REMOTE MANAGEMENT:

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION
FOR SUCCESS

BY SCOTT OFFERMANN

As reliance on technology increases, many companies are encouraging employees to work remotely in order to reduce the office space required, streamline management structure and increase candidate pools. The result is "remote management" — the supervision, direction and mentoring of employees who are not located in proximity to and in regular physical presence of managers. Employees, including both mangers and subordinates, are often placed in remote management situations with little understanding and even less support, resulting in failure at all levels.

While there are several causes behind remote management failure, the main reason is because those employees do not take the time to understand the preferred communication process, do not recognize both the personal and professional needs of the participants and do not commit to the additional time and effort required for success. When participants take the time to understand manager, subordinate and peer preferred communication styles in addition to their personal style and are willing to commit the appropriate time and effort required, remote management can be very successful.

Communication approach

Remote management utilizes a different approach requiring more forethought and focus than traditional face-to-face management. A significant reason for breakdown of the remote management approach is the failure of participants to recognize their own interaction preferences and needs. This is the way individuals prefer to communicate, including not only the means of communication, but the frequency, content, cadence and tone of these interactions.

DEFINING THE PARAMETERS

To create a strong remote management relationship, the employee and the manger need to identify and understand how they prefer to interact and communicate. This includes how often formal and informal communication occurs, what information is required for operating the business and, just as importantly, what is required for the manager and subordinate to feel successful.

The frequency, content and cadence will vary with each individual based on his or her needs. At one end of the spectrum are people who want little to no direct contact with colleagues and prefer a solitary job, requiring little interaction. On the other end are those who are social butterflies and only thrive in direct contact with others who require frequent interaction.

The recognition of how much and the type of feedback given and received is also essential to creating a positive remote relationship. Just as in a traditional management relationship, it is easy to have managers who over- or under-communicate. Remote management relationships are more fragile due to the isolation from management. Too much or too little feedback will damage the remote

relationship since the participants do not get the opportunity to receive immediate feedback, creating frustration and a feeling of insecurity.

Understanding the preferred level of interaction with people creates the foundation for the remote relationship by reducing uncertainty. This understanding is essential since it is necessary to fulfill individuals' personal needs and expectations as well as to provide the support needed to make them feel like they are a part of the team. This not only includes work information but also immediate performance feedback, direction and mentoring.

SELECTING THE TOOLS

In addition to the frequency of contact, clarifying the preferred tools of communication is also essential. This involves specifying the method each team member is the most comfortable using to interact with others. Whether it's face-to-face, telephone, sending emails, texting or instant messaging, everyone has a preferred method of communication. Managers and employees need to recognize each other's preferred communication tools in order to achieve effective communication.

There are times when the communication method is determined by the content or audience. For example, if you have to share consistent information among a large group of people, an email or a group meeting is often the best method. When discussing information with individuals, a phone call or email may be more appropriate. Determining the best form for the given requirement will allow managers to make clear how communication will be made. With this understanding is also the clarification of how given situations will be communicated and expectations on the speed of reply.

MANAGEMENT STYLES

Once you have an understanding of the desired quantity of interaction and preferred communication channels, it is possible to define the appropriate management style. This is the way a manager and employees interact, request information and provide direction and feedback.

Typical management styles include micro management, macro management, task-directed, outcome-directed and process-driven methods. The management style that aligns with you personally will result not only in satisfying business requirements, but more importantly support a feeling of success and reduce frustration. Consider how you manage or how you prefer to be managed. Understanding this will assist you in setting the expectations for the highest success.

PREFERENCES AND COMPROMISE

The information discussed so far is about defining the frequency and the tools used for communication. While this well thought-out information will help in traditional management, it is essential to the success of remote management.

It will also help in recognizing what is not working and enable dialogue to determine if it can be corrected, or if the relationship will never be successful. For example, if your preferred communication is in person or by telephone and the manager only will communicate by email or text, this relationship will not be successful. Both participants will need to work on a compromise. If one cannot be reached, there will be little chance of success. Using personal preferences to identify and discuss communication will provide a strong understanding between the participants, recognizing that these communication styles will need to be altered based on situation, audience and urgency.

Adjusting methods for remote settings

How do we use this information to create successful remote management relationships? In a traditional management relationship there is engagement in a variety of different face-to-face opportunities, both official and unofficial, that enable us to learn about

manager and employee expectations, challenges and successes. These include informal drop-in meetings, watercooler conversations, and peers overhearing conversations and injecting opinions and suggestions, providing the immediate feedback necessary for creating success. Nonverbal cues are also key components of communication. When an employee is displaying frustration or confusion in a traditional management setting, it is easier to identify and mitigate the problem, provide mentoring, direction and clarity.

Working within a remote environment, however, there is a need to actively replace face-to-face opportunities. This requires a conscious effort and additional time. It is far too easy to overlook the need to regularly connect with remote employees.

As a manager you are required to understand and replace the traditional methods of team building. As an employee you will need to support the manager in replacing these traditional activities. This includes identifying what information you want and need to know, and the level at which you wish to be engaged, as well as providing access to your thought process.

There needs to be an understanding of what information is important to the manager and the subordinate and how that information is delivered, the frequency and the method of delivery based on the situation. This communication will allow you to mentor the remote employee or be mentored by the supervisor setting expectations and preferences.

The recognition of how much and the type of feedback given and received is essential to creating a positive remote relationship.

A successful remote management relationship must be consciously constructed. In the beginning, more time will be required to learn the preferences of the participants. This usually means a defined time to speak with employees to discuss activities and issues.

To create the foundation, a daily meeting should be scheduled. This time should be scheduled during the employee's normal working hours and not for the convenience of the manager. These meetings are typically unstructured and should be used to create a rapport and provide immediate information and feedback on expectations, challenges, corporate direction and personal challenges. As the rapport is built, the frequency can be reduced. The frequency of subsequent meetings will need to be determined based on the participants' needs and situational requirements.

These meetings do not remove the need for formal, structured meetings such as weekly or fortnightly, one-on-one meetings and team meetings. When you schedule a meeting, it is important to follow through with the established meeting time. Do not cancel because of conflicts. It is essential that these meetings are made the priority. If you continually reschedule, cancel or cut meetings short, you send the message that the remote employee is unimportant. Take the time to reschedule and make yourself available.

Success is proportionate to effort

Remote management can be a highly successful and fulfilling way to conduct business. Success is generated by taking the initial effort when beginning the interaction and dedicating the time required to generate success. This includes understanding communication requirements, defining the tools and setting expectations. It also includes providing mentoring, interaction and support, which are foundational requirements for a successful remote management relationship.

Clearly understanding and articulating this information will generate acceptance from all participants and provide a path for personal and professional success. Each participant must also be willing to dedicate the time required to make the remote management successful.

Remote management is not an easier way to manage. It requires a deeper understanding of communication preferences and a significant time commitment to create a strong and successful relationship. **FMJ**

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