

# Tips for managing teams remotely in the first few weeks during the Alert Level 4 lockdown

Managing staff working remotely involves us using old skills in new ways. As managers, we need to [manage workflow, build a sense of team connection and support individuals](#) to feel part of their community. There is a range of [resources](#) that can support you.

This resource is designed to support you in the initial stage of supporting your team when they are starting to work from home because of the Alert Level 4 lockdown. These tips will help you provide your remote team members with the support they need to function as an effective member of your team.

## Be aware of the challenges your staff may be facing

These are some of the challenges that the individuals in your team may be facing and which may have an impact.

- Social isolation
- Distractions at home – particularly with schools closed and other family members working at home
- Concern about family and friends
- Concerns about having to learn new technology and different ways of doing things whilst in seclusion

Some strategies to support remote teams in the first couple of weeks include:

- Do not underestimate the **time** it may take your team to set up a working space. Some may be dealing with internet issues or shared spaces and it may take time for them to establish a routine. Reassure people that this is not BAU in their normal work environment and therefore some activities are going to take longer as they set-up. Encourage them to take time to test out and become familiar with any new communication tools like Zoom or Microsoft Teams.
- Talk with individual staff about how their **home circumstances** may affect their ability to work (e.g. may be sharing a dining table as a workspace, limited access to the internet) and talk about how this might be managed during the transition to working at home.

- Talk with staff about the importance of [keeping well whilst remote working](#) including set a time to take regular breaks to stretch, go outside in the fresh air and exercise – this is very important during this period of household isolation. You and your team could join the [Health and Wellbeing Yammer site](#) led by the University's Occupational Health Team.
- **Routines and habits** provide security and stability – especially important for remote working during lockdown. Have a discussion with the team about what could help cue them into remote working – share the lessons learned in the first few weeks as part of your team meetings or team conversation channel on Microsoft Teams. For example, if staff bike to work then go for a bike ride before they sit down to work at home, start work at the same time as normal if possible, consider wearing work clothes and perhaps making a packed lunch as normal. Talk about the ways in which, if individual circumstances allow, staff might be able to signal to members of their household when they would appreciate a quiet time focused on their work, such as putting up a “Deep work” sign. Consider having lists or reminders of priority activities stuck up on the wall near the computer as a way of helping to focus on “what we need to be doing”
- Establish **structured daily check-ins**. This might be a mixture of team calls, emails and texts or individual ones.
- Ensure staff are familiar with the **communication tools** you are going to use with them e.g. connecting using VPN, Zoom, emails, Microsoft Teams, Slack or Trello. ITS have put together a useful [package](#) to help you and your team set up for working remotely. Remind staff unfamiliar with using Zoom, to allow time to get ready and connected before the meeting starts, so that they don't arrive feeling rushed.
- Provide opportunities for remote **social interaction**. This might be as simple as having time at the start or end of team calls just for non-work items, a virtual lunch, or a short morning tea chat to do a quiz. While these types of events may sound artificial or forced, experienced managers of remote workers (and the workers themselves) report that virtual events help reduce feelings of isolation, promoting a sense of belonging.
- Remember that the rapid move to remote working because of COVID-19 means that people are experiencing a range of **responses** from shock, grief, anger, concern about the future and the health of other family members right through to problem-solving and wanting to "do something". This means that different members of the team will be experiencing different reactions and these change day by day or hour by hour.
- Provide **encouragement and emotional support**. Especially in the context of an abrupt shift to remote working, it is important for managers to acknowledge stress, listen to staff anxieties and concerns, and empathise. If a newly remote staff member is clearly having difficulties but not communicating this, ask them how they're doing. Even a general question such as “How is this remote work situation working out for you so far?” can elicit important information that you might not otherwise hear. Once you ask the question, be sure to listen carefully to the response, and briefly restate it back to the employee, to ensure that you understood correctly.

- Let the staff member's stress or concerns (rather than your own) be the focus of this conversation. The [University webpage](#) includes strategies people can use to recognise and cope with stress and anxiety.
- Research on emotional intelligence tells us that [employees look to their managers for cues](#) about how to react to sudden changes or crisis situations. If a manager communicates stress and helplessness, this will have what Daniel Goleman calls a "[trickle-down](#)" effect on staff. Effective leaders take a two-pronged approach, both acknowledging the stress and anxiety that employees may be feeling in difficult circumstances, but also providing **calm reassurance** and affirmation of their confidence in their teams, using phrases such as "we've got this," or "this is tough, but I know we can handle it," or "let's look for ways to use our strengths during this time." With this support, staff members are more likely to take up the challenge with a sense of purpose and focus.

## Start with yourself and lead by example

How you maintain **your wellbeing** affects your ability to lead and manage staff. Remember the safety briefing on an airplane; put your oxygen mask on first in order to be able to help other people. This also applies to leadership. Every hour, [take three deep breaths or look out of the window](#) and pause – managers need to remain **calm** in rapidly changing situations. Talk regularly with people in your circle of support. Avoid making irrevocable decisions when you are hungry or tired – consider putting a two-minute delay on your sent emails. Every day, get some sleep/rest, exercise, drink plenty of water and eat regularly.

## Create a team plan

Creating and sharing **a plan** for your team will help to prevent any misunderstandings that may arise when people no longer see each other in the workplace. By having a plan that clearly sets out things like communication and responsibilities, you can prevent potential issues from arising later. Staff will be aware of when they will be in contact with each other and the activities for which each team member has responsibility. This can help them plan effectively and can also be useful when reacting to developing situations.

## Be visible

When leading a remote team, you tend to have less regular face-to-face time with team members. This can sometimes be an obstacle to maintaining close working relationships, therefore it is important to schedule regular meetings with all team members and think about **ways to keep in touch** with each other.

## Be equitable

Some staff will need to be in contact with you more than others. However, it is important that all team members are aware of your presence and **accessibility**. Make sure that you always schedule regular

time with team members and stay in close contact with everyone. You may have to dedicate resources to specific team members on occasion, but this should not be at the long-term expense of the other members.

### Build team spirit through regular team contact

It is important for a team's manager to foster the sense of **connectedness**, particularly during this time of lockdown, rather than a group of individuals working on related issues. Encouraging your team members to get to know what their colleagues are doing and how it relates to them can help to create a greater sense of team spirit.

### Utilise technology

Try to schedule regular **online calls** amongst the team members. By interacting with each other regularly as a group, they can begin to develop more positive team relationships. Email communication is less personal; while it is a necessary tool, use other communication methods and encourage team members to do the same. Although remote teams don't have the same amount of face-to-face time as more traditional teams, using technology such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams allows team members to become more familiar and comfortable with each other.

### Have a conflict resolution strategy

**Conflicts** will arise within most teams from time to time, but these can be more complicated to resolve when working remotely as there is less opportunity to deal with issues face-to-face. When people feel stressed, conflict and tension is even more likely to occur. By having a plan in place, staff know that they can follow certain steps to deal with any conflicts quickly and without the problem spiralling. So, talk from the outset with your team about how people can raise concerns and tensions. This might be along the lines of saying "We are experiencing significant change as we move to working remotely under lockdown, and that can mean that tensions and misunderstandings can arise between staff members. If you have a concern then please think about can you "bring it up and wrap it up" with the person and if not then please talk with me, don't sit on the tension. We can work it through".

### Finally

The working environment may have changed for both you and your team; supporting your people is more important than ever. They need your help to adapt to the ever-changing environment as well as to find and maintain their energy, purpose and resilience in the face of a range of evolving challenges.

"I've learned that **people** will forget what you said, **people** will forget what you did, but **people** will never forget how you made them feel." Maya Angelou