

[‘Tips and Tricks to manage large teams in a remote environment’](#)

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WFH for my team of around 1600 employees spread across 170 locations was, by no means, easy! Since call centres had to be shut down overnight, we embarked on a massive communication blitzkrieg, informing our customers of the various digital avenues (AI driven chatbot, WhatsApp, portal, mobile app, etc.) available for uninterrupted servicing. Our branch teams reached out personally via phone calls to more than 20,000 distribution partners, informing them that they could continue to service customers via the app and the portal we had made available to them.

Having successfully led a large, distributed team in a remote environment during the last 18 months, here's a compendium on the challenges faced during the journey and the solutions thereof.

At the outset, we need to understand the challenges that employees may face when working remotely. These include lack of personal supervision and social / physical distancing. There is a plethora of solutions available to tackle this.

Digital orientation – The time that employees save on commuting to office can be well-spent on digital learning & development on recalibrating their approaches to the new normal. The

beauty of digital training is that you no longer need to cram programs into packed days since folks no longer need to travel. You can stagger sessions, resulting in greater retention and effectiveness.

Emotional connect – Even as employees are socially and physically distanced, the key is to continue to ensure emotional and digital connect via digital engagement programs. A very important aspect which helped us here was when we converted adversity into opportunity by moving from the traditional paradigm of employee engagement to the new paradigm of family engagement. When we organized a weekend MasterChef, we had family members participating with gusto!

Over-communication – While communication is often under-rated as a tool in such situations, in the remote working environment, over-communication is the lowest gear in which you need to drive! Since employees no longer have access to watercooler conversations and the informal communication networks that spring up in every firm, the need for communication goes up manifold. Daily check-ins and a strong operating rhythm are of the essence here.

Outcome focus – While traditional supervision may tend to focus on the process (login time, idle time et al), in a remote environment, unlearning this aspect and a quick alignment to complete focus on outcomes is the key. As long as the outcomes are not compromised upon, this reorientation may even result in productivity benefits in the form of self-monitoring and elimination of unnecessary layers.

Recalibration – A shift to a remote way of working indicates not just a platform shift, but a cultural shift. The non-traditional sounds of the doorbell ring, the cry of a baby, the barking of the pet dog are very much a part of the new landscape. These should be welcomed. A puritan approach in terms of replication of a complete office-type set-up is impractical and can result in unwarranted frustration. Enjoy the human touch!

Counselling support – Since mental health is a key focus area, many firms have set up counselling support wherein employees can discuss any area which is of concern to them with counsellors. And while this support system is set up, the key is the communication from the leadership – asking for help is not a sign of weakness!

Creativity – A remote way of working offers tremendous flexibility to various units to set up their own ways of working. A firm announced a “50 is the new 60” norm during this period. They scheduled meetings for 60 minutes but ended up them in 50 minutes so that employees have time for breaks between meetings! Similarly, firms have meeting-free days so that employees have the flexibility of focussing on their own work.

Schedule time for non-work related bonding – I organized “chai pe charcha” sessions with various team members in batches. They were pleasantly surprised at being invited to scheduled meetings wherein the focus was not on project reviews, but on simply getting to know them and understanding how their families were faring and how they were coping with the remote way of working. The feedback was awesome and we then took it to a new level, once we covered all of them, by organizing sessions based on themes.

Celebrate virtually – We came up with a home grown employee, now family, engagement program, christened “Celebrating You”, to keep employees engaged. Apart from virtual birthday parties, digital singing / music / painting competitions, we also organized yoga and mental stress-buster sessions. Given the extra importance the employees attach to such engagement programs during these socially distanced times, our engagement scores ended up being higher than the pre-pandemic scores!

Human touch – A very simple yet effective way to bring in a human touch is to use video as much as possible! Also, as the office becomes the new off-site (!), physical meetings, while adhering to social distancing norms, once or twice in a year, ensure that the bonding stays intact!

As we embrace this new normal fully, we need to be agile to incorporate trends quickly. On the whole, our remote work environment management is reflected in the results – our customers have indicated their satisfaction via our two key metrics (the lowest on grievances and the highest on NPS) and our employees have articulated their happiness via the key metric of engagement scores (scores during the pandemic higher than the scores prior to the pandemic)! As Gartner says, success in a hybrid work environment requires employers to move beyond viewing remote or hybrid environments as a temporary or short-term strategy and to treat it as an opportunity.

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