

Remote Teams Need Real Communication

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Due to recent COVID-19 guidelines, many employees are being asked to work from home. That means managers must lead their teams remotely, and they're wondering how they can stay connected. From phone to email, video to texting, social media to shared digital communications or co-working platforms, the ways we communicate with individuals and groups in the virtual world are multiplying. But which one is the best?

Know Your Communication Goal

There are endless reasons a manager may reach out, which means how and in what ways you communicate will vary. Before choosing your preferred communication method, ask yourself a few questions:

- Do you need to hold a team meeting?
- Do you need to conduct a one-on-one disciplinary meeting?
- Is the meeting to deliver a new update or policy?
- Will the meeting be to brainstorm about an upcoming event or project?
- Is the meeting to just generally check in with someone on your team?

Know Your Virtual Technology

Not every virtual office is the same. We all likely have email, phones, and SMS/messaging/texting at our disposal, but many of us also have options like video, digital communications platforms (Slack, Asana, and so on), digital co-working and collaboration platforms (Google Docs, Trello, Basecamp, SharePoint, for example) and more available too. While there is often an urge to just depend upon the comfort of phone calls and emails for everything you need to communicate, they're simply not "the best" options for every occasion.

Match Your Tech to Your Goals

Here is where technology and humanity may meet nicely with a little bit of insight and planning on the part of a savvy virtual manager. Let's look closer at the five examples we gave earlier:

Is it to hold a meeting? If it's just with one person or a small handful of team members, using a conference call line may work. But this is also a great opportunity to get everyone on camera so the meeting can feel more appropriately intimate and to ensure everyone is plugged into the session. Conference calls are seen as a great time to multitask in the virtual world, but it's difficult to do a quick load of laundry during a meeting when you're on camera. Video calls are also great because screens, documents, and overview materials can be shared with ease.

Is it to conduct a one-on-one disciplinary meeting? Well, email is certainly out. And sure, this is often handled well on the phone. But if you have to deliver difficult or complex information? Often this too is where being on video can make a difficult conversation more functionally empathic and insightful. On camera, you can see each other—including expressions—and the other person's potential confusion, frustration, or anger. As a savvy manager, knowing how someone is experiencing something anywhere in the range of important to complicated is essential to being able to manage in real time. You want to know the gravity of the topics covered are landing, and video offers the best opportunity for this experience.

Is it to deliver a new update or policy? You know that old saying, "This meeting could have been an email"? Yep, this is one of those. Unless the policy is earth-shattering or highly complex, these kinds of managerial communications are best delivered by email or perhaps over digital communication in a co-working or collaboration platform. This is just information being communicated, and it doesn't require the intimacy or, quite frankly, the time of a call or video.

Is it to brainstorm about an upcoming event or project? Again, this may be a great place for a phone or video meeting, but here is where you start to value the tricks, tools, and purpose of digital communications, co-working, or collaboration platforms. While each one is a bit different, the intent is often the same: These platforms allow members of a team to contribute to a project, question, or inquiry at the same time or on their own time—with the aid of being able to add photos, links, video/audio, and more. And it's well organized, structured, and in one place, allowing everyone to contribute in ways that work best for them and everyone's needs.

Is it just generally to check in with someone on your team? In a formal, scheduled capacity, we'd recommend you use the phone or video meeting. Just a quick, simple need? Use a text, SMS, or message. Need an update on a project or client? Again, consider using one of your digital communications, co-working, or collaboration platforms. Your needs as a manager to provide any form of outreach are not one-size-fits-all, so your digital communications efforts shouldn't be either.

Building Consistent Remote Team Culture

One thing we'd like to leave you with beyond the practical insights we've already shared is another way to think about digital communications. You don't always have to treat every communication need like a potential potluck. Some of your team members may struggle on camera. Some may be hard to "read" on a call. Others may be uncomfortable with new or complex technologies.

In these cases, you have some inner managerial decisions to make. Do you exempt some forms of digital communications to accommodate certain members of your team? Or could you instead use these moments to build some culture within your virtual management efforts? Suggesting, for example, that all one-on-one weekly calls are on camera or that all team project notes are communicated in Task For Trello are great ways to build a kind of communications culture that can have a lasting impact and help all members of your team feel confident about their own best ways to communicate.

You are a human manager learning to communicate with other humans aided by the power of technology. These efforts should allow you to think about the value of the human experience as supported by the best version of technology we can leverage for the goal. The power really is in your human hands; the technology just helps it virtually travel around the world.