

Leading From Afar

BY SARAH FISTER GALE

The chance to work remotely is an attractive perk, but managers have to adapt their leadership style if they're to keep these workers productive and engaged.

Offering remote work options has become increasingly common at companies that want to attract and retain the best workers regardless of where they reside. A 2015 Gallup poll shows 39 percent of companies currently allow some employees to work remotely, and a 2013 study from the social collaboration company Kona shows up to 70 percent of employees would like to take advantage of such options.

It's a perk that has few costs and many benefits. Remote work allows companies to source talent globally and attract top recruits. The Gallup poll shows these workers tend to be more engaged and to log more hours than their in-office counterparts.

However, these benefits aren't achieved simply by letting people work from home and hoping for the best. Remote employees require a different kind of management style if they are to be successful and engaged. "When an employee 'goes remote,' they often get disillusioned and start to feel cut off from the organization," said Mark Murphy, CEO of Leadership IQ, a leadership development and training company. "At the same time, employees still working in the office can feel resentful of the remote team, and suddenly everyone is unhappy."

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A Different Management Paradigm

Adapting to this new work environment can be difficult for leaders who are accustomed to managing face-to-face. But if they don't adapt their style to accommodate remote workers' needs, it will affect their short-term productivity and their long-term plans to stay with the company.

"A lot of managers think that if their people start working remotely, it will save them time, but that's a myth," Murphy said. "They still need to interact with those employees, and they have to be a lot more conscious about how they do it."

The remote work environment can test a manager's ability to lead, and will often determine how effective and connected these workers are. Gallup found that managers account for at least 70 percent of the variance in employee engagement, and when employees have little other contact with the company, that manager becomes their lifeline.

"When employees go remote, the manager's job changes from director to facilitator," said Chris Wiborg, director of collaboration and managing remote workers for Cisco Systems Inc.

Cisco provides its employees with the latest technologies to stay connected from wherever they work. But technology alone isn't enough to make these employees feel engaged with the company.

To create a thriving remote work culture, Cisco managers had to change their focus from time on the job to outcomes. Outgoing CEO John Chambers helped to drive that culture change, making it a priority to enable Cisco employees to work from wherever they are most productive. "He pushed that philosophy down through the ranks," Wiborg said. "Now it's who we are as a culture."

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One of the most successful features of the remote work culture at Cisco is regular meetings. Leaders are encouraged to host regular team meetings and all-hands announcements that people can attend in person or virtually using webcams so they can interact face-to-face with other employees, wherever they're located. "These meetings create the binding element that holds the company together," Wiborg said.

In addition to organizational changes, managers may need tactical training on how to manage these remote employees, and make sure they feel connected to the business, said Jenny Dearborn, chief learning officer at software company SAP. "If you leave people to their own devices, the chance they will learn these skills is low. A lot of people would fail, and there would be a lot of casualties before they got it right."

Appropriate development interventions will teach managers how to identify which people and roles will work best in a remote setting. "It turns out the people who do the best job working remotely aren't loners, they are the natural connectors," Murphy said.

Because almost every job has interdependencies, remote workers have to be good at actively connecting with their teammates and keeping people updated on their progress — even if their teammates are halfway around the world.

At SAP, managers are taught how to ask behavioral interview questions, such as "tell me about a great day at work," or "describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills," to tease out whether an employee would be a good fit for a remote position.

"You want people who are confident working independently, proficient in the use of remote tools, and articulate in their communication skills," Dearborn said.

Then, once the remote position is confirmed, managers need tools and training on how to guide these employees. Dearborn said at SAP, those skills are built into the foundation of the leadership curriculum. Her group offers three specific courses — which cover topics such as communication and team building strategies, and how to use technology to stay connected and foster engagement across the team — for managers on how to build and manage virtual teams.

The traditional leadership training program also includes modules on how to effectively manage remote workers. "This way everyone goes through some training on managing remote workers, even if they don't seek out a specific course on the topic," she said.

Meeting Expectations

Companies also need to help managers understand how to track and report on remote teams performance, said Rock Anderson, chief people officer for Cox Automotive, a global provider of automotive products and services, and owner of Auto Trader the online car-buying marketplace, in Atlanta.

To make sure remote employees have a long-term view of their career at Cox, Anderson's team offers training for managers on how to set expectations and review their performance on a regular basis.

The human resources managers also work closely with business unit managers to be sure they provide

Metrics Go the Distance

By Kate Everson

When distance makes it hard for managers to observe their remote employees' performance, measurement helps them keep an eye on out-of-site workers.

"Whether someone's sitting in my call center or sitting in Des Moines, Iowa, I should have a good metric to measure whatever activity or behavior I want to drive," said Adam Ochstein, founder and CEO of StratEx Partners, a human resources services company.

At StratEx, software tracks the number of phone calls salespeople make, the quantity and quality of emails they send, how many meetings they attend and closed deals. Ochstein said many of StratEx's project managers work remotely, so their managers deploy programs that look at similar statistics.

Learning leaders can work with front-line managers on how to use communication tools to get the right measurements for their employees' performance by setting up an agenda and protocol of what they should ask and monitor, Ochstein said.

For example, managers need to know that reaching out to clients to get feedback should not be done from a micromanagement standpoint. Instead, they should open the conversation by saying, "We're a collaborative organization, and I'd like to know how the meeting went."

They also should know how to use engagement surveys, as well as how to use multiple methods to reach out to employees. StratEx uses video, email, periodical face-to-face meetings and its own tool called Shoutout that combines notification and collaboration functions in a social media-style program.

Every employee might not be on board with using the newest technology to communicate, however. The average remote employee is 49 years old, according to Global Workplace Analytics' 2011 "State of Telework in the U.S." report — an age group potentially not as interested in the next big social network.

Managers also have to be flexible in how they do their jobs, said Gregory Andrews, senior vice president of consulting firm Corporate Synergies Group. That includes collecting measurements in a way that's not intrusive and doesn't detract from an employees' work.

"It's really front-line manager training that teaches managers how to delegate, trust and empower the people working for them," Ochstein said. "Either managers are good at that or not good at that. The ones who are good at that are good whether the employees are sitting in their office or in New York City."

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remote workers with training and career development, including access to online learning modules on how to use remote technology, such as Cisco WebEx and SharePoint; and biannual performance reviews.

Anderson said the HR team is an added safety net for remote workers and their managers. "It's so important for the HR and learning teams to stay aligned with the business leaders and make sure we listen to their needs," he said.

Those needs don't end once a course is over. When employees work remotely, managers can feel isolated too; it's important to provide them with networks and support structures to stay connected, Wiborg said. Cisco does this by creating online manager forums, where company leaders can network and share best practices on things like managing remote employees.

If managers don't adapt to accommodate remote workers' needs, it will affect their short-term productivity and their long-term plans to stay with the company.

These forums can help individual managers solve problems, and create a space to crowdsource ideas that can be adopted companywide.

For example, after several Cisco managers discussed how they moved from biannual performance reviews to providing more frequent real-time feedback to remote workers, HR adopted these more frequent "sync-ups" as a formal performance management practice. "You can learn a lot from the collective wisdom of your peers," he said.

Stop by the Virtual Watercooler

Finally, one cannot forget the social aspect of leading remote teams. Fostering personal relationships is a critical component, and it should be a core part of the management development process, said John Drew, vice president and managing director at Kelly Services Inc., a global outsourcing and consulting services company, which ranked fifth on Flex Jobs' 2015 Top 100 Companies With Remote Jobs list.

Kelly encourages managers to take advantage of tools such as Chatter, the social media platform where

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team members can share best practices and celebrate teammates' success stories.

"It's a great way to acknowledge the accomplishments of remote workers to the whole company," Drew said. He also regularly sets up a virtual coffee room using SharePoint, where employees come together to talk. "That's a very important part of our process because it creates opportunities for remote teams to socialize."

Cisco uses similar strategies to keep teams engaged. "You don't have serendipitous watercooler time when your team works remotely, so you have to consciously make it happen," Wiborg said.

To foster more cross team collaboration, Cisco sets up networked webcams in break rooms, so an employee grabbing coffee in Oslo can chat with a colleague in San Francisco. "Those interactions are when the aha moments happen," he said.

At SAP, Dearborn hosts Friday lunches on Google Hangouts, where the only rule is that employees can't talk about work. "You have to teach managers to be deliberate in creating these social situations, because you can't just go to someone's desk and ask them to grab lunch," she said. "If you don't force good habits, they won't take hold."

For many managers the first foray into managing remote teams can be fraught with fears and uncertainties. A common concern is that employees will slack off if no one is there to watch over them. It turns out the opposite is more likely to be true.

The aforementioned Gallup poll survey shows remote workers log an average of four more hours per week than their in-office counterparts, and often have a hard time stepping away from work, when it's right there beckoning to them from the next room. In those cases, managers need to be able to identify workers who burn the candle at both ends, and step in if it becomes a problem.

At Kelly Services, if Drew sees a team member working all hours, he'll schedule a private one-on-one meeting to talk about the importance of re-energizing and offer training on how to set boundaries.

He also may encourage them to take time off to recharge. "Some people feel guilty when they aren't working, so you have to help them find the balance," he said.

If someone is slacking off, managers need to be able to have that conversation as well. "It doesn't matter if you are remote or in the office, it goes back to the concept of trust," Wiborg said. "If you trust people to do their job, let them do it. Once you set them loose, you will be amazed at what they can do." **CLO**

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leadership role. "If they're overseeing employees from three different countries, they have to be familiar with three different cultures," Wharton said.

When clients take on overseas assignments, OI Global Partners matches those clients with coaches from that part of the world who can provide the necessarily cultural development.

The same goes for clients who are not actually relocating but might be taking on a more global leadership role. "If they're overseeing employees from three different countries, they have to be familiar with three different cultures," Wharton said.

Similarly at Qualcomm, Tsoulos said employees transitioning into global roles are typically matched with a mentor familiar with the country where the job is located, whether that be someone within the company or an external coach.

"We really try and target their development individually," Tsoulos said. "What's your specific position overseas, what country will you be in, what are your roles and responsibilities? We try to tailor more individual development plans for those people."

However, because Qualcomm rarely sends large groups of people overseas at one time, Tsoulos said as of right now, they are not offering any formal global development — so employees are exposed to cultural coaching through that mentorship program only after they have already been assigned to a global role.

Having himself been placed into an overseas position early in his career without much of a global leadership education, Golding said he believes making this sort of development more widely available would be hugely beneficial to the workforce as a whole.

"I worked for large global companies, and we had programs for teaching people like language prep and those kinds of things. But I know from personal experience having to work overseas what it's like to not be prepared for some of the things I needed to think about," Golding said, referring to his time abroad as an "eye-opening" experience. "I would have loved to have some of these tools."

And in the context of what is, after all, an increasingly global market, those leadership tools are only going to become more relevant as time goes on.

"If we go deep enough in most organizations, we'll find that we're partnering with global suppliers, we're partnering with customers who are global," Golding said. "It's a pretty key skill for folks to get in touch with sooner rather than later if they're planning on a long leadership career." **CLO**

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