Washoe County Guide: Effectively Managing a Remote Workforce

Guide for keeping a Remote Team focused, productive, and engaged
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Executive Summary

The purpose of this guide is to help supervisors and managers with effective practices for successful management of a remote or virtually based team. Experienced remote team leaders and professionals who are new to their remote supervisory role will find these suggestions handy for keeping remote team members on track and productive. These recommendations are very concrete, actionable, and applicable for remote team management functions across many departments.

Who is this Guide for?

This guide is intended for supervisors and managers looking to increase their remote team members' efficiency, accountability, and professional satisfaction. These best practices will enable them to:

- Build stronger rapport with individual members of their virtual team,
- Keep focused on organization, department and team goals and objectives, make sure they are clear and specific,
- Make sure team members are empowered for strong performance and career development,
- Boost worker morale and job satisfaction within the team setting, and
- Ensure the remote team's work process is timely, efficient, and aligns with the in-office team.

What to Expect in this Guide?

Supervising a remote workforce can bring up challenges in team cohesiveness, communication, and productivity not normally encountered in a traditional workplace environment. It is therefore necessary to adapt measures addressing these challenges and keeping remote work collaborations fluid.

But the question of "how to do so" may be a driving force here. How, in concrete terms, do you effectively manage a remote team for best results?

In this guide, Human Resources will provide best practices for effective management of a remote team, which can be valuable for experienced and newer supervisors alike.

Practices for Effective Management

1. Make Sure to Identify the Right Jobs

Naturally, the first step is identifying the right jobs suitable for remote work. After all, successful remote work teams are made up of jobs and people best suited for their work roles and responsibilities.

In the case of a remote working environment, this reality takes on further definition. Not every job is suitable for remote working and not every person is up to the task of working alone. Also, some job tasks cannot be done remotely, and some professionals perform better in a structured, physical workplace over a virtual work experience, which places a huge premium on independence and responsibility. For best results, it is imperative to choose the correct job and the right people who are up for this challenge and capable of working independently.

The manager and employee will discuss current job responsibilities and determine what tasks are appropriate for remote work arrangements and which ones are not, and how will they be accomplished. Such factors include the nature of the work which will be performed, including the need for, and amount of interaction with the public, co-workers, and subordinates required by the position. The manager will take into consideration the employee's work performance.

The department head makes the final decision as to who will be assigned to remote work based on the job position requirements and applied to all team members fairly. Remote work should not be a reward or punishment. The decision should incorporate the employee's input.

2. Ensure Your Remote Team Members' Understanding of Expectations

In a virtual work setting, the importance of having clear goals, expectations, and

objectives early and often cannot be overstated. It is much easier for a remote team to achieve what is expected of them when everyone is given clear guidance.

From the beginning, it is optimal to be accessible and be sure to articulate your priorities, milestones, performance goals and more. Outline each team member's availability and ensure you can reach them when needed. Make the team calendar available to all team members.

Familiarize yourself with the Telecommuting Policy. Complete the Telecommuting Work Agreement Form. Draft a work plan. Review the following questions when creating a work plan:

- What routine responsibilities/tasks cannot be fulfilled while working remotely and how will that impact operations or other people?
- What routine responsibilities/tasks require regular communication and collaboration with others?
- Often employees experience fewer interruptions while working remotely. Are there any special projects or tasks that the employee can work on while working remotely?
- What reoccurring events or meetings are scheduled; will they be accessible using technology?
- Remote work may provide the perfect opportunity for an employee to accomplish a few development goals. Are there any developmental goals that can be worked on at this time?

Be clear about your expectations with staff for maintaining their current work schedule or if needed, consider a flexible schedule based on operational needs. The manager and employee must agree to a work schedule. During the agreed upon work schedule, the employee shall only perform County work and is required to seek prior approval for any change in schedule, overtime, or leave of any kind.

Some expectations for business protocol can include:

- When to work – hours, days, hybrid schedule (in-office on specific days or as needed), 5/8's or alternative work schedules, flexibility in scheduling. Establish clear parameters to insure work/life balance.

- How to apply for and calendar time off – especially important to clearly define what constitutes sick time or Worker's Compensation leave.
- Performance standards for professional conduct – what is the expected behavior and performance defined in the work plan.
- Which lines of communication should be open – an appropriate level of communication between manager and employee will be agreed upon in the work plan.
- When these lines of communication should be open – supervisors should tell staff how often they should send updates on work plan progress and what those updates should include. Supervisors should also communicate how quickly they expect staff to respond while working remotely and the best ways for the staff member to contact the supervisor while working remotely.

The employee may be required to maintain records of their hours worked and descriptions of the work they perform and to forward those records to their supervisor. Tracking the employees work progress, will calm supervisor's fears, and provide the employee with structure. Resist the urge to micro-manage.

And just as in the workplace, managers should keep team members up-to-date on policy and staffing changes. They also should model behavior around the hours employees work, such as establishing expectations around responding to any after-hours work e-mail and texts. This helps employees maintain a healthy work/life balance and prevents them from burning out which, without the physical separation between home and the office, can be more common when working from home.

After sharing what is expected, make certain to ask if there are any questions or concerns. It is important everyone be on the same page and addressing any confusion or lack of clarity regarding expectations from the get-go will reduce opportunities for misunderstanding or even underperformance.

Hold people accountable. Remote team members have less supervision. It is important to set them up for success by clearly defining actions, specifying what is to be completed, and establishing agreed upon due dates. It is also useful to mutually decide on periodic progress check points. The frequency of checkpoints will depend upon the difficulty of the task and the experience of the person. If,

on occasion, a team member does not follow through on a commitment, then do not berate the person. Rather, engage in problem-solving by encouraging the person to think about what they can do to get back on track, how they might prevent this problem from recurring, and what additional help or support they may need from you.

In short, when your team members are aware of what is expected of them, they will be ready to perform according to those expectations and to be held accountable when they do not.

> 💡 **Bonus Tip: Document questions and answers as you go along**
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> As you manage your remote team activities, it's a good idea to take the individual questions that come up during the process and document them with the appropriate answers. Afterward, share these questions and answers with all your remote team and in-office team members. Doing so will keep everyone informed of what's going on and cut back on complications arising from worker confusion.

3. Schedule Regular Calls and Meetings

It cannot be emphasized enough—in a remote work setting, frequent communication is paramount! Regular calls and/or meetings will keep everyone apprised of what's been accomplished, any project setbacks, any important details related to individual worker responsibilities and duties, and other relevant information.

In this context, it is important to be well-prepared for the meeting beforehand. A meeting agenda should be shared ahead of time so everyone can prepare adequately. Keeping regular meeting minutes are also an asset, as the minutes can serve as a to-do list for the time between now and the next-scheduled meeting. Minutes can also help keep meetings efficient. They enable your remote team members to refer to them at any time and check what was agreed on. In turn, having minutes helps you avoid any unnecessary repeating of these points in future meetings and enables your team members to proceed with their work.

Meeting scheduling and timing are also of prime importance. Because time management is already a huge element of an individual remote team member's efforts, being on time for the meeting is critical. It is advisable not to postpone scheduled meetings, either. Aside from its role in virtual workplace efficiency, it is a measure by which your remote team member can gauge your respect for their time.

Determine which platform you will use to communicate as a team, clarify expectations for online availability, and confirm everyone has access to the technology tool(s) and support resources.

Adjust the length of your meetings. Instead of lengthy meetings, have short, one topic huddles. Set cultural norms with your team members that it is OK to take a five-minute audio-only break during a long meeting.

> 💡 **Bonus Tip: Hold regular meetings with an online meeting program**
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> When you host an online meeting, you make it easy for your remote team members to attend and participate. Online meeting software features, such as the screen sharing feature, can pay huge dividends in showing remote team members important information that needs visual reinforcement or demonstration.

4. Keep the Communication Lines Open

Having communication avenues open daily is essential. To answer any questions or concerns from your remote team, it is necessary to be readily accessible for addressing requests. TEAMS is an example of where you can quickly address worker concerns or inquiries. Other methods for daily communication can include telephone contact or e-mail communications. If you will not be available, be sure to let your remote team know.

The way you communicate is as important as what you communicate. Show empathy for the challenges your employees are facing, be understanding, and practice humanity. Make sure communication is tailored to employees' specific needs.

In your daily communications, encourage your remote team members to be innovative or forward-thinking. If they have a problem or new idea, they should not be afraid to reach out. Be sure to ask them what they are working on, each day.

Conduct regular check-ins. Start each workday with a phone, video, or instant message chat. Your remote team will be eager for connection and information and the structure will help everyone create a positive routine. Every other day, or even weekly, may be fine, so long as you are in contact frequently enough that your team members are in sync with you and/or with one another.

If you normally make daily rounds to visit staff at their desks, you can give them a call during this period. Maintain team meetings and one-to-one check-ins, altering the schedule, if needed, to accommodate any alternative schedules that have been approved.

Such frequent contact may at first seem unnecessary, however, if one or more remote team members are spending time on the wrong task, then that potentially could be many hours wasted. If it makes sense, encouraging team members to keep in touch with each other can be invaluable for additional points of communication, too.

> 💡 **Bonus Tip: Have Regular One-on-One Meetings with Employees**
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> With employees working remotely, you won't have the same moments to talk about issues as you do face-to-face. So, give more time to employees for one-on-ones, give them the time to contact you. Always turn your availability on (TEAMS) since your employees have no idea when your door is actually open. Give them one day in a week for one-on-ones to discuss their issues and you can give them your instructions. This will cover various important topics of discussions because of not being merely present in the office.

5. Be Sure You and Your Team Have the Right Remote Work Tools

Communication and collaboration between you and your remote team members are only as effective as the tools you use. A truly effective remote work team will have all the vital remote work tools. These tools can include e-mail, a file sharing capacity (e.g. shared drives), an instant messaging platform (TEAMS), screen sharing software (TEAMS, Office 365), and software or resources specific to your department.

The manager, technology services, and employee will review the physical workspace needs, equipment requirements, and the appropriate location for the remote work. The employee will confirm they have access to space conducive to performing remote work.

The supervisor will make sure the employee has access to technology support, is using an approved VPN, and enhanced data security while working remotely. The employee agrees to maintain a working telephone voice line to make and receive work related telephone calls as well as working internet service. The supervisor should ensure the employee knows how to access their voicemail from home or set up call forwarding.

The dedicated workspace should be quiet, clean, and safe with adequate lighting and ventilation. Employees are expected to maintain their home workspace in a safe manner, free from safety hazards.

It is advisable you and your team remain up-to-date in your communication technologies. Testing them so they stay at performance standards is ideal, as well. Communication technologies that should be "up-to-speed" include hardware and software alike. After all, it can be frustrating to do something like a TEAMS call with someone who does not have a working microphone!

6. Promote a Positive Work Environment: Build and Maintain Trust

When managers cannot directly observe work, they tend to monitor and follow-up on remote team members more than in-office workers. If expectations about regular check-ins are not set beforehand, the result can be team members feeling

their manager trusts them less because they are working remotely, negatively impacting their motivation and performance. It is imperative managers set expectations for check-ins up front and adhere to them consistently. Employees should not feel the check-ins are an interruption to their work, or a waste of time, so keep the check-ins short.

An important factor for many professionals is to feel valued. Aside from the personal reinforcement a positive team environment gives an individual team member, it is important to create a team culture that is premised upon mutual respect and trust. For one, the power of expressing gratitude for the remote team member's contributions cannot be overstated.

Keeping your remote team members up-to-date with what is going on with your department's core team or other team segments can help in fostering department identity, as well. By relaying new department developments or exciting highlights from the week, you can help build a sense of "belonging" amongst your remote team members. Other measures that reinforce the personal dimension of your remote team members, such as timely, in-person meetings can help build worker morale, community, and professional satisfaction as well.

> ### 💡 Bonus Tip: Provide opportunity for team members to submit feedback
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> Having a feedback system in place where remote team members can, during one-on-ones or performance reviews, offer insights into how the team's virtual working environment could be enhanced can be invaluable. If you receive feedback from your employees, you need to do something about it and share it with the rest of your team.

7. Encourage Collaboration between Remote Team Members and In-Office Team Members

Ask employees to document how to do their job. Share and make information accessible as it is imperative. Use these documents as an opportunity to collaborate with other team members. Does the workload need to be rebalanced? Are there employees who have more available time to accomplish tasks and

should work be reassigned accordingly? Can employees in the department be cross-trained to cover for each other?

Connect with other supervisors within your division regarding workload and transferrable tasks/skills. Employees may be available to assist others in the department to complete necessary tasks.

For example, an in-office team member has been tasked with answering the phones and completing a complicated report. There is a particularly high call volume and they will not be able to complete the report by the deadline. A remote team member could assist by either completing the report because their remote work allows them to focus without interruption or the calls could be forwarded to the remote team member temporarily. Empower the employees to reach out to each other and problem-solve issues.

Remote team members are missing out on "water cooler conversations" and impromptu meetings. Encourage them to schedule planned spontaneous meetings. A daily short question or comment to other co-workers using TEAMS, e-mail, or a phone call can do the trick. A great opening question would be, "What are you working on?" They could also share a recent customer interaction with co-workers. Start TEAMS meetings with an example of scheduled planned spontaneous interaction.

> ## 💡 Bonus Tip: Encourage employees to collaborate with each other
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> Employees have learned how to connect with their supervisors and show them what is getting done. But employees struggled to find ways to work together. Despite seemingly endless video conferences, requests for help made directly to peers has dropped and collaboration quickly followed. Empowering employees to reach out to peers will foster collaboration and reduce the feeling of working alone for remote team members.

8. Celebrate

Celebrate the same work milestones that would be celebrated in the office. Point out any accomplishments or exceptional behaviors and achievements.

When remote team members consistently do their jobs well, it can be easy to develop an "out of sight, out of mind" attitude. In addition to celebrating wins (and providing constructive criticism when employees fall short), make sure you consistently provide positive feedback.

Working remotely tends to create silos, and very narrow, task-focused, behaviors. One way to avoid this is to shine a (not embarrassing) spotlight so everyone can feel good about everybody else's work, identify resources, and support each other. You are not a collection of high-performing individuals, you are a high-performing team. When you let remote team members know you have noticed their good work and tell them they have made a difference, they will feel like a part of the team. The bottom line is, taking a personal interest in all your employees will make them feel more valuable.

Pay attention to professional development. Encourage your team to improve existing skills and learn new valuable skills by accessing online courses. Even if remote team members have access to online employee development courses, they may feel they are missing out on informal mentoring opportunities. Specifically address this with professional development plans. Consider funding programs that allow remote team members to receive in-person training and attend conferences. It is a great way to build their skills and to show you value them.

Have fun! Change and uncertainty sometimes seem like the only constants. Take time to engage with employees on a personal level and insert levity whenever possible. Try some of the following:

- Setting a daily/weekly TEAMS virtual background theme and take a few minutes to review and discuss why individuals choose their backgrounds.
- Hosting a weekly coffee hour as a department. Let people connect on topics unrelated to work.
- Have theme-based TEAMS meetings with silly hats, masks or wearing a particular color.
- Creating a virtual scavenger hunt.

Closing Thoughts

In conclusion, even though you are in different locations, there are ample opportunities to establish quality performance standards, relationship-building opportunities, and worker support for your remote team member(s). Have your goals and work environment standards in place, be upfront about what is expected of your remote team members and take time to promote their own contributions as well as their own professional satisfaction and sense of worth. By fostering an environment of high-performance standards, mutual respect and trust, and team cohesiveness, you can be effective in taking your team's productivity and efficiency to new heights. No one knows what comes next, and though the future is uncertain, one thing is clear: you will need to remain flexible while the work world adapts to changes.