PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN A REMOTE TEAM

Most obvious to managing a team – remote or not – is that we want our team to perform well.

If only the means of doing so were as obvious!

Managing an individual's performance well, especially someone who is remote, is challenging, perplexing, and definitely not one-size-fits-all. In fact, according to our survey, "managing individual performance, while not being in-person" was the third most popular response as "the hardest part of a remote manager's job" (8% of remote managers said this).

Questions of "How do you know if someone is actually working?" or "How do you help someone from afar, if they're underperforming?" or "How do you continue to encourage and coach someone who is performing well?" are tricky questions to consider and address.

From our survey of 297 remote managers and employees, and insights from 1,000+ managers in The Watercooler in Know Your Team, here are my observations on the potential answers around managing individual performance in a remote team…

Nix your nagging paranoia.

When you're in an office, you see folks come in. You see them leave. They seem "busy." They seem productive. So, you get this nice, warm, reassuring fuzzy feeling that things are indeed "going to plan." Stuff is happening. All is well.

When you're not in an office and everyone is remote, it's different. Yes, you might see when someone is online or not. But all of sudden, you really don't know if they're working. What if someone is just on Facebook the whole day? What if they're out with friends or just spending their entire day running errands?

Your answer to that should be: So what?

Time applied does not equate to progress made. It's important not to conflate the two. As a remote manager you have to kill that nagging voice inside that asks, "Well, are they working?" You can never answer that truly even when you are in-person. So why focus on it in a remote environment?

Rather, instead of becoming consumed by your own paranoia, remind yourself that you want to focus on the results. And, the path to results is creating the best environment for a person to achieve those results.

A huge part of performance management is in fact trusting that the team you picked, and you hired, and you chose, is up to the job.

Hold consistent, rigorous one-on-one meetings.

Most remote managers will tell you how heavily they lean on holding regular, meaningful one-on-one meetings in order to support their team and encourage their performance. This is true, of course, in in-person environments. But when you're remote, these one-on-one meetings become even more crucial.

According to our survey, the most popular frequency that remote managers hold their one-on-one meetings with their direct reports is every single week (32% of remote managers said this), and the most common duration was 30 minutes to one hour (40% of remote managers said this).

Most remote teams will use Zoom for video conferencing for these one-on-one meetings, and ask that the video be turned on. This allows you to read body language, smile at one another, and feel as close as you might to being in the same room.

Perhaps most importantly, you want to spend time properly preparing for your one-on-one meetings. You'll only get out of your one-on-one meeting what you put in. Here are a few points of emphasis to consider when preparing for your remote one-on-one meeting:

- Take the first 10 - 15 minutes to talk about something fun, light-hearted, and more personal in the beginning. Since "building trust and rapport across the team" is the #1 thing remote managers should prioritize (33% of remote managers said this), you can utilize your one-on-one meeting to fulfill this purpose.
- Ask questions you couldn't ask in an all-team chat setting or something you wouldn't post publicly. One-on-one meetings are valuable, sacred time to get feedback and get to the bottom of issues. Save your status reports or project updates for a separate meeting, or your designated tool you use to communicate those things.
- Actively clarify expectations and ask for feedback about yourself. Some of my favorite one-on-one questions I like to regularly ask are topics that are always hard to gage from a distance, such as: "How is your workload?" and "What about my management style would you change?" and "What have I done lately that's been annoying?"

To save time preparing for your meeting, you can use our One-on-Ones Tool in Know Your Team to get hundreds of one-on-one question suggestions and one-on-one meeting templates.

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Review performance – but it doesn't have to be a formal performance review.

When it comes to performance management, the natural thought is that you should utilize an actual performance review. This is a popular route within remote teams, as we found that 54% of remote managers survey do some sort of performance management review.

- However, more recently, performance reviews have become less en vogue. When we asked our 1,000+ managers in The Watercooler, the majority said that they did not use performance reviews formall, but sought out other methods instead. Here were some of their tips and advice around performance reviews:
- Have lightweight, meaningful check-ins twice a year, combined with regular one-on-one meetings.
- Use every fourth one-on-one meeting as the time to talk about performance instead of the traditional of the traditional performance review cycles. This is something Patty McCord, former VP of People at Netflix, recommended in a 2015 TED Talk. It's also what we do here internally at Know Your Team.
- Keep salary adjustments completely separate from the performance review and have it handled by HR (though performance certainly plays into this). Here's a Harvard Business Review article that discusses this more in-depth.
- Tools like feedback surveys in Know Your Team can nudge employees in the right direction.

Here's an example of a one-on-one meeting agenda that I personally used through our One-on-Ones Tool in Know Your Team that focuses specifically on performance management:

Personal connection

- How's life? What's new?
- What are you most excited about your vacation next week?
- Anything have you worried or down lately?

Performance + feedback

- As you reflect on your own performance, personally, what stands out to you? What have you learned or observed about yourself?
- What's a recent situation you wish you handled differently? What would you change?
- Would you be open to me sharing some feedback with you?
- How is your workload?
- As you reflect on my personal performance, what stands out to you? What have you observed and wish was different and/or stayed the same?
- When have you been annoyed, peeved, or bothered by me and something I've done?
- What do you find challenging about my management style?
- What do you appreciate about my management style?

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Takeaways and Next Steps:

- What takeaways and next steps do we both have?

Figuring out how to manage performance well shouldn't be as daunting as it seems. Focus on creating an environment where you can trust your team, hold rigorous one-on-ones, and have a regular discussion about performance throughout the year instead of just as at a one-off time. Better performance begins there.

Takeaways:

- Skip surveillance: Focus on results, and truly trust your employees.
- Hold consistent one-on-one meetings – it's recommended to do so once a week, and for 30 minutes to one hour.
- For performance reviews, incorporate them as lightweight check-ins at multiple points in the year, instead of relying on one, giant review once a year.