Flexible, Remote and Online Working guide
Part 2: Team management and pastoral care protocols

Remote working isn't just an online version of our offline workplaces. Getting it right isn't as simple as copy-and-pasting our meetings, business functions or delivery platforms online. Nor is it about using different platforms to do the same things we did before. Or just something-we-have-to-put-up-with-until-the-world-goes-back-to-normal.

Remote working is a discrete form of team and workload management that requires a discrete set of skills and behaviours. Investing in those skills can help your organisation survive and thrive into the future, not just during C-19.

Part 2: Team management and pastoral care protocols

There are no short cuts when it comes to remote management. Looking after teams at a distance requires us to be both more intentional and more creative, and to communicate more frequently and effectively than we ever have before.

Communication platforms

Ways of communicating in person don't automatically work well online. We have to rethink the platforms we use to communicate with our teams and stakeholders, and how we use those platforms to communicate more often, more effectively, and in more (and more varied) ways.

It helps to set up different communication channels for different purposes. This may include:

- **Synchronous communication tools** (for when people are online at the same time), such as:
    - Team or stakeholder meetings (interactive tele- and/or video-conferencing)
    - Team or stakeholder broadcasts (non-interactive podcasts or video live streams)
    - Team catch ups (in teams or one-on-ones, phone or video calls)
    - Team/Peer catch ups (phone or video calls)

- **Asynchronous communication tools** (for when people are not online at the same time) such as:
    - Emails
    - Team or stakeholder meetings (audio or video recordings, or minutes)
    - Team or stakeholder broadcasts (audio or video recordings)
    - Team collaboration tools (shared work documents)
    - Team/Peer chats (text, GIFs and emojis)

You may choose one digital product that does all of these in a single platform (like Microsoft Teams), or a combination of digital products (like Zoom, Slack and Google Docs).

Communication techniques

The loss of informal office interactions and the effect of isolation on remote workers can have a big impact on team wellness and productivity. This means we need to put more effort into communication than ever before - perhaps to the point of over-communication (at least when starting out). We need to be more strategic, more human, more present and more available. This may include:

- **Updating team contact lists (including emergency contacts).** Make sure your team contact lists are up-to-date and include all of your communications platforms. Circulate these to everybody in case one of those platforms fails. Make sure everyone's emergency contact details are up to date too, in case you can't get in touch with someone working from home.

- **Using different communications platforms for different purposes** (see 'Communications platforms' above). Provide clear guidelines about which communication channels are to be used for which purpose (such as only using text-based chat tools for non-work conversations).

- **Using different communications styles for different purposes.** A well-placed gif or emoji on a social chat platform can increase connection, show you're listening, encourage team interaction, and help share your human side when tensions are high. (But wield these carefully – humour is subjective, and everyone is particularly sensitive right now).

- **Preferencing video chats where possible**. Using video can be awkward, but it's important. It helps address the communication issues caused by the loss of non-verbal cues, increases connection, context and understanding, and can give you visual clues if a team member isn't coping. Try to change prolonged email, text or chat conversations into video calls instead. (Video can be an issue for those with limited bandwidth, but it's still good to start with video if possible, even if you have to move to voice-only calls).

- **Signing on and off.** If your communication platform/s have a way to signal that you are online, use it to show when you're available – not just at the start and end of the day, but during if needs be. Make yourself as approachable as possible.

- **Standing up.** Some organisations start their days with regular team stand-ups. These short, practical online meetings can help confirm what needs to get done and who needs any help, while helping provide structure and connection.

- **Checking in**. Make sure you check in with everyone in some way every week. Pay attention to who's contributing to group meetings. Make sure you have recurring one-on-ones with everyone in your diary. Try to listen, understand and respond to individual needs. Encourage team members to discover (and share) the remote working practices that work best for them. Encourage them to check in with their peers.

- **Giving feedback** (positive as well as negative). Acknowledgement is crucial in remote working environments. Putting effort into positive feedback creates a space in which negative feedback is taken seriously. Tell people when they're doing well. Say thanks. Praise them in group settings. Show them you're grateful.

- **Asking for feedback too**. The transition to remote working, even if temporary, is a process. Be open about issues. Ask for advice from your teams. Crowdsource solutions. Listen to your team and, wherever possible, update your protocols and procedures in response.

Clarity

Increasing communication on its own isn't enough. We also need that communication to be clear. This includes setting expectations about workload (see 'Accountability'), how and when that work will be done (see 'Flexibility'), how our teams are going and what we can do to help (see 'Empathy').

Be mindful of your delivery. When writing, try to streamline topics or ideas to a single conversation. For example, a number of emails that each have their own topic can be easier to keep track of than a single email covering multiple topics. When speaking, try not to go off on tangents or break up your sentences. Try to be as calm as you can.

Be mindful of your messages. This is particularly important in situations where people might be fearing for their organisation or their jobs. Try not to speculate. Try to be as consistent as you can.

Be mindful of your method. Provide clear guidelines about which communication channels should be used for which purpose, and model that behaviour.

Accountability

Not being able to watch our teams at work can make some managers doubt those teams are working effectively (or at all). Loss of visual accountability can lead (usually unfairly) to a lack of trust. This, in turn, can lead to micromanagement, which makes more work for everybody and only breeds resentment and mistrust.

What we actually need is to trust our teams more, which may involve changing the way we think about and measure what they do. This may include:

- Focusing on accomplishments, outcomes and goals rather than tasks or hours.

- Working with team members to set clear expectations about how their work will be measured and their short- and long-term targets.

- Checking in regularly to discuss their progress, or what resources or support they need.

- Asking team members about what they've achieved, rather than how they've achieved it.

- Avoiding employee monitoring software or unnecessary email oversight at all costs. (However, setting up shared documents to keep track of progress may be helpful in ensuring business continuity in case of staff illness or change.)

If team members meet their targets, does it really matter which or how many hours they worked in a day, or the process they used? Refocusing on outcomes rather than hours may feel revolutionary to some more traditional organisations, but can provide significant benefits in terms of team wellness and productivity both online and back in the office.

Flexibility

Remote work routines and rhythms are likely to look different to those we find in an office – particularly in the midst of C19.

It is no longer reasonable to expect team members to be able to focus their full attention on work during 'work hours'. They may be sharing computers, fighting for bandwidth (or even just a quite space to take calls), or balancing work with home-schooling or caring responsibilities.

Not to mention adjusting to the usual lag in response time that happens when people aren't in the same place or time zone. Do we really need them to be working traditional office hours within such an environment?

Making sure there's real flexibility within your flexible working policy is the key to getting remote working right. This may include:

- Focusing on outcomes rather than hours (see 'Accountability' above).

- Setting expectations about internal and external response times, and sharing those expectations with the world. This could be through:

  o Updating voicemail greetings and email auto-replies with information about likely response times.

  o Updating email signatures with information about flexible working arrangements. For example:

    ▪ "I am working from home on flexible hours. If your matter is time sensitive, please do not rely on email. Call or text me instead on [PHONE NUMBER]. I will respond to your email as soon as I can."

    ▪ "We work flexibly at [NAME OF ORGANISATION]. If I'm sending this message outside of normal business hours, it's because it suits me. There is no expectation that you will respond outside your own working hours."

- Sharing team calendars and encouraging team members to keep them up to date, including blocking out their non-working times. If it works best for them to work between 5-7am and 5-10pm, so be it. If they're achieving their outcomes, who cares?

- Ensuring team schedules overlap only as much as is necessary to get the job done. If necessary, set a common time window that everyone is on the clock (being mindful of people working in different time zones).

- Setting team meetings during common time windows, and recording or repeating them to accommodate different work days or time zones if required. Even better, think about ways to achieve the same outcomes in ways that don't need everyone online at the same time.

- Leading by example. Share and signal your availability with your team so they know when they can reach out. Don't model or celebrate working long hours.

Empathy

We are all still adjusting to the world of C19. Many of us are shocked or scared. Many of us are frustrated or exhausted. Some of us are still in denial. The uncertainty effects everyone, as does the inability to plan for a future we cannot yet know. We are bunkering down to ways of working and living that are completely unknown to most of us. And some of us, of course, are affected even more – through loss of work or livelihoods, illness, or the loss of those we love. There is panic and grief all around. How (and how quickly) we adapt to this change will be different for us all.

As leaders of teams, we need to make personal connections. Ask people how they're doing. Listen to their answers. Don't try to 'fix' or rush them. Try to avoid dismissing their concerns or addressing them with a barrage of facts. Try to avoid reminding them that they may be better off than others. Comparisons aren't helpful, but being there for someone really is.

Share your own feelings and experiences to help increase connection (but don't overburden your team or forget the direction of your duty of care). Keep a look out for visual and verbal clues to how team members are coping. And keep checking in as things change.

Listening can take a lot of time, which right now feels in very short supply. If you can't be there for your team as much as you'd like, delegate your pastoral care responsibilities until you can. And make sure to document your organisation's processes and resources about wellness, mental health, and where people can turn to for help.

Remote workplace culture

It's not just about the work, of course. It's also about the workplace, and making sure our workplace culture is as healthy, productive, effective and enjoyable online as it is in the office.

When moving our workplaces online, we need to put thought into the team and social strategies that can address the loss of office-based interactions that keep us connected, informed and enjoying our work. This means we have to formally design how we communicate informally, and consciously build our online communities. This may include:

- Creating opportunities for people to come together that aren't about work: such as virtual coffees, drinks or shared lunches.

- Celebrating special occasions and milestones.

- Recognising success.

- Theming social catch ups.

- Holding silly competitions.

- Asking team members to suggest social activities.

- Encouraging team members to customise their virtual workspaces (at least for internal meetings).

- Encouraging acts of sharing: working from home hacks, lockdown recipes, pictures of their views, pets or home offices, GIFs about how they're feeling.

- Encouraging acts of generosity: such as lockdown buddy systems or pro bono work.

It's worth the effort to keep everyone connected and working well remotely-but-together online.

About the writer

Kate Larsen is a Non-profit & Cultural Consultant with more than 20 years' experience as a leader and senior executive in the non-profit, government and cultural sectors in Australia, Asia and the United Kingdom. She has particular expertise in the areas of workplace culture and wellness, online communication and communities, and increasing access for marginalised groups. This includes experience managing remote-working teams at a state and national level.

If you need advice on how to set up, lead, train and manage your team remotely or online, please get in touch at kate@larsenkeys.com.au.