. Be accurate about your expectations. When working remotely, it's easy to get off course. At Cooke Media Group I don't care when people work, but we do have clear expectations and deadlines. When you don't see people on a daily basis, even the smallest missed expectation can snowball. So, make sure everyone knows your expectations and is clear on delivery.

4. Get your remote workers the tools they need to be productive. Project management apps for teams like [Asana](#), [Trello](#), and communication apps like [Slack](#) or [Zoom](#) can be critical to keeping everyone working together no matter where they're located. Don't skimp when it comes to tools, software, and platforms for your team.

5. Make everyone feel welcome no matter where they are. The team that developed the [Trello](#) app is interesting because they when they have meetings they include everyone on Skype, Zoom, or Google Hangout calls. That means that even when some of the team is in the office, they still individually get on the Zoom call (even when they're in the same room) so everyone looks equal. Look for innovative ideas that keep everyone feeling equal and don't make remote workers feel like second class citizens.

6. Remember that it's not just about work. Don't forget to celebrate birthdays, special anniversaries, etc. Think of all the ways people create a community and come up with ways you can do that online.

7. When possible, schedule connection times. Even though they're working from home, try to design some type of schedule, so you have an idea when everyone is available to communicate, when they need privacy, etc. Remote workers can't hang a "Do Not Disturb" sign on their doors, and working from home can get bogged down as people mix their personal and business lives, so try to develop at least a few times in the day when everyone is on the same schedule.

8. Encourage employees to create an official workspace in their home. It's important to set up a unique space for work, get the right furniture, a printer, good WIFI, etc. So many personal issues conflict with working at home, and having a dedicated space makes it so much more productive. When I started out as a freelancer, it was important for me to get up, shower, and get dressed. I could have sat at my desk all day in my pajamas but being dressed somehow motivated me because it just felt more like "work." Plus, having a dedicated workspace lets the kids know that daddy or mommy is working and teaches them to respect work time.

9. Give the employees some flexibility. Family intrusions, unexpected emergencies, schedule changes – all happen regularly to remote workers. So do your best to give them some wiggle room and try to be flexible. This is one of the biggest trust builders when it comes to leading remote workers.

10. Finally – realize that this is the future of work. A very large group of employees will probably never go back to the traditional office life. So now is the time to think through what systems, processes, equipment, and personnel, do we need to make this work for the long haul?