Coronavirus: 5 ways to be a better manager when working from home

By Thomas Roulet   26 Mar 2020

Everyone is adjusting to life during the coronavirus pandemic. For many, working from home is the new normal and poses all sorts of new challenges. Anyone in a position of management has, overnight, lost many of the tangible aspects of doing their job - particularly the non-verbal aspects of communication and how we interact in space, in person.

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It is essential that managers are attuned to the various personal needs of their colleagues at this time. The boundaries between work and personal life erode when we work from home and everyone will experience this situation in a different way, depending on their family situation, their dependants, and the various dimensions of their personalities.

This requires managers to put themselves in the shoes of their colleagues and take their perspective. There is a large amount of research into this idea of taking another person's perspective, as this approach has found to have a range of positive consequences – in particular bringing people closer. Fundamentally it requires us all to be our most compassionate and caring selves. Here are five tips to help at this fraught time.

1. Understand the specifics of personal situations

For those who have no children or dependants to take care of, it might be easy to imagine coronavirus as something that has significantly cleared our agenda. Some may believe they are more focused working from home, without the usual office distractions.

But the reality for many will involve overseeing care for children and even home learning following the closure of their schools. This will be a daunting task. Others may also be stressed about loved ones they are separated from and who might be at high risk of suffering from the current pandemic.

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2. Adapt work expectations

The abrupt shift in normal procedures requires managers to adapt their expectations of their workers, who may be less productive or finding it hard to focus. Managers should concentrate on listening more, given the lack of visible office signals, and adopt a softer management style that enables workers to explain their particular constraints and methods for adjusting to them.

It's also important to remember that people might not be forthcoming on how the current turmoil is affecting their mental health. Managers need to be attuned to this so that organisations can offer support through their human resources departments or other channels.

3. Maintain contact and make it a routine

Constant communication channels need to be maintained and reinforced. Emails simply won't replace the small talk and mundane workplace interactions that create a positive and friendly culture that enables organisations to move forward on work-related tasks.

One way to maintain contact and conviviality is to schedule regular video conferencing in which five minutes are allocated to each team member to share their feelings and experiences. Virtual coffee breaks planned at the same time every day can also do the trick, as they help recreate as much as possible a shared community experience. This will enable managers to gain a better perspective of how everyone is doing, because impressions and emotions are more likely to be shared in interpersonal and group communications.

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4. Realise the loss of invisible social cues

We all communicate and interact through gestures and body language. This applies in the workplace as much as anywhere. When managing others, we do not even realise that our physical expression conveys almost as much as what we have to say.

In the current situation, most of these cues are now invisible. And behind the screen of a video conference many of the bodily signs we traditionally rely on will be lost. Managers must therefore consider how their messages are perceived and taken on board.

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5. Make things even clearer

Managers need to be extra careful about what they intend to communicate, and be more explicit about their objectives, expectations and plans. Emails are more likely to be wrongly interpreted than in-person conversation, so managers should proofread their communications even more carefully – for tone as well as content. Even if you've worked alongside your colleagues for many years prior to the coronavirus pandemic, it's important to realise that they cannot read your mind.

This crisis will definitely change the way we manage and interact at work, whether this is through screens or physically. Embracing the idea of perspective taking is essential for managers to understand the particular situations and constraints of their workers, and provide the necessary support.

Ultimately, this shift in leadership expectations, more open channels of communication, and new routines will enable organisations to function in a human way, despite the forced social isolation.

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