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Remote control

~~WITH MANY EMPLOYEES WORKING FROM HOME DURING CORONAVIRUS CRISIS, IT'S~~
IMPORTANT FOR COMPANIES TO BE ABLE TO MANAGE STAFF REMOTELY

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Coronavirus is spreading quickly across Canada, resulting in the most event and meeting cancellations I've ever seen in my entire career. Stores are extremely busy, individuals are scrambling to stockpile food and necessities while business leaders and organizations are strategizing what to do to prevent the spread of disease in their workplace. This ranges from increasing sanitation and cleanliness in the workplace, making hand sanitizer available and screening clients/visitors who have travelled outside Canada in the last 21 days.

While face time with clients/customers is always the best, one of the popular strategies to reducing workplace illness is to provide work-at-home options where possible. On the other hand, managing a remote workforce also adds challenges to the role of supervisor and increases the challenge for employees.

While we don't know how long working at home will be required because of the coronavirus health crisis, it is important to establish some "rules of the road" for those employees who will be working at home. In addition, supervisors must be aware of the personal emotional challenges that might arise due to this situation. The following suggestions may be helpful:

Provide the right tools

While some employees are already set up to work at home, most are not and must be connected before they can engage with their assignments. In other words, they have to have the right tools, and tools that consistently work. Provide employees with laptops that are linked to your workplace and provide security rather than asking employees to use their own home equipment. Provide employees with cellphones if phoning will be a continuing part of their job and/or be prepared to subsidize the use of an employee's private phone. If remote work continues for a longer period of time, managers might need to explore some sort of work tracking system if this isn't currently in place.

Establish clear expectations

Switching to a new work environment is not easy and, in this case, it is important to have an orientation meeting to discuss management's intentions and expectations as well as what support employees can expect from management. Since the length of time employees will be working from home is not known, it is important to establish weekly expectations with weekly deadlines. Assess the nature of the work to be assigned and ensure it is truly doable from a remote work office. Be clear about expectations for reporting back to management for status reports and/or assistance.

Recognize and deal with change issues

Suddenly becoming a remote worker is not an easy task as there are both physical and emotional challenges. For instance, in some cases, employees don't have a separate workspace at home and so will be trying to work from their dining room table. Be considerate of the anxiety and angst the employee might experience and the time it might take to settle back into being productive in their new workspace. Keep in mind as well that some of your employees will feel isolated and lonely while others may be easily distracted by the home environment especially if young children are around.

Respect work style

Keep in mind that some members of your remote work team may not be well-suited to an isolated work situation and working alone. Think about their learning and work style and try to assign work tasks that best fit their style so that they are productive and supportive of this temporary work scenario.

Establish regular communication

Your remote workers are still part of your team and need to be treated as such. If they raise a question try to respond as soon as possible. Contact them more frequently during the startup of this new workspace and then schedule regular calls after this. Remember to include all your staff on "staff" communiques. Encourage employees to check-in voluntarily to ensure everyone is adjusting as best as possible.

Stay connected

Use tools such as Zoom or Skype for a weekly meeting so that your team will get to literally "see" their colleagues and will continue to feel part of the team. Use this meeting time to provide feedback, inviting employees to raise issues of concern and to brainstorm solutions. Their involvement will make your situation seem less of a challenge. Continue to celebrate special days such as the first day of spring to insert some fun in their day.

Make a personal call

A sudden change to a work environment during a scare such as the coronavirus makes it all the more important to make an effort to develop and retain a close bond with your employees. Take time to make a personal call to show appreciation and support, and engage in some small talk. Show an interest in an employee's family and how they are managing. Ask the employee if there is anything else the management can do to help.

Be aware of communication differences

Communicating face to face is different than by telephone or by email. Be conscious of your style and how you want the message to be sent and received. Use simple clear sentences with one message per sentence. Avoid longer sentences that include multiple words such as "you, they," etc because the reader quickly gets lost as to who is who. Keep in mind as well that the conversations will lose the personal sensitivity that face-to-face communication offers so there is a higher risk of miscommunication. Use those creative emoticons to help share your emotions.

Focus on trust

Most employees who will be assigned to work at home, already work independently and/or with minimal guidance at their normal physical workplace location. Therefore, it is important to give them this confidence when they are working at home as well. Avoid showering them with phone calls to check up on them. Trust them.

As you can see, managing remote employees can be quite a challenge, especially when it is required for an emergency situation such as with the coronavirus. It requires good planning, good communication strategies, as well as creativity and persistence in ensuring your team is not only held together but they continue to be motivated and feel safe.

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