



Effectively Manage (and Empower) Remote Teams

Re-imagining how managers, employees, and teams communicate and collaborate in asynchronous ways would create the right environment for everyone to succeed.



Ben Stroup

Problem: Traditional management practices were implemented before location-independent work became normal. Thus, managers are unprepared for changes to systems, workflows, and processes that would otherwise ensure success.

Opportunity: Re-imagining how managers, employees, and teams communicate and collaborate in asynchronous ways would create the right environment for everyone to succeed.

Resolution: Equip middle and executive managers with the knowledge, tools, and disciplines required to manage toward outcomes instead of productivity. Further, make a shift in metrics in order to ensure the right measures encourage new behaviors.

Leading and managing remote teams does not invalidate traditional management practices and disciplines. Rather, it re-invents them. If you're not managing well in non-remote settings, then remote management will amplify where you're falling short. Too often the conditions and circumstances of work (such as time zone, geography, and personality) are offered as evidence of why remote work isn't as effective or impactful as non-remote work. The real culprit, though, is the failure to adapt modern, industrial practices into a location-independent context.

One of the most common management idioms I hear is, "If I can't see you, I can't manage you." That might have been true in decades past. But no longer does that statement reflect today's business reality. It would be more accurate for those leaders to say, "If I don't see you, I don't know how to manage you." If managers can be vulnerable about their comfort zones, it will provide the humility necessary to shift habits and practices to enable a more dynamic and agile workforce that is focused on finding, deploying, and supporting the best talent to solve the biggest challenges.

Working Remotely Is Rapidly Being Normalized

I know my perspective is a little different than others who have been in the workforce for more than eighteen years. But for me, there isn't a time in my professional life when I wasn't working remotely to some extent. My first real professional job out of college was calling executives and selling them software that averaged \$50,000 to \$150,000 in cost. I learned how to manage the complex sale without ever meeting an executive in person. That was a very formative process that provided an approach to business that continues to shape my work today.

Given the fact that I cut my teeth in corporate sales and marketing, I learned that:

1. Results matter more than effort.
2. Outcomes matter more than activity.
3. Goals shape commitments and productivity.

This, perhaps, has given me a leg up on others who were managed differently. Over the years, my managers cared little about how much time I was in the office. In fact, some felt that if I was in the office, I wasn't with prospects. And at the end of every month, quarter, six months, and year, no one wanted to hear how long I worked, how hard I tried, or how much I had hoped for something. The cold, hard reality of objectives, results, and outcomes were the only things that mattered.

Just as everyone is not cut out for sales, not every manager or employee is cut out for remote work. To be effective, you must have highly skilled managers and trusted employees. But this should not be the exception. Instead, it should be the rule. If you can't manage someone you don't see, it probably means you're not managing them at all. And if you can't trust someone you don't see, you probably don't have the right employee either.

What It Takes to Effectively Lead and Manage Remote Teams

Communication. You must be incredibly clear about what you say and expect. And it must be documented for future reference. In remote settings, overcommunicating is always best.

Co-creation and collaboration. These are essential skills. Don't just tell people what to do. Provide context for the outcomes and results you expect, the constraints you're dealing with, and the risks you anticipate. Then get their feedback and input, adapting whenever, wherever, and as often as necessary.

Technology. If you are still passing around interoffice memos in paper folders and logging onto faceless conference calls, you're in for a world of change. Learning how to video conference, share documents, use cloud storage, and manage projects, processes, and stages is essential.

Project Management. Break everything you're doing down into projects, milestones, and checkpoints. You should never be more than five to seven days away from knowing if you're on track or off track. This will help you adapt ahead of a crisis.

What Management Habits Are Required?

Document outcomes and results. Your activity matters little if you miss your targets. Know your leading indicators and lagging indicators. Revisit and measure them regularly.

Conduct regular 1-on-1s with your team. This may vary based on how many people you're managing. But you should not go much longer than two weeks between check-ins. These should be no longer than thirty minutes, because anything longer indicates you need more clarity somewhere else. You should be dealing with exceptions only.

Conduct weekly team meetings. These are status updates and should last no longer than an hour. You're working from a previously agreed to plan. If an item requires more than a few minutes of conversation or is contextual to one or two team members, take it offline.

Proactive intervention. If you think something is off, don't guess or wait to see if the situation works itself out. Engage the people impacted as soon as reasonably possible. Then take the necessary steps to resolve what you perceive to be a problem. This is also true when you need to act ahead of your team to make it possible within your organization for them to be successful.

What Team Member Habits Are Required?

Consistency and follow-through. If results matter, then actions will reveal if a team member is engaged or not. Disciplined execution is a must-have characteristic for remote team members.

Ownership. You can't teach this behavior or incentivize it. If a team member doesn't own what they are responsible for delivering, they will consistently underperform.

Communication. This is a two-way street. As much as this is the responsibility of management, it is also the responsibility of the team member.

Accountability. You need to deliver on the outcomes and results you can directly impact. You can't control what others do, but you can control what you do. The best employees always find a way to get it done, and they don't settle for excuses.

What Next?

If you're reading this and realize your managers can't operate in this environment, develop a learning plan to get them there. Have honest conversations with the laggards, and don't be afraid to make personnel changes when necessary. If you're a manager and realize a team member or two isn't exhibiting the habits above, it's on you to resource them for success and hold them accountable to results. If not, it's time for a change.

Stop blaming remote work for a persistent failure to deliver on results. A location-independent approach to staffing means you can access the right talent wherever they are in the world. It means you can stop investing in corporate office space (large or small) and repurpose those dollars into technology, systems, processes, and people that will accelerate the capacity of teams to achieve more—and do it more profitably.

It's time to let go of our industrial management tendencies and embrace the new reality of work. Remote teams often outperform their non-remote counterparts, because what is required to be successful in a remote setting requires a higher caliber of manager and employee. So a natural byproduct of skilling up for a remote workforce means you are, essentially, future-proofing your people and systems for a more dynamic and agile business environment that is ready to manage through what is expected to be a decade of persistent disruption.

About

Ben Stroup is Chief Growth Architect and President at Velocity Strategy Solutions where he helps leaders design, develop, and deploy smarter business growth strategies. Ben is a futurist, disruptor, and data champion. He leads a team that takes a structured learning approach to business challenges, which allows them to assist leaders in bridging the gap between ideas, innovation, and revenue—taking ideas from mind to market.

Velocity Strategy Solutions is an on-demand, next-generation business strategy and management consulting firm which provides clients with a relentless focus on data, execution, and results that positively impact the bottom line. Velocity delivers integrated people and revenue strategies combined with a disciplined approach to growth architecture that elevates the capacity of leaders, teams, and organizations to succeed and win more.