5 Things To Do As You Transition To Remote Work

With the coronavirus pandemic, you may have suddenly found yourself working from home bunkered up next to a copiously stocked fridge and a nervous roommate rattling off hourly news updates.

While increased snacking and a distracting roommate don't necessarily make for ideal working conditions, there's potential for much more serious problems to arise. After all, this is an unprecedented movement of workers from office to remote, and the movement essentially happened overnight.

Research shows that one of the gravest threats to remote employees is a feeling of isolation. In a joint study conducted at UT Austin, Yale, and NYU, researchers found that remote workers who felt isolated experienced a sharp decline in performance, felt a decreased sense of "belonging" to their organizations, and had an increased desire to leave their companies altogether.

The good news is that you can curb isolation and many of the other problems arising around remote work by paying extra attention to emotional intelligence (EQ). Establishing emotionally intelligent practices in your remote work can help bridge the gap between online work and in-office work.

Below are TalentSmart's five essential strategies for communicating as effectively online as you do in person.

1. Meet by video. Ever been on a phone call where you share an idea you've been developing for a long time, and you're met with a wave of silence in return? You inevitably run through the list of possible reactions as you wait to hear something back: Nods of approval, skeptical eye rolls, or furrowed brows... These types of miscommunications are inevitable on the phone because humans are by nature visual learners and communicators.

In fact, research shows that our brains naturally pay more attention to visual cues than auditory ones during conversations. Even our memory sharpens in response to what we see rather than what we hear.

FaceTime, Skype, and Zoom play into our natural visual strengths. They also replicate in-person meetings more effectively than a conference call. On a conference call, people can mute themselves, get up and walk around, organize their desks, respond to emails, and flip through Instagram while other people talk. On a video call, people are accountable for their attention in the same ways they are at an around-the-table meeting. Video also allows emotions and reactions to surface in real time in front of the group.

2. Encourage breaks. When it comes to remote work, the default tends to be distrust. Managers seem to want to know about every minute of everyone's day to make up for the fact that they can't monitor butt-in-chair minutes like they could in the office. In reality, the default should be trust. Remote workers need breaks to walk, eat, use the bathroom, and socialize, just like they do in an office. Don't make them feel guilty for every minute spent standing up from their desks. Instead, monitor aspects of the big picture like the quantity and quality of work completed.

3. Cut out multitasking during meetings. One of the biggest killers of remote communication and productivity is social loafing during calls. You put ten people on a call, and people inevitably begin to feel like they don't need to be there. The result is usually muted phones, email checks, and snack breaks. In remote work, when meetings are your only form of communication, it's especially important to make them count. Here are four methods TalentSmart uses to keep remote meetings on track, involved, and communicative:

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Call on people to share opinions. Calling on individuals keeps people mentally present during meetings because people are reassured that their opinions matter. No one wants to get caught off-guard in front of the group and waste everyone's time either.

Assign people tasks or roles. Instead of just letting the meeting play out passively with people contributing as they please, ask people to come in with questions, content, or research on a particular topic.

Address people individually. Carve out a time during weekly meetings (we like to use the first fifteen minutes) to conduct a round-robin meeting where people open up about what they're doing personally and professionally. If this is new to your team, try having the person leading the meeting share first to help set a comfortable precedent for everyone else.

Meet by video. Like we just emphasized in the previous section, video meetings elicit more responsibility and add an authentic personal touch.

4. Encourage conversations that stray off the beaten track.
In an effort to understand what makes their best teams succeed, Google closely analyzed over a hundred of its teams for a year. The researchers looked for patterns in personality, IQ, and team structure, but none were discernible. Instead, they found a specific mentality that the best teams all shared: psychological safety. Psychological safety is a group mentality where people feel comfortable taking risks and don't fear rejection or ridicule. Google teams that felt this sense of safety had more equal contributions from all of their members, read their teammates' tones of voice and body language more effectively, and were more skilled at recognizing when a teammate felt excluded or upset. How did the teams develop psychological safety? The answer was simple: By opening up to each other about personal challenges or events in their lives.

So how do you recreate an environment of safety in a remote world stripped of water-cooler conversations and hallway run-ins? You have to make an active effort to strengthen bonding. It can be as simple as setting aside fifteen minutes at the beginning or end of a meeting to check in personally on each member of the team. You can also encourage people to hold their own virtual water-cooler conversations by meeting virtually for lunch or a snack.

5. You can't communicate enough.
The tricky thing about remote work is trying to understand what the people around you are thinking and where they're coming from. When communication is minimized or confined to formal meetings, people inevitably miscommunicate and feel a growing sense of distrust and isolation. Nip this problem in the bud by erring on the side of over-communication. Sure, there are the usual things you would need to communicate about in an office, like the questions you have, documents you can't find, and clarity on some email instructions. But, there are also some forms of communication more unique to remote work, like updating bosses with progress on a project more frequently or taking a few minutes to converse casually the way you might in an office.

If you manage people, set up times of open availability for anyone reporting to you. Try to schedule one-on-ones more often than usual. Also, be sure to communicate encouragement and emotional support, even if it feels unnecessary. Recognition goes a long way in fighting isolation by making people feel valued and connected to the organization.

Bringing It All Together

The secret to remote work is giving those extra nudges of effort to show people where you're coming from as well as trying to understand where they're coming from. These strategies all work to build a high-EQ remote workplace

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because they focus on using technology to make our interactions more human, not less. Maybe there's a silver lining to all the chaos and change going on right now: People are learning new ways to communicate and get work done, and this has the potential to make work more flexible moving forward.
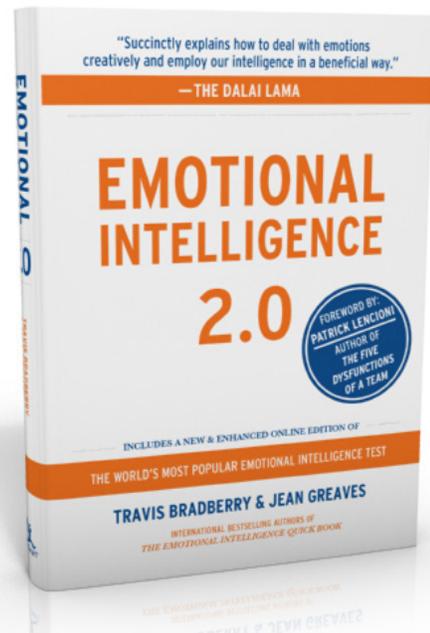
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