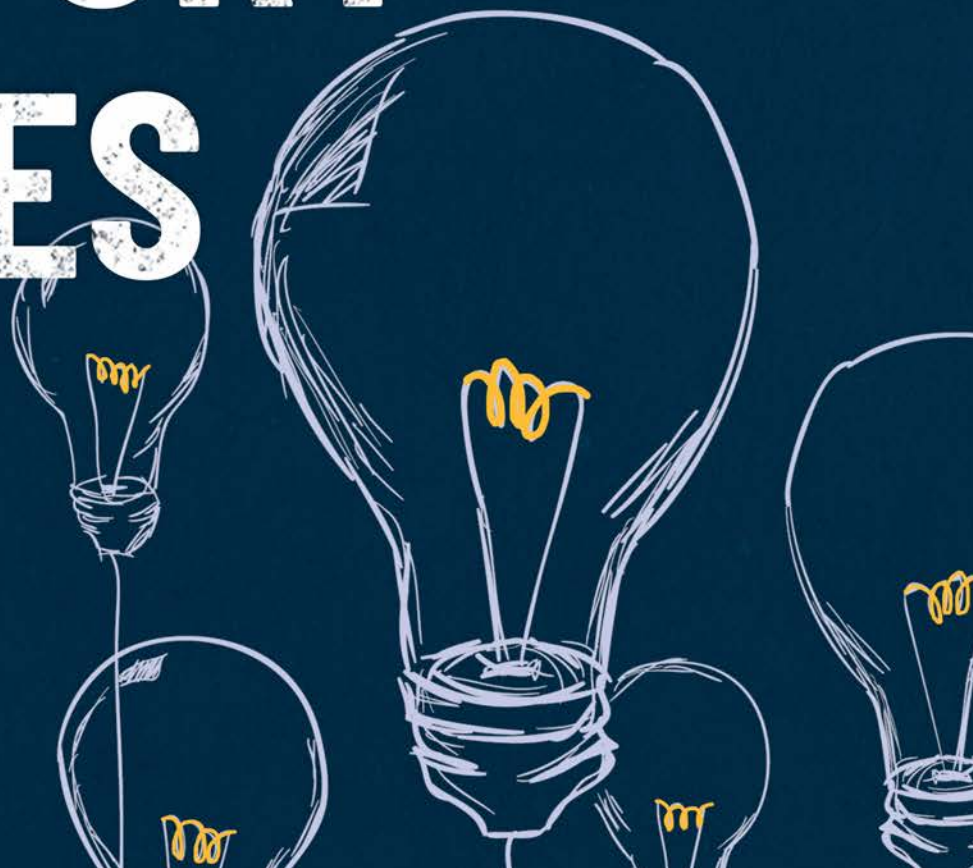


# THE DISTRIBUTED TEAMS SUPPORT SERIES

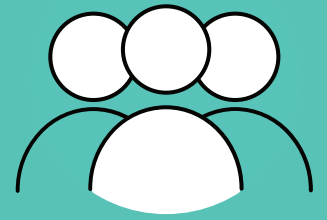


This time several months ago, we all had no idea of what was about to happen. Or even if we did, we couldn't have comprehended what it would truly look like. Within hours, many of you went from offline to online. For people leaders, especially, it's a massive challenge as you are the overarching person keeping your teams together. As we specialise in performance management, we pivoted our content to respond to the pain points many of you might have and are maybe still experiencing. Distributed teams is an area we know a lot about, and with that in mind, we created this series.

Since then, we've listened to your feedback and continued to answer any questions you might have. We mean it when we say we are passionate about keeping companies connected and we are here to help. As a result, we've compiled the content from the last few weeks into an eBook, added some new features with deeper insight to support you and your team during - as well as beyond - this transition. Let's begin.



# Part I: Managing Your Team



When it comes to working remotely, usually a job advert will state whether it's a remote working opportunity or sometimes it's an option for someone already based in the office. However, we've now seen the numbers of businesses having to operate as a distributed team soar with many people now working from home in light of the devastating outbreak of the coronavirus and it's unimaginable impacts on individuals, communities and businesses.

In many cases, this way of working might be a long-term solution or at least one we need to be able to do. Whatever your current situation as you read this is, whether you were already working as part of a team with its members located in various places or this is new to you, there is one commonality that will never change; **how you respond as a manager is crucial to your team's success.**

“It's at times like this where fear can quickly manifest, and it calls on you to lead now more than ever.”

Why? Because instead of it being about those who are long-term remote employees or working remotely by choice, we're now talking about another type of distributed team. We are talking about those who are working from home maybe for the first time, those who have to self-isolate or are on lockdown but can still work, and for all of the above, it wasn't really a choice.

Despite whether the practice is the norm or unprecedented, however, everyone is still operating in a climate of uncertainty and change. It's at times like this fear can quickly manifest, and it calls on you to lead now more than ever. Let's explore some of the ways you can do this effectively, with your people at the centre of the process without compromising on productivity.

## 1. Reassurance

The unknown can induce panic and being told what to do without any consultation can be met with resistance which has been the reality of many. No doubt you are feeling the pressure too, but even some of your most headstrong employees will look to their leaders for guidance in unprecedented circumstances. You may not have all the answers but reassure everyone that you will answer what you can and do your best to inform them as the situation unfolds. **Your people must know you are doing the best you can for them.**

## 2. Patience

You may not be able to manage the external influencing factors, but you have control over your approach. Make sure it's a patient one. Being calm will stand to you, and it usually brings clarity to situations too. Clear communication and the best decisions rarely come from a place of chaos. **Be patient with yourself and with your people.** Their reactions will likely be wide and varied throughout this process and need to be met from a place of patience. It can be frustrating when things may not flow like you are used to with internal operations. There will be teething problems, but it requires patience to succeed, especially from you. It's a real lead by example moment.

## 3. Connection

**Regardless of their situation or location, all employees need connection.** This can come in many forms. You can choose a digital connection platform that links all your people, or you can connect certain people or teams who might have shared aspects of their experience. It's crucial they feel a sense of community and belonging.

When it comes to you interacting with them, it mustn't be limited to occasional project updates in the form of lean emails. You must check-in with your people and find out how they are doing. For example, schedule a weekly video call on top of the regular checks-ins. We'll discuss meetings in more depth later but know, strengthening the relationships you have with your distributed team is just as important as the efforts you would make in the office.



## 4. Accessibility

**People need to have access to what they need to do their work.** They require resources and the people they need to move their work forward. This might come in the form of documents or a response from a co-worker. Their goal-setting and progression should not be forgotten, and they need to be supported in achieving their aims. It might take some time to map this out and see things from their perspective. However, it will give you a better idea of what they need from others to get their work completed when they can no longer walk up to someone's desk and ask for it.

## 5. Motivation

Working remotely – successfully – takes a lot of self-discipline and one of the main ways to support this is through motivation. This is an element of an office environment that your people may now be missing out on. The same way you might energise your team in a meeting, or someone brings back doughnuts for everyone after lunch, you need to apply the same approach with them online. **It's essential they feel inspired to do their work, but it's even more crucial that you don't rely on your people to provide it for themselves solely.** Find out what motivates them if you don't already, and go from there.



## 6. Empathy

If you have worked remotely before, you will be able to relate to some extent what it entails. However, as you know, there is a big difference between working as part of a distributed team with ample preparation time and what everyone has and is facing now. **It's important to have empathy with your people's situation and show compassion for the challenges they face.** It will work towards building trust and better communication if they feel like you are open to hearing about the difficulties they are experiencing. And the only way you'll know about what they are is to ask.

## 7. Trust

This is something you will need to build in distributed teams. It doesn't happen overnight. **Remember to give people the space to deliver.** Don't feel you have to check in every day on their work constantly. But check in every day on the person, the human. Be more human and don't be afraid to show your own vulnerability by being honest with them, for example. This will build trust within your team. Some of the best policies for working in distributed teams are built on three simple words: we trust you.

## 8. Communication

One way to truly understand the crucial nature of effective communication is when it comes to distributed teams. You are relying solely on the digital to convey everything you can otherwise do in person, such as your body language as an example. This might feel like you need to communicate more as a result to compensate but what you really need is to structure your communication. **Your calendar should be set up to include regular team sync calls as well as a framework for 1:1s and questions.**

The process needs to be clear, centralised and consistent so everyone knows where they stand as well as how to use the system. This will bring flow to your communication process. All team members should be encouraged to contribute, to support one another and if new people join the distributed team, consider a buddy system to get them settled in. You can't rely on them making new friends in the hall or the office canteen so make sure they are supported.

## 9. Respond

**Whatever the issue, it's imperative you respond.** It could be something as simple as feedback or an answer needed to move a project to the next stage. Remote workers need to be able to do their work and be supported in doing so, but one of the ways it can negatively impact relationships as well as deepen a sense of isolation is not hearing back or delays in response. By being as prompt as possible with the right approach, they know they are respected, appreciated and prioritised.





## 10. Prevention

**The wellbeing of your people is a top priority.** However, it's not without its challenges, and it's not solely up to the person themselves to stay on top of it in their professional lives. They need a job and company that supports it too. Buffer's 2019 report on remote work, shows the latest trends with loneliness ranking high in the biggest struggles for remote employees.

There are a couple of points to note here. Firstly, by educating yourself and staying on top of these trends, you give yourself a better chance of spotting the signs and preventing potential problems. Secondly, how can you spot issues such as loneliness in your people? You lookout for the same things you would in someone in the office.

- How do they seem when you talk with them?
- Are they engaged with their work?
- Do they constantly meet you with challenges rather than a solution?
- How is their response time?

But most importantly, ask them. You don't have to ask them directly if they feel lonely, for example, but approach it in a way with some key questions that will help you get the answers.

For example,

*"How are you feeling about working remotely?"*

*"Have you a designated space you can work from?"*

*"Are there any other ways I can support you?"*



These kinds of questions will help you find out more about your people and their experience, meaning you can spot if they are struggling or feeling isolated and intervene to support them.

Also, keep in mind that everyone responds differently to change. You might have one person on your team that steps up to the plate, assisting in coordinating these changes and promptly responding to communication. Keep an eye on them as time goes on, as they might burn out so don't let them get to that stage regardless of how helpful or productive they might be now. Meanwhile, someone else might be drifting on and off the professional grid. This might be how they deal with the shock of an abrupt change. Help them weave their way into their new work practice, slowly, in their own time. The situation is the same but different for everyone, as will be everyone's reactions and responses.

The reasons for everyone's newfound displacement are out of your control but taking the above steps are ways to take back the power and ensure you lead your people in the right direction. They need to feel the same things that they usually feel in-house, like being part of a network and that they are valued. There is a way to manage a distributed team right, and the solution to this goes far beyond the occasional phone call. It involves an ethos of *'because your people are out of sight, does not mean they are out of mind'* - and bringing your office's offline sense of community, online.



# Part II: Your Wellbeing



Let's face it. There is no shortage of information in the digital sphere about wellbeing at work. But there weren't tons of pre-written guides out there tailored to this unique situation ready to read the day it arrived. One day we all got up and went to work as normal and the next we stayed at home where we continue to stay. This is working remotely set to the shared backdrop of a global pandemic. We have seen it bring out a culture of community, but it's also one shrouded in uncertainty and change, which challenges our wellbeing.

We carry around our wellbeing with us. It's not something that's fixed at work, but we are used to having our pillars that support it, built into our day. It might be the gym session for some, meditation for another, and walking the dog for someone else. For many, these have either been limited or are now out of bounds, so not only are some people trying to adapt to their new circumstances, many have to adjust their usual wellbeing supports. This takes a willingness, ingenuity, trial and error and of course time. Even if we can access these all again someday, we've still had a period without them, and that has an impact.

So how can we do it, how can we manage it and what has it got to do with working as part of a distributed team? Firstly, our wellbeing is paramount, and secondly, we can't work if we are not well. It matters in both your professional and personal life as they are all part of your life. What can we do to look after it during this time and into the future? The short answer is plenty, but here are our top 11 ways to look after your wellbeing right now while working as part of a distributed team.

## 1. Acknowledge Your Feelings

It's an incredibly strange time and with it, comes an array of feelings, often in waves. It's essential you acknowledge them when they come up. Firstly, for your wellbeing but also for your productivity. Whatever you are holding on to can block you moving forward in both a personal and professional capacity. Express it.

If it's work-related, make sure you know who the go-to person is, and go to them. If you are a people leader, ensure your people know who to go to too. If it's personal, take five with a trusted friend or partner. **We are all in this together at the moment, and it will bring up challenges for everyone, but it's crucial not to hold on to them silently.** If you don't feel comfortable talking to anyone about them, write down what's bothering you. Releasing whatever it is, helps lighten the internal load.

## 2. Create Your Space

You need your environment to support your work as best you can. This will be different for everyone. Some of you might be sharing a kitchen table with a housemate, or there might be children around too. Not everyone has the luxury of a home office without interruptions, so this might call for you to be creative.

Do what you can to create a nice space for yourself that you like to be in. This can be as simple as sitting in your favourite chair, putting artwork on your desk, having good lighting or being in the room with the best internet speed. **Make sure you have a plan when it comes to making and taking calls, so they don't become stressful.** Any small effort you can make in this area for yourself to support your wellbeing will pay off.

## 3. Normalise What You Can

Do what you can to normalise your situation. You might like to dress for work in the morning, take your lunch at the regular time or chat with the friend you'd usually meet for coffee every Thursday. Whatever it is that you are in control of normalising and that you would like to, then do it. It's another way to stay focused throughout your week in what is already a displaced working environment. But don't force it.

## 4. Have Realistic Expectations

To put it simply, don't be too hard on yourself. All you can do is all you can do. Expecting the same level of output and response you have in work, immediately at home, isn't rational. Have realistic expectations of yourself and others. It will take everyone a while to get into a groove, and even then, this will happen for everyone at a different rate. And then grooves might call for changes. Be open to that too.

This is worth keeping in mind when it comes to you and your team trying to stay on track and achieve your goals. If your expectations are not aligned, for example, or you don't have the supports you need to move your work forward, you'll hit a roadblock. To avoid this, don't expect things to work the same way as the office automatically. It's much easier for things to get overlooked while working remotely as a team and during a transition. Loosen your expectational drip and flag something if it needs to be flagged.

## 5. Take Breaks

There is a lot more self-management required when you are working in a distributed team. **Be sure to take breaks to catch your breath and re-energise.** When and if you can, go outside. Research shows that less than 10 minutes in nature can lower your stress and anxiety. Depending on your situation and the weather, maybe you can even work outside.



## **6. Connect With Your Community**

It's vital to connect with your teams and colleagues. Having a video call has a more human touch so ensure these are part of your week. It's also important to include occasions to link in with each other that aren't just for work. Have a virtual lunch scheduled and bring your food with you. Working remotely can become isolated and lonely as we discussed, so it's imperative to retain the connectivity of the office to keep morale up and as another way to support one another.

## **7. Look After Your Physical Health**

This doesn't mean you have to do thirty minutes of cardio before you start your day. It can come in the form of eating nutritious meals, for example. Perhaps it could be going for walks or doing some gentle exercise or even something like sitting in a supportive desk-chair. These efforts help you protect your physical wellbeing as well as the added bonus of clearing your mind and boosting your mood.

## **8. Find a Practice**

It might be mindfulness, yoga, a HIIT-workout, journaling, dancing, gardening, cooking or baking. Find something – that isn't work – that works for you. We all need support in our newfound environment that keeps us grounded and helps us manage, express or relieve our stress consistently and healthily.

## 9. Minimize Your Media Consumption

It's hard to avoid all the digital distractions. But if you can reduce your consumption of the news, or designate a time to check your social media accounts, it will give you space. It will also contribute to a sense of peace rather than the panic and sensory overload that comes with it all – not forgetting the productivity benefits too.

If you are finding this tricky, turn off your notifications, temporarily unsubscribe from news updates or have a separate browser for your work. Be mindful of the media you choose to consume. When it comes to your downtime, it might be an idea to favour something from the feel-good category rather than another crime documentary.

## 10. Finish On Time

One of the biggest challenges to working from home is switching off from work when your working day is done. Physically leaving work is one thing, but mentally leaving it is another. Give yourself a cut-off point and stick to it. Then mark it by either taking a short walk or setting an alarm for that time. Something that says to you, *'I'm finished for the day and cannot come back to this until the morning'*. Then walk away and enjoy your evening. If you don't draw a line in the sand, you risk burning out.

## 11. Take It One Day At A Time

It's difficult not to let our minds race as the situation is changing daily, and we try to find individual normality amidst global chaos. We can plan all we want but a good way to navigate this is to take it one day at a time. That's all anyone can really expect of us right now, and all you can expect from yourself. Even post-pandemic, it's a great approach to stay in the present and do what you can in the now. It reduces the sense of overwhelm and supports staying focused as well as mindful work.

As we read in the previous section, there are several conversational approaches you can take to check-in on your people's wellbeing and if they are struggling. But their overall wellbeing has several more facets than that. Spotting a disengaged employee in the office is one thing, but digitally, it can be a little trickier.

You don't know for one hundred percent certainty, that once they come off that video call where they were putting their best foot forward, they went back to bed and are feeling anxious and overwhelmed. There is a dual responsibility here. The onus isn't entirely on you to keep on top of everyone's inner state, but you are responsible for your fifty percent as a leader to ensure your people are ok.

Responses to poor wellbeing can vary depending on the person, but here are some signs you can look out for in your people:

- Not Meeting Their Targets
- Late For Meetings
- Poor Response Rate to Communication
- Not Engaged In Conversations
- Minimal Contribution or Oversharing
- Disrespecting Boundaries
- Not Acting Like Themselves

How do you proceed?

The first thing you can do, which is in everyone's best interest is to create an environment where they can tell you how they feel. Your approach as a people leader is crucial here. Do your people usually come to you if they are struggling? Consider an approach where you ask them how they are - beyond work. Show interest and that it's ok to share some information with you. You set that tone and share a little in return. You aren't a robot, either.

It can be something as simple as asking how they are finding their setup, whether it's hard or easy for them to get started in the morning and you offer the same. Instil confidence and show compassion. You can't see them all day every day and pick up on micro signals, and you will have to rely on your intuition here. Remember, you know them. Trust your gut if you feel something is off then it probably is.

“Your wellbeing is a priority, and only you can make it the top one.”

A huge part of wellbeing and in achieving this kind of rapport comes back to balancing the personal and the professional. The fact that we are all forced to work from home has jump-started this. The walls are already being broken down. Sometimes the HRM's toddler can be heard screaming in the background, or your CEO's cat decides to join the meeting. How do you usually respond to this? Is it actually disrupting the meeting? Is this kind of thing happening too often? Or perhaps, it's a welcome break.

You can embrace these few seconds of ease that breaks the intensity of everyone staring directly into the screen during a meeting. It allows the naturalness that happens in an in-office meeting. People can look around the room there without being noticed to get a moment of headspace. Being on a video call can feel like a form of digital surveillance. You also don't want your people more focused on how they want to prevent their child or pet interrupting, and less on what the meeting is about so make it ok, for life to exist, but that has to come from you.

Your wellbeing is a priority, and only you can make it the top one. This is crucial for you as a person but also for those around you and your work. You are part of a team where you need everyone to do their best to manage themselves, look after their health and their stress levels. And they need it from you as a people leader too. Take time to figure out what works for you and be open to that changing. If you do this, you'll find you will be able to face whatever challenges come your way without your wellbeing feeling the impacts.



# Part III - Adapting To A Changing Process



*As dealing with change becomes a regular activity, leading it becomes a skill to hone, an internal capacity to master. – Arnaud Henneville-Wedholm*

Working as part of a distributed team is an ongoing process full of change. The key to success as a manager is not only how you adapt to it, but leading your people through it. You do this by supporting them in their adaptation. There are a few key areas to focus on in relation to this. Let's explore them and how best to acclimatise to an evolving system.

## Stay Focused

You need to take time to take stock. Review and reflect. What needs to be achieved? Do the tasks you had when you left the office now need to be reprioritised? Have you lots of new ones to do in order to fully set up others to do their work? A lot has changed so this may or may not alter your priorities, but you need to consider them all. Either way, once you nail this down, you will be cementing the core block needed to get into your workflow, even if everything around it is still up in the air. **It's up to you as a people leader to anchor things.**



## Set The Tone

With this in mind, comes another reminder that you set the tone and you need to. Your people need you to. **If you would like your people to remain positive and keep their energy up, then lead by example and do the same.** This isn't just in the best interest of the business, but everyone's best interest. It brings order and the ideal approach to what is an uprooted working environment. The same way you walk into an office, and you can see and feel the company culture, you need to set the tone for your people here, even if it's digitally done.

## Get Goal-Setting

Then comes the time to get back on track. **Your goals are of great importance, and you must make sure they are the right ones for now.** You must ensure that, especially if they change, there is alignment across teams and company goals. Also, they need to be achievable. For the moment and in times of uncertainty, think short-term. For example, what can you and your team achieve over the next six weeks? If you keep it within a reasonable time-frame, it's easier to measure and manage as well as adapt to what comes up. Over time then, you can set longer-term ones. We'll delve into this further in another chapter.

## Create Structure

**Working remotely effectively takes time.** It's not until you are trying to work outside the office environment you realise all the subtle structures in place that support you in getting your work done. Your people are acclimatising to their new way of working, but you can support them in moving through change by providing them with structure. The same goes for your customers.

For example, propose to run daily digital stand-ups, weekly updates, management check-ins or customer sessions throughout this time, keeping everything as business as usual as possible. It also gives people something to work within and provides much-needed structure during adjustment periods.

## Build Trust

As you and your people shift to more asynchronous communication, there need to be other factors that connect you and your processes. This is where good relationships come in. **Once the structures are in place, it's about taking a step to the side, rather than back, and making space for your people to get on with deep work.** This is about trust, and you need to build it, so it remains a consistent force during change.

Another way of building trust is through transparency which your people need now more than ever. They need to be able to see the different stages of a project and their responsibilities in the process alongside others, so they know where they stand as well as which direction to go to move things forward.

## Provide Support

This is the most crucial point. Change is happening for all of your people, and this challenges everyone's headspace. Having 1:1s are especially important right now. Make a point of having no set agenda to start but focus on listening to your people.

**Find out their concerns as well as their priorities and most vitally, how they are feeling.** You can slowly incorporate work from there and be open to resetting deliverables. The personal side of work needs to take the steering wheel this time.

It's worth reinforcing here again how your people need to be provided with the tools they require to do their work, especially when in a distributed team. Why? Because the casual 'drop by' to someone's desk or conversations while grabbing a coffee that fills in the communication gaps or acts as a follow-up, don't exist. You can't rely on catching them before they leave the office and you don't want anyone sitting at their desk, at home, waiting for something in order to progress their working day. They need to be able to access what they require to move processes forward. If they don't, it risks morale and productivity plummeting. Keeping on top of this as a people leader will keep your people energised and everyone will see, and feel the benefits of being an active, productive participant in this newfound process as it unfolds.

Is there anything you should avoid?

Yes. There are several easy to fall into practices that we would recommend staying clear of if you can.

### **1. Assuming Anything**

This applies to everything. You aren't in the office. You are not around your people, so never assume you know what you need to, or that someone will let you know. Always ask and get clarification.

### **2. Having Unrealistic Expectations**

Try not to expect your people to adapt to this process easily and swiftly. It's a new process, and it will be different for everyone. Your best in-house employee may not be your best remote working one. Be realistic in your expectations of your people as you hope they will be of you.

### **3. Seeing This As Direct Transfer**

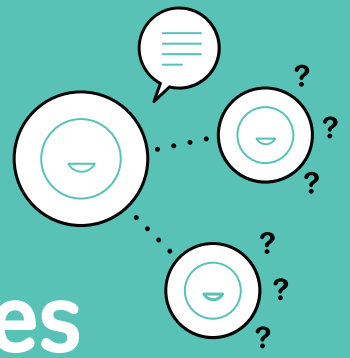
Because it's not. This is not a straightforward offline to online transition. It's much more than that. In fact, if you can see this as implementing a new way of doing things that has equally positive impacts - it's just a different process - then you'll be able to start utilising these benefits. Going from letter to email is different, so is this. Try to avoid seeing it as the same. It will make things more difficult.

## 4. Things Will Be The Same

They won't because as we said, they are different. Your people will work differently, but it might be better. This entirely new setup might result in a better outcome for everyone involved, but you won't know until you do it, adapt to it and perfect it.

Adapting to a changing process requires willingness, flexibility, patience and effective communication. These are qualities your people will need to see in you and inspire within them to move forward together and to overcome whatever challenges you face. This way, instead of change disconnecting your people, it brings them together. But this starts with you. Does your current approach reflect this? If not, we've always operated on the philosophy of thinking big but taking small actions consistently, and this is no different. It's possible to start today and make subtle changes that help you and your people navigate through a continually evolving process, successfully.

# Part IV – Responding to Communication Challenges



In the words of business strategist Tony Robbins, *“To effectively communicate, we must realise that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others”*. This is especially relevant at the moment. Not only because everyone does experience the world differently, but everyone is currently having a unique experience during our shared situation. This is the top thing to keep in mind when you are communicating with your people, especially when working as part of a distributed team and calls for you to be intuitive in your approach, now and into the future.

There are certain challenges that you face as a people leader during this time when it comes to communication, especially if you are predominantly used to face-to-face time with your people. Let’s explore what they are and how best to respond.



# What Are The Challenges?

## 1. Being Out Of Sync

If your people are used to working in an office together, and now suddenly everyone is working remotely, consider it the equivalent of having a container full of marbles, and then dropping them all over the floor. People were used to occupying a certain space, physically, which supported them professionally. Now they find themselves displaced, leaving them feeling scattered and having to find where they belong again, individually and as part of a team.

This upsets your communication processes. Perhaps some of your team are located in other countries, while others might have to readjust their working hours to accommodate their family. The environment they are trying to settle in will have other factors to consider. Your people are out of sync, which is a liability for communication. It also hinders workflow so you'll need to get them back into it which requires greater communication from you.

## 2. Loss of In-Person Signals

The most notable challenge to your company's communication by not having everyone in one place at the one time is signal loss. You are now missing out on all of the in-person signals we usually take for granted but heavily rely on to communicate effectively.



From someone's physical stance to casual in the moment conversations like walking back to your desks after a meeting and all the subtleties in between, these communication actions that usually fill in the gaps no longer exist.

Instead, they have been replaced by lots of digital faces staring at one another, forced comfortability with awkward silences, waiting patiently and fearing to misjudge the right time to speak. There is a far greater chance of things being misinterpreted or falling through the cracks when relying solely on digital means of communication.

### **3. Impact on Operations**

As everyone is suddenly displaced, it means that their workflow is too. People are used to working as a team in-house to get things over the line. They might rely on the person next to them if they need clarification on something for example or even how a new project is usually presented and followed through for delivery – these are all likely impacted. In the same way as the in-person signals, there are many of these that we may not realise until we are all working remotely we rely on for communicating at work.

## What Can You Do?

**Acknowledgement** – Start with acknowledging how strange this all is because it is. Then acknowledge the efforts you know people are making for this to work. Being part of a distributed team, as well as working from home is unprecedented, new, and abrupt for many people. There is an adjustment period. Tell your people. Express how you are finding it yourself. We can't stress enough the relevancy of the personal side of things at the moment and will help you connect better as a team. As we always say, deepening relationships improve communication.

**Set The Tone** – We say this a lot, but it's because we mean it. What kind of communicator are you? Does your approach need to be altered to respond to the needs of a distributed team? This might include making your approach more empathetic as people adapt. It might require you to be a bit more motivational as they are struggling to find inspiration. It might mean both. If you know your team, you'll know what works best, and they will be looking for you to lead here.

**Pick A Platform** – Choose a digital connection tool that works best for you and your people. It must be one that is easy to use, especially if it's new. It must be one everyone is on board with, clear on how it works as well as be an active participant. It should facilitate collaboration, transparency, encourage deep work and support asynchronous communications.

The main overall goal with your chosen platform is to streamline your communication by centralizing it. This will bring order and flow to your process. People don't need disjointed communication on projects. Keep it simple and keep it focused.



**Strike A Balance** – Your communications strategy with your people needs to be a balanced one. You'll need to find the equilibrium between the types of communication you have with your people. Short emails about work need to be counterbalanced with communication about how the person is getting on and offering support.

**Video Calls** – On that note, when it comes to communicating with your people during this time, we favour video calls for clarity and communication over phone calls. It's more personal. The exception to this is if a poor internet connection gravely hampers the flow of communication. Then follow up with a phone call.

This doesn't mean replacing all interactions with video calls, or everyone will be exhausted from them but do for the key meetings. If a conversation merits video use, then go for it but for a quick opinion on something, don't hesitate to opt for a quick call. Use your judgement and find the balance. You'll soon see what works for your people.

Emails are fine too, but they need to be secondary and support or follow on from main video meetings if about a heavier topic. Our advice is to operate your video calls similar to the in-person meetings in terms of ensuring you schedule them, regularly for both team meetings as well as 1:1s.

## What Are The Solutions?

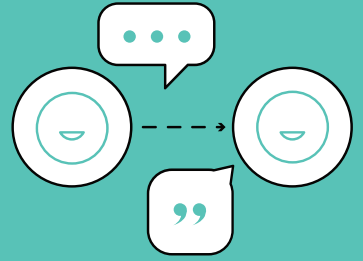
If we put the challenges aside for a moment, let's look at some solutions. For example, imagine you have a person on your team who is overcommunicating. What does this look like? You are notified of every update and detail. It's the equivalent of a micro-manger but in employee form. You have to look beyond the surface when it comes to tackling communication concerns. Where is this habit coming from? Is this new behaviour? Chances are they are trying to prove their importance or trying to find their balance with going remote, so they are overcompensating. Talk to them. Help them strike that balance. Reassure them and support them in finding their flow.

What if you have the opposite problem? You have a team member who is not following the new communication protocol, and it's having a negative impact on operations. There is definitely something else going on there. Perhaps they don't understand the new system. Maybe they have an IT issue slowing things down. They could simply be finding it difficult to ease into a new process and environment. Imagine how challenging it might be for someone who rarely had to attend meetings to now have to Zoom regularly, for example. In terms of response, you apply the same strategy. Talk to them. You might find out directly what is going on. Or you might have to find out more about how they are getting on and put some pieces together. Then follow this with supportive action.

One key factor in ensuring there is a flow to your communication is getting your people on board with the solution. Get to know them and what works for them. Include them in the process. Following their feedback, choose your communication process, build your structure and stick with it for a provisional period. As time passes and your people's relationship with their new communication process evolve, it might require changes, so be flexible in your approach and be consistent in checking with your people. You'll soon figure out what works best. It will be reflected in your people's opinions about it as well as everyone's workflow.



# Part V – How To Hold Digital Meetings



Successfully managing a distributed team starts with utilising the positives the situation brings. It's also about transferring the offline company processes that are still required, online. Making decisions, having discussions, problem-solving and team-building all still have to happen, no matter where everyone is located, and they usually happen with various kinds of meetings.

But perhaps now, we can embrace doing this in a slightly different way. For example, encouraging more decentralised decision making in teams and supporting your people by providing them with tools to aid asynchronous communication. Meetings are a core component of every company communication strategy, and we rely on them heavily as businesses to get things done. Let's look at how to run them successfully, digitally.

## Create Structure

You have to start with a structure. This is an ideal time to take stock of what meetings are working, and what ones aren't.

Ask yourself:

- Do all of the meetings we currently run need to keep happening?
- Which types are a priority?
- Which ones are necessary?

Having reviewed the essential meetings in a given week, month or quarter, you'll know which of these will best support your overall business objectives and equally your people. Perhaps it's a daily 15-minute stand-up or check-in. Maybe it's weekly team sync on planned versus executed priorities. Or it could be regular 1:1's with your people as well as quarterly sessions planning company goals.

Whatever way you prioritise these, as we said, create a schedule in consultation with your team, ensuring everyone is included in the process. That way, your people are more likely to be willing and active participants rather than if they wake up to a bunch of new meeting notifications flooding their calendars without context. **Be flexible and adapt them to the continuous feedback you hear from your people.**

For example, you might find your team has a critical deliverable one week and needs to focus their energy and attention on this. Maybe instead of meeting, collaboration moves to digital tools and shared documents are developed on priorities and updates. This way, your team can contribute when they have the time to do so. **Be sure to set clear expectations such as when you are online, you are available to jump on a quick call.** Leave space in your calendar for the occasional ad hoc meetings that might be required.

## Daily Stand-Ups

These are a great way to stay connected to your people and have the best insight into the workflow. Time-wise, ideally daily stand-ups need to be 15-20 minutes max which start on time and become a part of your people's routine. These should be focused sessions which address three areas.

The first being **achievements**. Find out what the person achieved yesterday. Follow this with their current **goals** by asking what they are working on today. Finally, round up by asking what **challenges** they are facing, if any and you can find solutions from there. If these meetings seem repetitive after a while, change how you ask the questions or add in another angle. For example, what did you enjoy most about the project you were working on yesterday? If the meetings are feeling flat, connect them with positive feelings to re-energize them.

## Team Meetings

This can stretch from a small team to a multi-departmental or cross-company meeting. Have a system decided in advance on how to run it. For example, does it require an agenda or is the meeting being called for one precise topic to be discussed? Either way, ensure everyone is clear on this in advance like sharing the agenda or clarifying the nature of the meeting. **It's essential to give people enough time to prepare.**

“Know when to lead and when to step back.”

Outline how you would like the meeting to run like asking everyone to put their phones on silent or mute their notifications to minimise disruption. The temptation is greater to check them as everyone's devices are in front of them; therefore, so is the level of potential distraction. A technique we find works quite well is to visualise a meeting room table and agree where people are sitting at it on the call. That way, you can go round the table to hear everyone's views and ensure a smooth flow to the discussion without people talking over one another.

Start with a few minutes of casual and general conversation suitable for a group discussion. **When running the meeting, give everyone a chance to speak if they wish to contribute.** Try to engage quieter members of the team within reason. Not everyone will have something to say, and that's ok too. The biggest obstacle here is keeping it on track. Know when to lead and when to step back.

**On closing, make sure everyone is leaving the meeting with clarity around their goals, ensuring everyone has an objective.** The meeting needs to be and feel relevant for your people to keep them engaged. Following up with a shared document after the meeting detailing its outcomes reaffirms this. It also allows people who attended to collaborate on items discussed as well as agreed actions.

## **Having 1:1s**

When it comes to having the all-important 1:1s, a lot of the same offline rules apply as do the general rules for all meetings. Start by scheduling it at a mutually agreeable time. Have an agenda but a loose and shared one that is created a reasonable time in advance. In terms of medium, as we mentioned above, use video calls unless something risks disrupting the flow of the conversation.

When it comes to kicking things off, **lead with checking in on how the person is doing.** This should always be a priority, but now more than ever. It is also your primary opportunity to gain greater insight into the experience this person is having and how they are genuinely finding the process, which means you'll know how best to respond supportively. For example, you might have a member of your team that finds the morning the noisiest time in their house to take calls or perhaps someone is living alone and would welcome more digital contact.

“Close the meeting with clarity.”



After a few minutes of catching up, you can naturally progress into discussing work. Give everyone you speak to the space to respond. Avoid jumping in, especially to fill awkward digital silences as it's imperative you listen instead. They will pass and are only made more awkward if you let them be. Again, you set the tone of the meeting as the people leader. **If you feel like the session is going off course, get it back on track.**

These meetings will not be without their challenges, whether it's the poor quality of the audio or visual, the syncopated conversation or the knowledge shared. The best way to navigate this is to be patient with yourself, the person and the process. As problems arise, discuss possible solutions. Close the meeting with clarity. Both of you should be leaving it with a clear understanding of what was discussed, steps required by both parties and a timeline to achieve them. This must then be followed up.

## **Empower Others To Lead**

What about the meetings you are not in? These need to happen too and without you. This is where trust comes in. You need to trust your people with these and empower them to make appropriate decisions. If the decision requires others, create a culture where they can easily find the people they need, make the decision and move the process forward as quickly as possible.

Offer support on how to run the meeting and similarly, check-in afterwards. You may not be at the meeting, but it doesn't mean you cannot support your team. **Ensure your people know your digital door is always open.**

## Digital Social Gatherings

There are other digital meetings to consider but ones of the casual kind. Efforts still need to be made to include something in everyone's schedule to keep people connected. This can be a digital coffee, lunch or company activity like a quiz as an example. The same as at work, not everyone has to attend the social gathering, but it's an option.

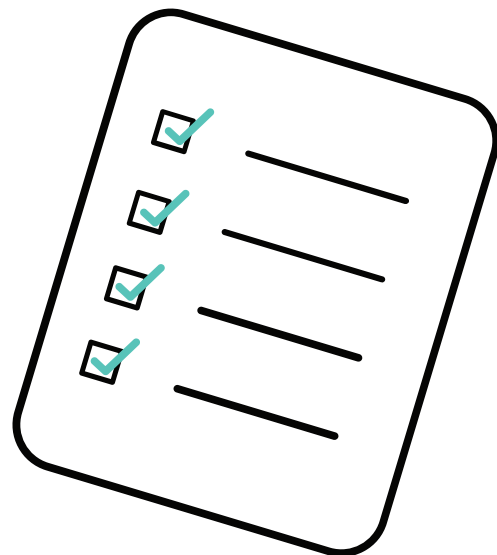
Perhaps the person in charge of your company's sports and social might take on organising this. Maybe it will be someone who is trying to fill their alone time on lockdown or perhaps, both. Let people come forward on it rather than initially appointing someone as everyone's working environments has varying degrees and types of challenges. These meetings strengthen relationships, improve team dynamics as well as helping you keep an eye out for those who might be struggling or feeling isolated.

**Holding productive online meetings is all about getting into a rhythm.** You get into one quicker by knowing your people and combining that with a suitable structure and process. Adjustments will need to be made and flexibility required, but it's very achievable. It's important to note too, that people are now online for the majority of their working day. Meetings can be a welcome break from the screen when they are held in person, but they can be a strain if it's all online activity. Find what suits you and your people best. This is all about achieving balance over burnout.

We'll finish this chapter with our checklist for check-ins.

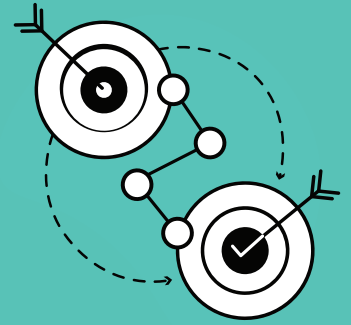
## 1:1s Checklist

- Schedule The Meeting
- Have A Shared Agenda
- Check-In On The Person
- Check-In On Goals
- Give Praise And Recognition
- Provide Feedback
- Make A Plan Of Action
- Reflect On Meeting
- Follow Up On Actions
- Follow Up With The Person





# Part VI – Setting Goals



Goal-setting is of crucial importance at all times but especially now. As we mentioned earlier, it will help you and your people to focus during an unsettling time as well as bringing alignment to your activities when people are physically displaced. This keeps everyone and your company on track to achieve their aims, regardless of the external situation. But it's not as simple as your people continuing to reach the goals set before the pandemic began and before it started impacting on your business operations. It's highly likely some of them have changed, so where do you begin?

**The first port of call when it comes to goal-setting at the moment remains taking time to reflect on your current goals.** This is followed by refreshing them based on your company's current situation and then refocusing them. If you are at a stage where this has already been done, apply this process regularly to ensure that whatever you are working on, is still in line with the ever-changing circumstances and whatever should be a top priority, is. With this in mind, be open to goal priorities changing, be flexible in adapting and conscious of these changes when it comes to your delivery as a people leader.

This can be difficult for people. **Change is difficult for people.** Imagine you have been working on something for months that you have really invested in. Suddenly, your boss tells you to shelve it because they have a different project for you to do. On the one hand, your people are no doubt grateful to have work to go to while many are losing their jobs. However, changing projects without much consultation or choice as the case may be, can be deflating. It's another certainty in their day-to-day that has now been uprooted.

Change and transition can bring up lots of mixed emotions. Allow for them in your people and be ready for them in your response. Show awareness, empathy and leadership in your communication. These qualities are especially required when it comes to discussing aims and objectives with your people which brings us to our first type of goal.

## Individual Goals

We always say start with your people. And this is no different. Check-in with them. Find out what is most important to them right now professionally. What are they working towards? Maybe they want to upskill, maybe they want to mentor, maybe they want to do both. There is no reason why these should be valued less because of what is happening or because everyone isn't in the same office.

By having a conversation about it, not only do you get a clearer understanding of who they are, their experience and where they want to go but how best to align what they want with the wider company goals. This is also the only way you'll know how best to support them in getting there.

## Team Goals

What are your team's goals? Have they changed? Is everyone clear on their agreed tasks? Ask yourself and them these questions. **It's vital to keep your teams connected.** It's the most efficient way to ensure no one is wasting time on the wrong priorities. It also aids the culture of looking out for one another in case anyone is having a difficult time and needs support. **Connectivity breeds collaboration, engagement and productivity as well as bringing clarity, order and community to your teams.**

**Include your people in the goal-setting process.** They should be part of the conversation. Goals are much more likely to be reached if people have been involved in their creation. It incites motivation. Again, lead by example when it comes to being open to changes and having flexibility in your approach. By operating both of the above practices, it makes your people better prepared to meet challenges head-on instead of feeling defenceless when they arrive.

## Company Goals

When it comes to your overall company objectives, we would usually be flying the flag of blue-sky thinking. However, in a climate where many businesses and organisations are trying to stay afloat, and people keep their jobs, it's ok for these goals to be a little less ambitious and more grounded in the present.

That doesn't mean your company goals don't still represent the overarching alignment umbrella; they do. But they will likely have to be adapted or refocused for the time being, and that is fine. When you step back, all three goal areas, whether in office or in a distributed team, should be aligned. Your people should also be in the know about these goals and how their individual aims and team objectives feed into them. This all works towards reaching your productivity targets and creates a culture of community in your company.

## Goal-Setting In The Current Climate

In general, with setting goals during the pandemic, we continue to recommend keeping your goals short-term. There is no point getting lost in long-term planning until we can see what's in the distance a little clearer. You are best to plan for what's in front of you. Operate in the now when it comes to your goals as best you can.

**This is not the time for complicating matters, especially not your aims. Keep them simple. By your goals being short term as we suggest, and simple, they are more likely to be achieved, and it's those short-term wins everyone needs right now.** Also, keep things achievable. No one needs to feel like they are climbing professional Everest at the moment. Your people need to feel return, value and a sense of worth in their work.

## Implementing The Best Process

You need to get your goal-setting systems right. For example, your goal tracking system and your communication processes need to be clear, consistent and easy to use. When it comes to a framework, we use OKRs (Objectives and Key Results), and we would highly recommend them. They support all your people working towards the wider company vision. This keeps people focused, engaged, gives them purpose and helps everyone stay on track. OKRs are great in general but ideal for now as they allow for flexibility with your objectives.

Your goal-setting also needs to be transparent. This builds trust, creates a culture of accountability and fairness. With our platform, for example, people can set their personal goals, review the department ones, and see the company goals for themselves, in their own time supporting their involvement in the process. It also ensures a fully transparent approach for our clients and their people when it comes to their company's goal-setting. It's all there for people to create, engage in and work towards achieving.

What about obstacles to the goal-setting process? What do you do if someone's personal goals are suddenly way off with the company ones, for example? How about if the team were seeing a return on their efforts, but now the goals are no longer relevant? Regardless of the situation, there is so much more than the goal to manage here. You have to be aware of feeling too.

How you frame the situation is key. It's not like you are binning everyone's aspirations, without consideration - but make sure your people know this. Never assume. Explain why the change is required and as always, involve them in the process too. It makes it easier for managing expectations and natural reassessment will take place in all the areas as this is about alignment. That's the overall aim with your goal-setting, whether on or offline.

We can't stress enough that when it comes to goal-setting as part of a distributed team, you need to listen to your people. **Remote working is most successful through clarity, collaboration, communication and consistency.** The same goes for your goals. Depending on the type of people leader you are and the situation your company is in, you might find you want to push through with a certain decision or feel like you are resetting your goals too often. You can strike the balance through inclusion.

Finally, it's vital everyone clearly understands how what they are working on contributes to the bigger picture and the valuable role they play in achieving it. By setting short term goals where you can see the return, you'll have achieved a lot even though it might feel like very little when you emerge on the other side of the pandemic.

# Part VII – Finding Your Operational Rhythm



By the time you get to this stage of your distributed team experience, it might feel like in many respects you have made it, you have figured it out. You are getting in an operational groove. Yet, in many others, there are pieces of the puzzle still scattered across your digital space that you don't quite know yet where they fit. No one has it all figured out at this point - even with the above implemented - and especially if this way of working is brand new to every member of your team.

As the main dust settles, even if other particles arise, this is about finding your team's specific workflow and getting your people, no matter where they are located in an operational rhythm. So how do you go about achieving this as a people leader?

## 1. Keep What Matters At The Centre

Your people, your customers and your product or service, these are at the core of everything you do and should remain so. See them as your foundation blocks, necessary for stability regardless of where people are located and the project they are working on. It starts here and works out. By having these at the focus, it will anchor your people's workflow.



## 2. Reviewing and Adapting

One of the key factors in finding your operational rhythm is through the practice of reviewing and adapting. This refers to your processes and approaches. Take stock regularly. Take time to ask what is working and what isn't. Take time to talk to your people about this. Maybe someone will have an idea on how to improve a system or perhaps someone's digital silence will let you know if something is wrong. Their input and responses will lead you on this.

## 3. Strike The Communication Balance

As we have explored in the other chapters of this support series, your communication efforts need to be upped and adapted to respond to working as a remote team. In-person subtleties can no longer be relied on, nor can casual conversations that bridge the gaps.

Are your current communication processes working? Are they inclusive? Is everyone communicating effectively? Are your people supported with the right communication tools to meet their needs? Communication is a core element of finding your operational flow. When there is a glitch here, everything crashes. But like all good processes, it's about balance. This does not mean over-communicating. Find what works best for your people. **The point of communication is about keeping everything clear and keeping people connected.**

We'd recommend instead of real-time, move to asynchronous communication. **Allow people to respond when they are available rather than always-on conversation.** With this approach, it's imperative updates, and information sharing are clear. This also needs to be transparent and accessible which lets communication and processes flow. It is vital to bring your team together but only when they are needed to align.

#### 4. Consistency Across The Board

We are consistently talking about being consistent. Because the fallout from dropping the ball on this is much more challenging to repair. It builds trust and strengthens teams, boosting engagement and productivity. People are then far more likely to actively participate in a steady workflow so your processes, as well as your approach, need to be consistent to achieve this.

For example, have scheduled weekly check-ins rather than ad hoc ones, and always turn up. If two of your team members come to you with a similar problem, it's important the response is fair and equal. **Your people need to know what you expect from you.** It brings a sense of stability to your team.

## 5. Creating A Culture of Collaboration

Working together as a team might sound obvious, but getting this into a rhythm, especially in a distributed team is where the real magic happens. This is about creating a sense of community. **People need to be connected, have their voice heard, feel supported and be included.** This naturally leads to increased creativity, problem-solving, upskilling, and a culture people want to be a part of. They will set their own tone and bring better flow if they are supported with what they need to facilitate collaboration.

## 6. Control The Controllable

This is not the time for setting unachievable goals or focusing your energy in the wrong place. **Take ownership of what you can and lead.** Forget the rest, for now. They will unfold in their own time. Instead, channel the focus of your people towards what you can achieve at present.

## 7. Move Out Of Crisis Mode

It's important to know when to start moving out of the crisis headspace, the time when you can look at the next six months, and the time to set longer-term goals. The focus shift from achievable short term wins to this will happen organically but don't forget about the short-term wins either. They are needed too. Remember goals keep your people grounded as well as motivated and are a vital element of operational flow.

It's also a good time to do an audit. For example, try applying our 'review and adapt' approach, as you move into this next stage. It's now time for investing in building; in your people, service and product. The answer to how to achieve this is by looking at what you have been doing. **Empower your people to share their ideas and lead out on new projects.** This will help you all get to the next phase together.



## 8. Acknowledgement And Gratitude

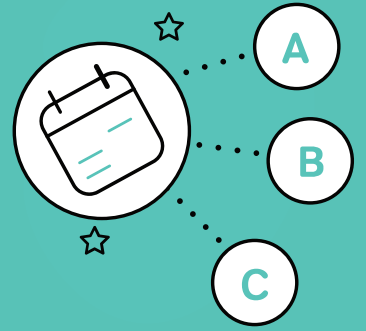
People are doing what they thought they couldn't, and because they have to. **If you want your people to find and stay in a rhythm they need to feel like it's worth staying in.**

Acknowledgement and feeling valued are essential here. People get blocked from progressing when they are frustrated. This goes against your ideal operating rhythm. Say thank you and mean it. Don't assume they know or see it as everyone has had to make sacrifices. Show gratitude for their efforts.

What do you do if someone is upsetting the flow? Let's say, all but one team member is on board with this new way of working. Before you look at what to do about it, you have to find out why. Maybe it doesn't work for this person for some reason so instead of seeing it as they are the problem, you and your team must find the solution. You've found it when the process fits your people rather than expecting your people to fit the process.

Overall, finding your operational rhythm is about working together. It's about keeping everyone involved in the process and its changes. It's about listening, communicating, responding instead of reacting and it's about leading. If you knit these threads together, it will bring about the kind of flow that not only encourages engagement and improves productivity, but it helps create an ideal company culture; one of community and collaboration regardless of where your team are.

# Part VIII - Getting Feedback



Everyone wants to progress and in order to achieve it, what we would recommend all people leaders do, is check in with their people before moving to the next phase. Every member of your team is having a different experience and how your company has responded during this time is extremely important. Despite every people leaders' best efforts, no one will ever get everything right, especially when faced with these particular set of circumstances beyond everyone's control.

That's why you need to know what's working and what isn't when it comes to your response, so it doesn't cost you in time, energy and your best people. The best way to do this is through feedback, and there has never been a more crucial time to get it.

Whether your team are slowly returning to work in the office or you are still managing a massive digital team, we've compiled a Covid Response Survey for your people to give you the insight you need to inform your next steps best.

## **Here's the thinking behind it:** What The Survey Measures

We have designed the survey to cover the following areas:

- Company Performance looks at how you have responded as a company and are the needs of your people being met.
- Health & Wellbeing focuses on how your people are feeling and how well they are coping during this time.
- Management Support refers to how supported your people are feeling during this period of change.
- Effective Communication explores the internal and external communications of your company.
- Culture addresses whether or not your people feel a sense of community even when they are apart.
- Your Role refers to the specific role of the survey participant and their opinion on remote working.
- Engagement will reflect the level of it by the person filling out the survey and how they feel the company were during this time.
- Leadership looks at the feeling of your people towards management in their response to Covid-19.
- Action gives space for your people to contribute other feedback, such as what would support them in their role.

## Why It's Important

You need to ask them so you know how best to proceed. We've made the survey feature of our software free to people leaders during this time so you can do just that. If you'd like to avail of it, you can get in touch with **Ronan** or **Noel** from our team so you can get the feedback you need now.

# Conclusion



Especially if this seems like an insurmountable task at times, and at others, you feel out of your depth, remember that you know how to manage your people. Your challenges are with the process, not with your people. If anything, it gives you a greater insight into their experiences when unexpected changes happen in their operations. And the more empathy you can have, the better you'll lead.

The last we will say on this is that words like communication, consistency, clarity, trust, feedback and wellbeing need to be more than business buzzwords but core pillars in your people leader approach. Don't see this as managing your digital team; see it as managing your team digitally. It should always be a case of people first with your approach. If you look after your people, performance and productivity will take care of themselves.

*At Frankli, we're passionate about performance management, keeping companies connected and helping leaders, lead. With us and our platform, you manage your people, and we manage the process. If you'd like to know more, [contact us today](#).*

