

Managing effective remote teams inclusively



“We are not working from home – we are at our homes during a crisis trying to work.” — Dame Helena Morrissey, Chair of the Diversity Project and founder of the 30% Club

The COVID-19 pandemic has made [working remotely](#) the daily reality for millions of people. Many people are feeling anxious. They are worried about loved ones, worried about losing their livelihoods and, in many cases, sharing their workspace with young children, teenagers and partners. Others are feeling alone and isolated.

The key to working remotely is maintaining open communication, understanding that every situation is unique, allowing flexibility in how people work, and ensuring a team feels connected and supported. Connection is also more important now than ever to create an environment of empathy, compassion and individual flexibility. It's also an opportunity to work differently and embrace a more honest way of looking at how things get done.

After several years of leading a 100% remote team, I've learned that different circumstances require different responses. There's no one-size-fits all way to work remotely. What is required is a [curiosity from leaders to get to know their employees](#), and to find out what they are facing and respond accordingly.

Now is the time to demonstrate trust, assume positive intent and give others the space to find their new work rhythm. It's also about understanding that productivity looks different at a time like this. It's about letting go of old, outdated ideas of how work gets done at a desk and about embracing a new normal of productivity.

[Catalyst has always been an advocate of remote working](#) and our team spans the globe, connecting through regular video conferencing for work and watercooler moments. We've developed a framework we've found to be effective:

Establish core hours: Within core hours, it is OK to go for a walk, go to the gym or buy groceries. Remote workers should be empowered to manage their lives while communicating and collaborating with their team members. The challenge of working remotely is you often work more, not less, so finding balance within the day is key. As a leader, it's key to “leave loudly” and model, authentically, what balance looks like to you. If you go for a jog, be visible doing so, let the team know. They will learn it's OK by your example.

At Catalyst, we also use a [Communication Charter](#), which defines when members of the team are present and how global hours are dealt with for meetings and conferences. Catalyst's [Managing Your Remote Team Inclusively Knowledge Burst](#) offers practical strategies leaders can use to make remote teams a success, like setting clear expectations, giving people ownership of their work, and creating communication channels in virtual settings.

Technology: Video conferencing, white boards, and chat functions are the bedrock of a remote workers day-to-day contact. Ensuring that team members are up-to-date and trained in technology and not making assumptions about people's comfort levels with technology is key. When possible, use video so you can see and react to visual cues, even when you're having a bad hair day.

Communication and structure: Remote teams miss out on the office banter, but this can be recreated with a quick morning 'chat'. This is a great way to start the day and allows all team members to give an outline of their work priorities and any work-life conflicts. It isn't about keeping tabs, but about sharing information and providing structure to the day. Frequent communication is essential to foster a transparent, supportive environment.

It's also important to avoid miscommunication and written communication is much more likely to be misinterpreted. Sometimes picking up the phone is the best way to communicate if emotions are high. In either case, communicate and assume positive intent, particularly now when people are feeling anxious and juggling various components of their lives in new ways. We use emojis to indicate tone and gifs for fun. It's essential to build trust with your team as you would in person.

Reimagining the watercooler: At Catalyst we have several instant messaging channels for work as well as for informal conversations where people share funny stories, pictures and gifs to brighten people's days. These casual "watercooler" chats build empathy and trust, reduces isolation, and encourages team morale and camaraderie beyond the traditional channels.

A virtual coffee/tea date: Creating a relaxed atmosphere and space where colleagues can brainstorm or discuss a specific project makes it a 'moment.' It's important to have a shared experience and cultivating inclusion.

Intentionality: Frequent engagement is key, but how much is too much? Now is not the time to load up calendars filled with meetings. Is that meeting essential? Part of finding the new normal of meetings can initially be more frequent communications and periodic check-ins, even if only to see how someone is doing. Don't wait for scheduled meetings to make contact. In some instances, reaching out just to check-in can have much more impact and feel more authentic than loading up people's calendars with meetings.

It can also be overwhelming managing a team remotely, so it's key to share your struggles with the new environment. [Leaders lead by example](#) and remote leaders who want to get the best out of their team need to show the [hallmarks of inclusive behaviours](#), including:

- Humility – we are all in this together, don't be afraid to show your flaws, insecurities and doubts;
- Curiosity – get to know your team, ask questions, find out how they are managing, etc.; and
- Authenticity – show up as you are.

Years ago, I took an unplanned team video call wearing my hair rollers. There was a lot of laughter, but it subconsciously gave our team permission to do the same. Oftentimes, we think we must behave a certain way, but sometimes simply showing up as human – warts and all – can be what employees need right now. According to Catalyst's [research](#) on "psychological safety", creating a place where employees can be themselves at work, feeling safe at work to voice their opinions and ideas, allows for a more innovative and inclusive workplace culture.

Finally, now is the time to hit the pause button and give colleagues the room to stretch and breathe. It is important to remember that everyone is coping with this crisis differently. They require space, time and understanding from their leadership and colleagues. A company that treats its workers with kindness and compassion at this time of crisis will be remembered and rewarded.



Notes:

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