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COVID-19 Has My Teams Working Remotely: A Guide for Leaders

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Individualization, expectations, communication are key for remote workers
- Managers need their leaders' support more than ever during this time
- Going fully remote may be your organization's new way to work

The novel coronavirus outbreak has put Italy on lockdown, closed schools in Madrid, shuttered the Securities and Exchange Commission's D.C. headquarters, turned New Rochelle into a containment zone -- and prompted business leaders everywhere to tell employees to take their laptops home at night in case a COVID-19 diagnosis suddenly turns the company remote.

If so, they'll join what *Time* calls "the World's Largest Work-From-Home Experiment," but without the preparation other companies have had. If your company is one of them -- or you think it will be -- this is what Gallup analytics reveals about managing a remote team.

Individualization is key. The best managers have always individualized their coaching to the worker, but doing so at a distance requires greater intentionality. Managers need to ask each team member to describe the conditions under which they perform best, their concerns about their workflow and their emotional response to the situation.

Managers in strengths-based businesses have a huge asset -- they can predict employees' reactions. Whether that means a driving need to complete projects, keep promises, maintain relationships or any other motivator, those traits are powerful ... and different for everyone. Managers will need to individualize to the person to get the best performance. A one-size-fits-all response never fits anyone very well.

Set expectations early and clearly. About half of all U.S. employees -- remote or not -- don't know what's expected of them at work. That's a bad beginning, and it'll get worse for employees sent home without good guidance. So managers must make expectations crystal clear: *X* is the work you should do, *Y* is the quality standard, *Z* is the deadline. Executives should provide higher-level expectations aligned with the company's purpose: We'll keep our customers engaged by doing *X*, we'll maintain our standards by doing *Y*, we'll fulfill our mission by doing *Z*. The more detail, the better.

But remember, fulfilling expectations requires equipment and information. Research from University of California Irvine professor Judith Olson found that the most successful remote work situations are those in which workers have similar work styles, know and like

each other, have technology that allows them to collaborate, and know how to use that technology. You may not have time to create great working relationships -- though you should try -- but now's the time to explore your digital options. That's how people will meet the expectations you set when leading remote teams.

Communication. Employees who are accustomed to working in-house may feel cut off from the resources, information or relationships they need to do their jobs well, so plan for more conference calls. It's OK to pad socializing into the timeframe; indeed, it may be vital for people who need lots of interaction to keep their energy up. Managers will have to be diligent about communicating productively -- coaching high performance requires frequent conversations, and there won't be chance conversations in the hall.

But *your* staff needs to hear from you too, especially as economic fears worsen, to maintain their trust in leadership. Keeping the lines of communication open, honest and broad is essential for productive remote team communication. Send emails or post videos about your reasoning, intentions and expectations. Make it easy for managers to know your thoughts and contribute their own.

Support your managers: A sudden change in the practice of management can be hard on managers. They may worry about disruptions to the workflow they're accountable for. Some may feel they have to be physically present to be good coaches, unsure that they can keep their remote teams engaged from a distance. Rather more negatively, there are still some managers who don't trust workers they can't see. All of them will have to manage workers in a new way, and fast.

So give them your support, both practical and emotional, during what may be a tough transition. Invest in management development and coaching ahead of the budget plan, and be affirming about the situation and understanding about altered deadlines. Just remember, your managers always need to know you have their back -- but never more so than when they feel insecure.

Looking Ahead

Gallup finds that 43% of U.S. employees work remotely some or all of the time, and many, many studies show remote workers are more productive and profitable than in-house employees. So don't worry -- telework can succeed spectacularly. Although your company will have to learn quickly, your people may perform at levels that surprise you.

But don't be surprised if they don't want to come back to the office.

Gallup research shows that 53% of employees say greater work-life balance and personal wellbeing are "very important" to them when considering a new job -- as do 60% of women, of whom 48% are actively looking for a new employer -- and that 51% of U.S. workers say they would quit their current job for one that allows flextime.

A huge proportion of workers already have. Gallup found that the number of remote workers grew by four percentage points -- representing millions of employees -- between 2012 and 2016, that workers are spending more time off-site than ever before, and that more and more industries are putting remote work policies in place (primarily finance, insurance and real estate, followed by transportation, retail, manufacturing and construction). "Remote work is no longer a privilege," *Forbes* recently reported. "It's become the standard operating mode for at least 50% of the U.S. population."

That percentage is about to explode, whether companies are prepared for it or not. So if you have to send people home to keep them safe, individualize, communicate and set expectations so your managers can coach effectively during a crisis. But keep this in mind: While COVID-19 won't be an issue forever, remote work will be. What you learn about leading a remote workforce and building a strong remote-work culture now will likely become best practice for your company later on.

Learn more about the changing demands of the workplace:

- [Watch our live webinar "COVID-19: Managing Your Workforce Through Disruption"](#) to get everything Gallup knows about disruption and other crises.

- Download Gallup's [State of the American Workplace report](#) for analytics and advice based on data collected from more than 195,600 U.S. employees.
- Register (for free) to get Gallup's latest issue of [The Real Future of Work](#), a webinar that delves into the most pressing topics facing business leaders.
- Read our latest bestseller, [It's the Manager](#), a collection of 52 of Gallup's most important discoveries from decades of research on the science of management.

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