5 Steps to leading distributed teams:
How to take your team to operational excellence
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How to lead your distributed team for real business impact

Maybe you inherited a world-class distributed team, or maybe your organization is growing fast and so are your distributed teams. You might wonder what you can do to lead your team in a way that makes a real business impact, like increased employee engagement and productivity. You might also be wondering what you can do to reduce turnover. Whether you want to build new leadership skills or brush up on the ones you have, we’ll show you five steps to leading distributed teams for real business impact.
The importance of great managers for distributed teams

Great managers make or break the employee experience. On distributed teams especially, people need to know they have a leader who supports them, and has their best interest at heart.

“If you are not taking good care of your people, you could be losing them, or it might be hard to attract them.”

Josh Bersin, Founder and CEO
What do today’s employees need?

Officevibe’s most recent research shows that:

1 in 6 employees say they don't have open discussions with peers where everyone’s opinion counts.

26% of employees say their organization doesn't give employee suggestions enough importance.

1 in 3 feel truly inspired by their company’s purpose and mission.

58% of employees are completely satisfied with how often they communicate with their direct manager.

34% of employees are unhappy with how frequently they receive recognition.

These challenges affect many teams, and you’re not alone. With the right approach, you can overcome these barriers and lead a happy, high-performing distributed team.
What makes a skilled distributed team leader?
Skilled distributed team leader traits

Skilled leaders understand and leverage employee strengths (and their own), are always looking to improve, and are always learning. The best leaders have the following qualities:

- They lean into their (and others’) strengths.
- They listen actively with the goal of understanding.
- They constantly hone their communication skills.
- They know the importance of building mutual respect.
- They harness the power of candid, constructive feedback.
- They champion accountability for themselves and for their team.
- They recognize good work and give credit where credit is due.
How can I become a great distributed team manager?

“Giving employees great autonomy and flexibility allows people to feel independent and empowered while still feeling like a part of something bigger. This leads to happy, loyal employees with a rich quality of life, which in turn leads to an amazing culture.”

Larry English, President and cofounder

Since we made the transition to distributed work in August 2020, we’ve learned a lot about distributed team challenges. From this and our ongoing research on employee expectations, we’ve come up with these five steps to better lead a distributed team.
STEP 1

Strengthen your team’s communication
When employees work remotely, it’s essential to make communication clear, streamlined, and consistent.

**Develop consistent communication norms**

- Meet with your team and have an open discussion about where information is shared, (Slack, email, project management software, shared docs, etc.), how it is shared, and by whom.

- From there, you can establish team expectations when it comes to response times, on and off hours, and the best communication channels for various information.

- Model your set communication norms and keep them accessible to everyone. Encourage people to hold each other accountable to the commitments you’ve made together.
Create more team communication opportunities

Team communication goes beyond one-and-done rule-setting. Skilled managers of distributed teams make better conversations — both work-related and casual — a part of their team’s day-to-day.

“1 in 6 employees say their manager doesn’t create opportunities for open team discussions.”

Officevibe’s Pulse Survey data
Improve team communication opportunities by...

- Selecting the best communication tools to meet team needs.

- Reviewing recurring team meetings so each one has a clear agenda and output.

- Encouraging asynchronous conversations to improve projects and deliverables.

- Leaving time to check in and check out at the start and end of every call.

“There is nothing more important in a group remote project than casual communication. Not just official emails and work updates, but the ability to sit back and chat.”

David Rabin, Vice President, Global Commercial Marketing

Lenovo
Enhance your personal communication style

Working on your communication skills helps you better keep up with your team, and better keep them updated on what they need to know.

Here’s how:

- Figure out the key messages you want to share ahead of group conversations.

- Make sure everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts in team discussions.

- Listen carefully and respond to questions and concerns, and offer to follow up when you don’t have an answer.

- End every team conversation with a recap of the key points discussed and any next steps.

What you say is just as important as how you say it. Leaders need to have a clear, concise, and well-thought-out communication style.
STEP 2

Forge a space for real talk with your team
It’s imperative that you deeply understand the needs and expectations of your distributed team. Since you can’t run into them in the office kitchen or halls, you must go out of your way to build a regular cadence of listening to your distributed team. To do that, you need to establish trust with your team members and make space for real talk.

Real talk means you have honest and helpful conversations that drive productivity and engagement. Without real talk in distributed teams, managers may fall into a false perception of what is going on with their team.

(LED) Here’s how to keep up with your team’s needs.
Solicit regular feedback to keep a pulse on engagement

Having regular opportunities for employees to provide upward feedback — especially for distributed teams — allows managers to actively offer support where and when their team really needs it. This can be done with:

- Pulse Surveys that measure key metrics of employee engagement, and track trends over time.

Officevibe’s Pulse Survey tool helps you see the whole picture and cluing you into what your employees won’t tell you directly, to reveal what you might be missing.
• The option to give written anonymous feedback, so team members can express themselves honestly and safely.

• Two-way conversations around employee feedback, so managers can better understand how people feel and take action.

These help you improve team performance and employee engagement — not to mention spot any issues that arise early, so you can take action.

Create the conditions for great work

Part of a manager’s role is to anticipate challenges and proactively offer solutions. Addressing challenges before they become overwhelming issues quashes short-term upsets and sets your team up for long-term success.
Actively improve the employee experience on your team by:

• Holding regular workshops with the team to tackle current problems together.

• Scheduling biweekly or weekly retrospective meetings to improve processes or reflect on success factors.

• Holding monthly team social hours where employees can connect on a personal level.

These all offer you opportunities to listen and proactively offer solutions to employee concerns. Including the entire team in problem-solving creates an environment where employees feel respected and involved. Officevibe was purposefully built to help you create a space for real talk and better employee engagement.
STEP 3
Connect your team to each other and your mission
Connection has emerged as one of the greatest challenges of distributed teams in our research. Employees are feeling disconnected from their peers, from company values, and from the collective purpose and mission they contribute to.

Driving connection has never been more important for team leaders.

“\textit{It’s very important that when people are not co-located, there are efforts made to help that team remember what their common vision is and see themselves as a team, an entity that’s working toward something together.}”

Pamela Hinds, Professor of Management Science and Engineering, Stanford University
Create psychological safety on your team

According to the Center for Creative Leadership, psychological safety is the belief that you won’t be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.

Officevibe’s anonymous feedback tool gives employees a safe space for honest communication, opening up discussions you wouldn’t have otherwise.
Emphasize the company vision and team purpose

As the team leader, you need to ensure the team is always pointed due north. Here’s how:

• Keep the team’s purpose, goals, and objectives at the forefront of discussions and decisions.

• Remind your team of their shared vision and purpose when conflict or disagreements arise.

• Empower your team to be self-directed in their work, and ask them how their decisions align with the team’s goals.

Being distributed, it’s easy for teams to start to feel disconnected, emotionally drained, and alone. Keeping the purpose and vision in mind helps relieve the burden of separation.
STEP 4
Make one-on-one conversations more impactful
Impactful one-on-ones are essential to keeping a high-level view of your team’s work dynamics and drive employees’ individual professional development. It’s important to use these moments wisely and connect with employees on a human level to build foundations of trust and understanding.

“Your reports need an unstructured time with you, at least every two weeks, where they can provide updates. Vent. Share their fears and concerns. Their anxieties. And you can help them. Pump them up.

Or just be their psychiatrist, sometimes.”

Jason Lemkin, Founder of EchoSign
Level-up your one-on-ones

Working on a distributed team can be challenging, but it’s important you don’t forget about or procrastinate on your one-on-ones. Your virtual one-on-one meetings are crucial to employee engagement. It’s important to keep these conversations fresh and uplifting.

The best way to level-up your one-on-ones is to focus on your employee’s purpose. It’s often easy for distributed team members to feel isolated from their work and the greater purpose of their contributions.
Here are a few things to help make one-on-ones more productive:

• Start by sharing positive feedback, from things you’ve witnessed and appreciated to the things other members of the team and clients have commented positively on.

• Take the time to discuss company values. Share examples of how they’ve embodied those values, and ask them to share their own examples.

• Ask them where they feel they’ve made the greatest impact on the business, and how their work has contributed to team and company objectives.

• Find out what excites your team member most about their upcoming work. But don’t stop there; dig a little deeper into why. What’s motivating them? What’s giving them confidence?

• Finally, spend some time coaching them on available resources that will help them learn and grow in their current job and in their career.

Remember, skilled managers have a good read on their team members, and the only way to have that is to ask meaningful questions, and really listen to their answers.
STEP 5

Keep employee recognition at the forefront
According to Officevibe’s Pulse Survey data, 34% of employees are unhappy with how often they receive recognition.

Yet, 92% of employees say recognition is meaningful when they receive it.

A recent study tells us that 53% of employees say more appreciation/recognition would make them more likely to stay with an organization. This is an important statistic as we build more distributed teams because 64% of employees attach more importance to recognition when working remotely.

McKinsey’s insights place rewards and recognition as top concerns for the new distributed world. When managers of distributed teams build a solid strategy to recognize team members, they see the impact of stronger engagement, increased employee morale, better customer service, and lower turnover.

This creates serious ROI such as 50% higher productivity and as much as a 20% increase in business outcomes.
Establish a vibrant culture of recognition and rewards

Just talking about the benefits of recognition won’t help if you don’t know where or how to begin to increase team member appreciation. Here are a few suggestions:

• Build appreciation into your one-on-one meetings. Something as simple as “I see how hard you’re working and it means a lot to senior management” can have a big impact.

• Take a moment at every weekly team sync to give some meaningful appreciation to your team members.

• Take the opportunity at cross-team updates to highlight the excellent work your team has done and the people who have gone above and beyond.

• Always give credit where credit is due. If you’re presenting your team’s work at a company-wide meeting, name the people who made it happen.

• Connect rewards to company goals. For example, once a month, each team across the company presents what they accomplished during the month. Then everyone votes on which team...
had the greatest impact on your yearly goals. The winning team gets to choose a nonprofit organization to get a donation from the company.

• Offer an employee-of-the-month award at a team or organizational level.

**Drive peer-to-peer recognition**

Recognition from peers can be really meaningful to employees. Yet only 56% of employees say their company truly encourages peer-to-peer recognition, according to our data. Here’s how to create a peer recognition culture:

• Offer time in weekly team meetings for peer-to-peer recognition. Ask everyone to give a kudos to another team member.

• Use channels like Google Chat, organization-wide email, Slack, and LinkedIn to share peer stories.

• Celebrate wins together and make time during work hours for these moments.

• Recognize goal achievements, promotions, work anniversaries, and other important milestones.
Every team faces challenges, and distributed teams are no different.
Distributed teams are part of the “new normal,” which means leaders need to hone their skills for dispersed team management. It’s important to help people (employees, managers, leaders) thrive under these conditions. With these five steps, you can lead your team to do their best work in spite of the challenges, and garner the benefits of happy distributed teams.

Officevibe helps you with powerful employee feedback and real-time insights, and better one-on-ones for employee development. You aren’t alone in the new world of dispersed teams. Let us help you make the biggest business impact.

Lead your dispersed teams with Officevibe.
We’ve come pretty far from where we were two years ago. But are we there yet?

No matter how many times we think we have something figured out, there will always be new discoveries that change what we thought we knew.

This series is about helping leaders find a way to navigate this new universe called distributed work. It’s about helping people continuously adapt, and strengthening what they can anchor themselves in.