



LEADING REMOTE TEAMS

New trends
and challenges
for managers

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Introduction

Although considerable research exists on the factors that predict leadership effectiveness, most of it has focused on managers who lead in a structured work environment or shared workplace. With advances in technology and heightened focus on work-life balance, more people are working remotely either part- or full-time. The notion of remote work is not new for organizations, with approximately 56% of worldwide companies utilizing this work arrangement, and the majority of employees now report that flexible work arrangements are important to them (Salesforce, 2020).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, at least 25 million workers globally fit the definition of remote workers (Global Workforce Analytics, 2015; 2017), 18% of which were full-time (Zeng, 2019). Further, remote work is expected to continue to rise even after the pandemic subsides as 3 out of 4 CEOs recently surveyed indicated they will not bring all employees back on site (Gartner, 2020). With this shift, managers will need to understand how to work remotely themselves as well as how to lead a team with less structure, fewer opportunities to communicate and collaboration enabled by technology.



What is remote work?

Simply defined, remote work describes an arrangement in which employees leverage technology to communicate and coordinate their efforts when working from various locations, including different time zones, or even countries, either full- or part-time.^a

Also called telework, e-work, distributed work, virtual work, flex-work, and telecommuting

^a Nilles (1975)

How do managers impact remote work?

In the aftermath of the outbreak of COVID-19, a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reported that over 75% of employers encouraged their employees to work from home (SHRM, 2020) and 7 out of 10 of those companies are struggling to adapt to this sudden shift. Additionally, a survey by IBM suggests that there will be a large increase in remote work after the pandemic subsides with 54% of respondents reporting a desire to continue to primarily work remotely (IBM, 2020).

People find remote work satisfying for various reasons (Gajendran & Harrison, 2006). These include more control over scheduling to better balance work-life demands and the flexibility to work on tasks during personal peak performance times. People also cite perceived gains in productivity from time saved on their commute and some reportedly exert discretionary effort in return for this perk (Lautsche, Kossek, & Eaton, 2009; Vega, Anderson, & Kaplan, 2015; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). Despite the attractiveness of remote work, outcomes are mixed as to the conditions under which those benefits are realized (Golden, 2009; Golden & Viega, 2005) and some early adopters (e.g., IBM, Yahoo) began scaling back after reconsidering both the pros and cons (Calvo, 2013).

Potential drawbacks are most likely to occur for people who work remotely more than 50% of the time (Golden & Viega, 2005). Without efforts to close the gaps introduced by distance, the quality of work relationships can suffer from decreased communication (Gajendran & Harrison, 2006). Some may also feel pressure from the additional responsibility of making more decisions autonomously (Perry, Rubino & Hunter, 2018), while others may struggle to disengage from work allowing it to interfere with family (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017; Golden & Raghuram, 2009).

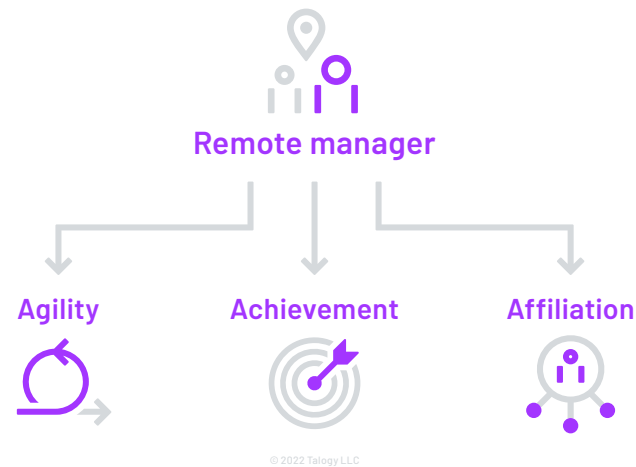
Managers are uniquely positioned to help people realize the benefits of remote work by adapting their leadership style to mitigate the potential pitfalls. For example, they can provide technology to enhance collaboration and facilitate knowledge sharing (Golden & Raghuram, 2009). They can also establish norms to ensure more frequent communication and enrich how information is exchanged to prevent feelings of isolation (Golden & Viega, 2005; Golden, Viega & Dino, 2008; Lautsch et al., 2009). Managers may also benefit from setting clear expectations using an outcome-oriented performance management approach to ensure objectivity and enhance trust (Virick, DaSilva & Arrington, 2010). Finally, just as in any coaching arrangement, effective managers learn about individual differences to strike the right balance between encouraging autonomy and providing support to promote a healthy work-life balance for each employee while focusing on their continued development (Grant, Wallace & Spurgeon, 2018; Nakrosiene, Buciuniene & Gostautaitė, 2018).

Though there has been a steady rise in remote work over the past few decades, the trend has been hastened by the pandemic as global organizations increasingly announce more permanent changes. This will require managers to rethink their leadership style as well as their own workplace preferences now and in the future. The changing nature of work highlights the importance of having managers who can help their employees build relationships and perform effectively regardless of location, starting with role modeling effective behaviors in their own work style. This is where hiring with remote work in mind and developing current managers on the key remote work competencies needed to be successful will prove to be fruitful for both employees and organizations. This paper discusses the key competencies needed to be an effective remote manager, addressing both the challenges of being a remote worker themselves as well as the additional demands of managing a distributed team.

The Talogy Remote Manager Model

In order to help our clients and partners provide their managers with insight on how to best lead in a remote work environment and realize their own potential as remote workers, Talogy has reviewed the science of managing remote work. We have developed a competency framework, referred to as the Remote Manager Model. Comparing current and future managers to the Remote Manager Model provides an understanding of their alignment as well as how to leverage their strengths and address development opportunities.

The Remote Manager Model is comprised of a set of competencies that scientific research has identified as important for success as a manager in a remote work environment. Competencies required for successfully managing remote work fall into three broad areas: **Agility**, **Achievement**, and **Affiliation**. Used in combination, these competencies describe the skills and behaviors needed to successfully manage remote workers and be an effective manager whilst working remotely.



Survey results suggest that Remote Management is likely to become more common:

- 40% felt strongly that their employer should provide opt-in remote work options
- More than 75% indicated that they would like to continue to work remotely, at least occasionally
- 54% reported that they would like to primarily work remotely

- IBM 2020



What skills lead to success in managing remote work?



Talogy has identified three core competency areas which are important for remote managers



Agility

How managers respond to change and help people handle challenges independently



Achievement

How managers adapt their work practices to drive action and ensure accountability



Affiliation

How managers overcome the physical distance required to coach others and build a supportive team

Agility

Remote managers need to be agile in a number of ways. Because communication is often technology-enabled and they are not surrounded by co-workers for support, remote managers are likely to need to adapt their processes and procedures for communication and other tasks. They are also likely to find themselves learning new skills and/or using new programs to overcome the extra barriers they face and will require a positive attitude to stay focused and productive while overcoming those obstacles. Agility is a key theme in remote management which entails these concepts of adaptability, learning agility and resilience, each of which is described in more detail below.

The Importance of Adaptability

Remote work environments may require more adaptability from remote managers than other work arrangements. Adaptability refers to individuals' capability of modifying their attitudes and behavior to changes and new circumstances. Remote managers have to attend to both individual and team factors related to productivity which are otherwise more controlled in a traditional work environment, such as ensuring all have a safe and efficient office setup and creating a team culture that aligns with organizational values. Without a productive workspace and boundaries, remote managers and workers are more likely to experience conflict between work and personal life. A highly adaptable remote manager is likely to handle this challenge by establishing clear priorities to ensure consistent results without inducing burnout. However, a remote work environment makes it more difficult to stay informed about shifting priorities and managers may have to work harder to ensure team members are up-to-date and aligned. Flexible remote managers proactively seek to understand where flexibility is likely to be needed and help others re-prioritize work to avoid setbacks or feelings of frustration which may naturally accompany change.

The Need for Learning Agility

Continuous learning is a characteristic needed for many modern jobs. An individual's appetite for learning and their ability to quickly pick up new skills can often make the difference between a high performer and

one who is simply getting their job done. When working away from a traditional office setting, the benefits of having a learning-focused work style are heightened because there are many tools that can be leveraged to enhance effectiveness, and it is important to encourage resourcefulness given the high degree of independence inherent when remote work. Managers who have a strong preference for stability and tradition may struggle to embrace new technologies, which can limit the frequency and type of communication they use and reduce their efficiency in a remote environment. As such, their team may not be aware of resources for remote employees and may feel like their manager is not available to them when questions arise about their goals and objectives. On the other hand, managers who enjoy learning new skills and are willing to employ different methods of coordinating remote work are more likely to be available and connected to their team, suggesting new methods to make remote work easier and more productive.

Why Resilience is Critical

When working remotely, individuals receive less immediate feedback than if they were in a physical office. Those who are naturally high in resilience can more easily bounce back from setbacks, regardless of their work environment. They tend to look internally to get perspective on the issue and use the situation as a learning opportunity. Individuals lower in resilience may be less effective in a remote environment, where isolation can make it easier to spend time dwelling on mistakes and setbacks. They also may feel overwhelmed by the additional responsibility and challenges introduced by distance. Being resilient is important for employee effectiveness and workers' well-being. It is also important for remote managers to demonstrate emotional control, adaptability, perseverance, and positivity to their team. How leaders react to challenges and change sends a direct message to their employees, who are likely to emulate them. Though there is less interaction in the virtual workplace, effective remote managers can still demonstrate how to effectively handle all types of situations, good and bad, by communicating effectively at the group and individual level and providing others a source of stability and direction whenever it is needed.

Achievement

Driving and achieving results as a remote manager requires independence, ownership and action-orientation. With a lack of readily available colleagues, managers may find themselves in situations where they need to gather data, analyze information, and make decisions more independently. Additionally, the distance between employees is likely to require remote managers to take action they may not usually do in the workplace. Further, unstructured work environments can lead to distractions and reduced productivity for some employees, and there may be some who find themselves in this arrangement though it is not their preference. Remote managers are responsible for managing any additional barriers to performance introduced by distance and holding themselves and their team accountable to achieving goals and objectives.

Valuing Analytical Thinking

To properly analyze a situation, managers must gather information in a purposeful manner to understand issues and resolve workplace problems. Strong analytical skills require the ability to determine what needs to be done and who should do it, combined with creativity to brainstorm solutions and the work ethic to see those plans through to fruition. Analysis is highly valued in any workplace setting, but it becomes more difficult to access people and information needed to solve problems and understand the context when interpreting data. In the absence of typical assets, some may struggle with solving basic problems and may be unable to create new approaches to their common processes. Managers who are more analytical will be likely to see remote work as a new opportunity to be creative and approach problems in a new way. They should not be affected by the barriers remote work presents, but rather be resourceful in pursuit of information they and their teams need to draw solid conclusions about what actions to take.

Initiative as a Core Driver

Remote work environments often provide workers with the exact job characteristic that many of them have been craving – autonomy. Research has shown that empowerment, and the freedom to plan how and

when to complete work, increases trust and leads to higher motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). However, some individuals who are lower in initiative may not respond as positively to the lack of structure, lessened coworker support, and reduced supervision that comes with a remote work environment. They may rely on the accountability that a physical workplace provides for an extra boost of motivation. Completing work virtually can also feel more difficult at times as it often requires a few extra steps or communications. For managers who are high in initiative and more naturally action-oriented, their internal motivation often overcomes the lack of structure in the work environment and they tend to find ways around obstacles that can arise in their own or their team members' work.

Why Ownership is Key

Taking ownership as a remote manager can take many forms. For one, effective remote managers take responsibility for their own performance as well as the performance of the team. They take accountability for ensuring that their team has the information and resources they need to be effective and successful, despite their distributed nature. As a remote manager, keeping open communications with their team to have the knowledge of when obstacles are impeding progress is vital in achieving effective results. Because spontaneous office check-ins and meetings are less likely to happen in a remote work environment, managers must take extra steps to reach out formally and informally to gauge progress. Additionally, remote managers must find ways to manage their own workloads by planning, following through and meeting important deadlines. Some managers do not work as effectively remotely, focusing on the easier or more interesting activities without the pressure of those who are physically present. Managers who are high in individual accountability are internally driven to own their work and complete it when expected. They can motivate themselves regardless of their environment and are aware they need to adjust their style for team members who need more directive motivation.

Affiliation

Affiliations. Relationships. Connections. All of these are essential for information to flow throughout an organization and for employees to collaborate and work together toward a common goal. How managers interact with their team members and colleagues has a direct impact on their relationships, communication, and effectiveness. Remote environments make building and maintaining these relationships more difficult. Therefore, it becomes even more important to identify remote managers who create a climate of teamwork, provide the coaching and development their team needs and appropriately show compassion despite their distance.

Coaching and Developing a Distributed Workforce

Remote managers have the added challenge of coaching without the opportunity to observe performance in person, yet they must still get to know each employee personally to understand their unique strengths and areas for development. Once known, they can help guide team members to grow their skills and build additional capacity. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to coaching, especially when leaders and/or their employees are remote. Remote managers neither want to be perceived as micromanaging nor as being too hands off. The key is to maintain continual dialogue with employees to inquire as to where support is needed and to help them overcome challenges. Remote managers must take care to individually consider each employee's capacity for added decision-making responsibilities and to set boundaries appropriate for them. It is important to be explicit about expectations and to be approachable, so people know you will ensure they have the resources and information they need to achieve goals independently.

Demonstrating Compassion

Remote environments by their nature reduce the richness of interpersonal interactions. Even when there is consistent communication with others, the connection is not the same. As a result, it can take longer

and require more effort to establish strong connections with colleagues and team members. To effectively manage a remote team, trust and respect are particularly important between managers and their team members. At times, remote team members can feel isolated, experience setbacks, and struggle with prioritizing their work from a remote setting. They need to know that their manager is someone who will listen to them and will not distrust or judge them, and compassion is key. This includes showing empathy for individuals' concerns and respect for their unique circumstances. This is especially challenging when there is physical distance and technology-enabled interactions set the tone for relationships, yet critically important as research has shown that compassion leads to a sense of psychological safety which often translates to job satisfaction, engagement, commitment, and positive organizational citizenship behaviors (Frasier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan & Vracheva, 2017).

Team Building from a Distance

In today's organizations where work teams are commonplace, managing a remote team can be challenging. Members of effective remote teams reach out early and often to align on dependencies and to exchange information. Some team members communicate less frequently than others, which may require extra effort on the part of remote managers to ensure quieter members are communicating with the rest of their team, have the resources they need, and are on track. Remote work, compared to working in traditional office environment, requires all involved to be more proactive about collaborating with others. This means taking steps to build rapport quickly and to clarify individuals' roles and responsibilities within work teams. Remote managers must foster relationships with peers and other leaders while also ensuring that their team members are building networks, making connections, and collaborating effectively. Effective remote managers create opportunities for themselves and their teams to communicate more frequently with colleagues and to build trust and alignment around shared goals.





Conclusion

In summary, effective remote managers require a mix of competencies related to Agility, Achievement, and Affiliation. While these characteristics are important for most jobs regardless of environment, they become especially important for managers with remote work and will become increasingly necessary as more people embrace remote work. When teams are dispersed, specific challenges must be addressed around social interaction, communication, and work style. Without proper efforts to close the gaps introduced by distance, the anticipated benefits of remote work may not be realized. Instead, there may be disruptions to the coordination of work between dispersed teams, the quality of relationships between supervisors and their subordinates may decline, and collaboration with other colleagues is reduced in remote work environments (Allen et al., 2015; Calvo 2013), but effective remote managers play an essential role in how remote work is experienced and are the key to closing the gaps introduced by distance for themselves and their employees.

It is possible to learn how to help others build and maintain relationships, effectively use communication channels, and adjust one's leadership style to be successful outside of a traditional office environment. The first step in doing so requires gaining personal insight and understanding where one may need to grow and develop. With this information, remote managers can identify ways of improving and gather feedback from their supervisor, trusted colleagues, or their team to further focus their efforts and realize their potential as a remote manager as well as to optimize the potential of their remote teams.

It is critical to support remote managers and employees to ensure their success in the new remote work environment and completing a robust and valid personality assessment is an ideal place to start. This provides specific actionable insight into the success factors for remote managers as well as guidance for development. Talogy can help with this need by providing a well-established personality tool and personalized insight report, specifically built around the Remote Manager Competency Model, enabling you to know where to focus development efforts and bring organizational benefits more quickly.

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