U of SC Human Resources

HOW TO SUCCEED AS A (VIRTUAL) TEAM LEADER

The shift from face time management to virtual management is not straightforward or simple. Virtual teams are fundamentally different from regular work teams. They cross boundaries related to geography, time, and organization and use technological means to communicate and collaborate. These differences *can* be overcome with planning and intentional management. This resource is designed to help you navigate this shift while maintaining productivity, trust, and communication.

All employees, managers and non-managers are experiencing these changes at the same time. While policy and procedure mandate a change, the process that individuals will go through is a **transition**. Individual people will move through the transition in different ways. While you may have some team members who are ready to implement a fully virtual work environment, some are still in the process of accepting these changes, and others are balancing the change in their work environment along new vulnerabilities and adjustments to other aspects of their home life.

As a leader, you can gauge where an individual team member might be on this spectrum of change by talking with them about their feelings, concerns, and answering questions. Pay attention to whether the employee is focusing on the future or the past and whether they seem to be in more of an emotional or rational frame of mind.

These general considerations will help you prepare to implement virtual work arrangements.

- *Accountability is key*. Set expectations for completing projects or performing ongoing duties. Put the details in writing to the degree possible. Define work systems and timelines. Establish a regular meeting schedule so everyone knows the cycle of when work should be completed. Send an agenda for the meeting so people have time to prepare. Have clear deliverables. Have employees track hours and what they were working on during those hours.

- *Check in regularly* using virtual communication tools. Make sure each person knows what tools should be used for communicating different types of information and the right contacts. For example: what system will you be using for conference calls vs. one on one check-ins? Are there channels available for informal conversations (remember that people will be missing the information that comes from passing in the hallway)? How will you communicate information that is time-sensitive or emergencies?

These suggestions are more specific to processes that you will want to maintain during the time of virtual work. Most of these are fundamental management skills that you already use every day, with special focus on the new skills required for virtual leadership.

- *Trust is essential.* If employees trust you and their team to be working toward common goals and a shared vision, they naturally collaborate and engage more with each other. Reiterate your mission and vision regularly, especially as it changes based on work needs of your department. Establish shared goals and connect the work of individuals and sub-teams to those goals.

- *Make sure that everyone is on the same systems.* For example, if there are shared projects and communications, make sure that everyone is comfortable using the tools. Be sure that everyone knows the guidelines for how documents will be stored and edited. If you have one team member editing a document in a separate platform, information will get lost in translation. Use project management tools and practices and document everything you can about work that gets done. Know where to get tech support. Consider doing some team training with the tools you want to use.

- *Discuss professional work environments*. For example, where will your team members sit during video conferences or virtual meetings. Prepare to get a window into the lives of your team members and don't be judgmental. Not every colleague has a home office and many may not have been planning for a virtual work environment. Discuss appropriate attire to wear during a video call unless you're comfortable with someone logging in wearing their pajamas.

- *Discuss work hours to be sure they overlap.* While a traditional 8-5 schedule may not work for your entire team, make sure employees are working at least 3-4 hours of the same time so problems can be addressed in real-time.

- *Be intentional.* Physical distance and communicating through a screen make it easier for miscommunication to happen and make it harder to listen. You may also face accessibility concerns for employees. Use good listening techniques, ask people to repeat what you've said, and build action plans so everyone is on the same page.

- *Check in with employees more often.* Remote workers are more likely to feel alienated or disconnected. Ask these team members about their work, but also talk with them about how they are feeling (physically and emotionally) as they cope with the changing rhythm of their life. Choose video channels over email and phone whenever possible.

- *Keep an eye out for new stressors.* Because of social distancing measures, introverted team members may be forced to spend more time around their families with less quiet time to themselves. Parents whose children are home due to school closings may be trying to balance keeping children occupied with getting productive work done. Extroverts may feel trapped and isolated and may need a different type of social interaction. Help people name their feelings and identify their stressors. Know the resources available to help team members cope with these changes.

- *Be clear about your availability.* While everyone else may be working virtually, that does not mean you must be accessible every moment of the day. Let your team know when you have

open office hours when they should call you with questions. Be sure to let people know how you prefer to be contacted after hours and how they should contact you in case of an emergency.

If you have any questions regarding teleworking during the COVID-19 event, please reach out to Human Resources at hrtrain@mailbox.sc.edu.