

MANAGING THE REMOTE WORK TEAM

BY JASON BADER, PRINCIPAL - THE DISTRIBUTION TEAM



Over the past several months, most of us have been faced with the reality of a remote workforce. This may be limited to self-management or management of a team of employees. Some of you have been involved with managing remote workers for some time and this is not much of a struggle. For many companies, like privately held distributors, this is a strange and foreign mode of operation. Covid-19 changed the very definition of work for many of us and I believe it will leave an indelible mark. In a time of vast uncertainty, I think I can be certain of this – a portion of our workforce will have adapted to, and now prefer, working from home. Given this potential, how do we adapt our management strategy to maintain productivity outside the four walls?

In my practice, I have the tremendous good fortune of interacting with, and listening to, the strategies and ideas of distribution managers in various roles. Recently, I was facilitating a discussion of managers dealing with this very question: How do we manage a remote workforce? Over the course of this article, I want to share some of the challenges and solutions discussed in this group. Again, these folks had never dealt with remote team members and found themselves wrestling with protocols, group cohesion and performance issues. Early on, they were thrust into this remote environment. Today, a new challenge has come forward. What if some team members do not want to come back into the office? Is this really a choice?

As the mandatory closure restrictions have eased in some areas, managers are struggling with how to bring people back while maintaining safety protocols. Do we need to put up Plexiglas extensions on the cubicles?

Do we require masks in private offices? There are several different opinions and standards out there. I don't judge one way or the other. As restrictions are lifted, interior staff seem to fall into one of two camps: 1) Those who are going stir crazy at home and can't wait to get back to the office and 2) Those who are very comfortable working from home and prefer the solidarity of remote work. Before my email box gets flooded with disgruntled readers, I will also acknowledge that the stay at home camp may also be concerned with their own health and safety. The cynic in me must also acknowledge that some of them have become one with their sweatpants and slippers. Ok by me. This is a judgment free article.

One of the more interesting lines of discussion came around the idea that remote work might be viewed as a privilege, or reward, as opposed to an ongoing right. Obviously, this doesn't apply to those who are itching to be back at the shop, but this really is a question for those who are asking to remain at home. This is a sticky area. Should we allow some to make the election to stay home? What if the person is constantly on the performance bubble? You know who I am referring to. These are the folks that do just enough to not get fired, but clearly don't perform above the minimum. By working from home, will their performance continue to disappoint? Without clear standards of performance, it's really just a subjective evaluation based on personal bias. If the decision to work from home is going to be a reward for performance, managers must create clear and consistent measurement for these positions.

Top performers can come from either the in office or remote work

camp. One of the consistencies with this group is that they tend to self-manage. You can give them a set of expectations, or a specific project, and they bang it out. Lesser performers tend to need more guidance, coaching and if I can be honest – monitoring. Therefore, the thought of allowing poor performers to work remotely is causing heartburn in most managers. I am not telling you which way to lean on this issue, but my discussion group came to the consensus that poor performers needed to be in the office.

If you are going to allow for remote work, it is important to set up expectations. During the high of lockdown, a friend shared that his company had to put out a memo on "appropriate dress" during Zoom meetings. It seems that people had got a bit casual while at home. My group leader shared some thoughts on creating agreements with those who wish to work from home. He shared three important areas: 1) What are the expected work hours? 2) What is an appropriate response time to requests from other team members? 3) How do you communicate that you will be unavailable or taking time off with your supervisor? The dividing line between work and home can become blurred in a remote situation. These agreements help both sides become more comfortable in a remote environment.

One of the other interesting suggestions from the group was about team interaction. When you have a spread-out team, with little interpersonal interaction, cohesion and inclusion can become strained. It is important to have scheduled meetings over some form of video conference. Make them show their face. Team members need to be present. One group member shared that his team had organized a non-work happy hour

during the lockdown. It may seem a bit odd, but they were trying to give people an opportunity to connect. I can just imagine this Zoom screen filled with all sorts of individuals consuming their favorite libation. I guess that is one way to have an office party without worrying about alcohol liability.

In a time of uncertainty, I can tell you with some degree of certainty that remote work is here to stay. You will be faced with the challenges that my group discussed. As you are working through this new organizational opportunity, take the time to create policies that reward performance while still maintaining your company culture. Create measurements that allow both the manager and the worker to become comfortable in this environment. Although the employee is not physically there, make sure that they don't feel isolated or disconnected. This is a sure-fire way to get them looking for greener pastures. At the risk of being redundant, I know one thing for certain – Distributors are a resilient lot. You will figure this out and come out better for it. If you need some help, or an unbiased ear, you know where to find me. Good luck.

About the Author:

Jason Bader is the principal of The Distribution Team. He is a holistic distribution advisor who is passionate about helping business owners solve challenges, generate wealth and achieve personal goals. He can be found speaking at several industry events throughout the year, providing executive coaching services to private clients and letting his thoughts be known in an industry publication or two. Last year, he launched his first podcast, Distribution Talk. Episodes can be found at www.distributiontalk.com and most podcast applications. He can be reached at (503) 282-2333 or via email at jason@distributionteam.com. You can find additional resources on his website: www.thedistributionteam.com