MANAGING ACCOUNTABILITY

MANAGING REMOTE TEAMS SERIES

Lessons from 20 Years of Research and Experience

Joanie B. Connell, Ph.D.

Managing Remote Teams Series
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Preface

B y the time the COVID pandemic hit, we had been working on and consulting to remote teams for over 20 years. Remote work was old news. For the most part, the companies who wanted to support remote teams knew what they were doing and people who wanted to work remotely were doing it. That changed when almost the entire world was sent home.

Companies who had never planned for people to work remotely suddenly had to figure out how. Managers who were used to "walking the halls" suddenly had to learn how to manage employees electronically. People who were used to team meetings and lunches were suddenly isolated at home. Managers needed help, not only with the basics of getting the equipment together, but also with how to communicate, manage performance, keep people motivated, maintain team cultures, all the while staying visible in the organization.

I decided to offer our expertise for free in the form of four webinars on remote management: *Managing Accountability, Managing Motivation, Managing Conflict, and*

Managing Distractions. We were, in fact, one of the first consulting firms to do so, in March 2020. Shortly after, others followed suit and people became so tired of webinars they stopped attending them.

It is now the end of 2021, and the pandemic is still going on but some companies have begun to allow or even require that people come back into the office to work in person. Many companies, however, have found they must offer remote and hybrid work solutions to keep employees—or find new ones—during The Great Resignation. Even after the reshuffling settles down, it is clear that remote work is here to stay.

Technology has improved and circumstances have shifted over the 20 years that we've focused on remote work, but the fundamental success factors have not. The books in this series provide managers with strategies to successfully manage high performing remote and hybrid teams. The writing style is very informal because the language originates from the spoken words in the free webinars. We edited some, but decided to leave it in the spoken style to make it a less formal, easily approachable read.

I hope you enjoy these books and learn some strategies to help you and your teams achieve greater success and happiness in your remote work environments. Please feel free to reach out anytime to our team for guidance, support, or to share success stories.

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MANAGING ACCOUNTABILITY

from the

Managing Remote Teams Book Series

The Remote Work Context

Before thinking about how to hold employees accountable, it is useful to consider who you have on your team and, if you have a choice, who you would want to have on your team in a remote situation.

Normally when hiring people to potentially work remotely or work from home and we're employing we have an assessment process that we go through. There are three levels of assessment that we follow for hiring remote workers.

We assess whether the person is a good fit for working from home or some other remote location. Are they capable of doing so, do they understand the technology well enough, and are they experienced enough to get the job done without a lot of supervision? We also assess whether they are trustworthy people.

Next, we consider the job fit. Is this a job that is easily done from home or remotely? Certain jobs require access to materials, customers, and all sorts of things that require people to be there in person, and there are a lot of creative jobs where people really need to see things. This can be a challenge for certain jobs, such as construction, maintenance, and hospitality.

The last part is the organizational fit. Is the organization equipped in terms of infrastructure and culture to handle remote workers? Culturally, some organizations are much more hands-on while some organizations are much more controlled. There might be safety reasons, such as HIPAA, or other reasons that require people to have confidential information, so it really depends on a lot of factors.

When there is not a good fit in any of those three levels, the people involved have to figure out how to make it work. For example, during the COVID pandemic when essentially everyone was sent home, there were a lot of people, jobs, and organizations that were not well suited to remote work and many changes had to be

made. People had to rearrange their lives, find ways to thrive (or at least survive) online, and managers—the subject of this book—had to figure out new ways to manage people.

Change can create discomfort, confusion, and anxiety. It can lead to ambiguity and miscommunication of expectations. It can take a bit of time to introduce remote work. Managing remote teams tends to require a lot more time and effort than you might be used to if you managed people in an office. The good news is, generally speaking, remote workers tend to be much more productive and flexible workers because they are able to get things done and manage their schedules while skipping their commute.

Accountability Challenges for Remote Teams

How is it different to keep employees accountable when they are working from home and working remotely in other locations? It is not fundamentally different than when they're working in the office, but certain typical managerial challenges tend to be exacerbated when in a remote environment. Three common challenges for remote managers are trust, communicating

expectations, and measuring progress. Accountability stradles all three challenges.

Trust

Looking at trust, it is important to ask the question, what is trust? This comes up for both the employer and the employee. There are four different factors or facets of trust and we can think of them as the four Cs: character, competence, caring, and context.

The Four Cs of Trust
- **C**haracter
- **C**ompetence
- **C**aring
- **C**ontext

The Facets of Trust

The first facet of trust is character, and that is basically integrity. It means doing what you say you will do. And when I say you, I mean this applies to you as a leader as well as your team members. Remember that you are role modeling the behavior that you are seeking.

The second facet of trust is competence. To be able to trust people they have to be able to do what they're being asked to do. Do they have the training? Do they

have the experience? Are they smart enough to do these things? Is it too complex a task to give to somebody in a reasonable way? Matching the task to the person, and their level of ability, is very important in remote contexts.

Caring is the third facet of trust. Caring has to do with the relationship. People trust the people they care for. As a leader, if you are showing the compassion and support and kindness to your employees and your team members, they are going to see that you care about them and then they will care about you more and want to do the right thing and fulfill their commitments to you. It's a different way of building trust through a caring relationship, in addition to having various structures in place.

The last facet of trust is context. Context refers to the part that we don't have control over. We might have some control such as what resources people have access to. Perhaps if they don't have access to resources, we as leaders can help them get those resources.

At the same time there can be a lot of ambiguity certain companies and in remote situations. In fast changing companies, for example, people may feel they don't know what's going to happen in the future and things change daily. The context outside of the organization may also be in flux, such as during the pandemic.

When we're talking about accountability, in a changing context, there will be a lot of reasons, excuses, whatever you may see them as, why people aren't getting their work done as they said they would. There will be opportunities here for you to adjust to, and I will get into this in a moment, as a reason to check in much more frequently than you might otherwise have done so, because of a changing environment.

Levels of Trust

In addition to the facets of trust, we have four different levels of trust: the manager, the employee, the relationship, and the team.

Four Levels of Trust
• The Manager
• The Employee
• The Relationship
• The Team

At the individual level, the person could either be the manager or the employee. At this level, it is basically credibility. As a manager, your credibility will influence other people's credibility and their accountability.

Your management style is also important. It boils down to how trusting are you of others and how trustworthy are you? So what does that mean in terms of

management style? Are you somebody who is more laisser fair or hands off? Do you give people big tasks and expect them to get them done and they just let you know when they're done and everything is great because you trust them and it's a good job that you've hired good people? If that's the case, in a remote environment you will probably have to up your game a little bit and check in more frequently, not that you don't trust people per se, but you'll need to add structure to make this work.

On the other hand, you may be more of a micro manager, what people refer to sometimes as a "control freak." We all might have a little bit of that tendency in ourselves, or we may be just slightly more controlling than others. If you have a more controllying management style, as a remote manager, you're going to have to be able to let go and that's not an easy thing to do. You're going to have to trust that people will get their work done and put in the structures to be able to check on them. So what we're basically telling people on either end of the trusting spectrum is to move a little bit toward the middle.

At the relationship level, we need to talk a little bit about how conflicts come up, how you interact with team members, and how people react to you. We have how your employees react to you as an individual and then we have the relationships within the whole team. How are the team members trusting each other in the

remote environment? How can we increase the trust among team members so that they can be accountable to each other as well?

The idea is we want to be able to trust each other. Research shows that one thing that comes up when we move to a virtual environment is that trust tends to disintegrate very quickly. They've done all sorts of studies on this and one thing that's been used a lot to study trust in a virtual environment is the prisoner's dilemma game. Some of you may be familiar with it. If you watch any crime dramas on TV you've seen where the detectives take two people accused of committing a crime together into separate rooms. Then they say that if they cooperate, they can have a lighter sentence, but if they don't cooperate then the other person might turn them in and they're going to have a worse outcome.

The prisoner's dilemma game is essentially that. Two people have the opportunity to gain a moderate amount of money if they cooperate with each other. They gain nothing if they both compete with each other. If one competes and the other cooperates, the one who competed can make the most money. The dilemma is whether to trust the other person to cooperate. The research shows that participants tend to cooperate less often when they are interacting via computer than when they are in person, even if they are in separate rooms when they are in person.

Cooperation is something we want to strive for in our teams. How do we do that? The best known way sounds so simple, but the best known way is to get people to interact with each other socially, to have time to bond with each other.

In a new team, if team members don't know each other that well, we suggest having a 'get-to-know-you' meeting or event. It is a face-to-face 'get to know you' if at all possible. In some cases, however, team members may have already known each other for a while at work and now they're being separated to work in a remote environment. In this case, the challenge is to maintain the trust.

Our suggestions to maintain or strengthen relationships remotely include creating social opportunities such as a community board for people to post things on. A lot of folks are doing that now in Slack or other group chat applications. The idea is to get people talking in a social way, in a community way, rather than always about work.

Another approach is to set up a virtual coffee or virtual lunchtime. During the pandemic, I had my daughter home from school, as many parents did, and when they had their lunch break they were in virtual school and they all FaceTimed each other as if they were at the cafeteria having lunch together. It's really important for

people to have that social time together, and that will increase the trust in terms of the accountability.

In addition to adding opportunities for team members to socialize and get to know each other, it's also important to add structure to build trust in remote relationships. We'll talk a lot about this in terms of setting the expectations when we get to the communications piece. However, there are some questions to consider in terms of building trust. How do we set the expectations? What are the new norms in a remote team? There may have been other norms in the past like you stopped by you had an open-door policy, and so on. But when you're remote, you can't stop by, and you don't have an open door. So how do you make that happen in a remote way?

Another way to help build and maintain trust is to give people the benefit of the doubt. There will be a lot of people who didn't get the email or even if you sent it they didn't read it because they had a thousand other emails. They didn't realize that they had to pre-register for a webinar or RSVP to a meeting. Figuring that kind of thing out using the technology can be hard. There may be other things going on like suddenly the kids are at home and they started having a fight and beating each other up and they had to run out and deal with that, so give the benefit of the doubt that people really are trying their best.

If everybody takes the forgiveness approach, then when somebody doesn't show up or turn something in, you still assume that there was a good reason. You check in with them with that attitude as opposed to accusing them or thinking, 'wow, they're just blowing me off,' or 'they don't care' or 'they're slacking off.' Give the benefit of the doubt. With remote teams, there will be lots of individual situations coming up, especially if people are working from home. Be sensitive to that as well. There might be cultural differences, individual differences, and other responsibilities people have going on at home.

In sum, aim to trust using the following techniques.

- Take time for team members to get to know each other and bond
- Add structure
    - Set expectations
    - Give benefit of the doubt
    - Be sensitive to individual differences
- Communicate often
    - Check in and rebuild periodically

Communication

Communication almost invariably arises as a challenge for remote teams. As a remote manager, you will have to communicate much more often. It's going to take much more of your time as a leader than it would normally because you're going to have to check in with people one-on-one a lot and also try to set up some kind of regular group meetings. They might be as often as a daily meeting, like they do in scrum or agile teams. We'll talk about why shortly.

When teams move into a remote environment, it is important to give some thought about how to set up these communications. Give thought to how you're going to assign tasks clearly and make sure that people understand them. Think about increasing the amount of checking in that you do because things will be changing, and ambiguity will surface.

There are three major steps to implement the best practices of communicating remotely: planning communications, clearly assigning tasks, and frequently monitoring progress.

Setting Expectations

The first step is to set up the expectations for how you are going to communicate. If you talk to five different

people, you will find that every single one of them has a different idea of what's reasonable. For example, you might ask, how quickly should you have to respond to a text message? Someone might say within minutes, somebody else might say within an hour, yet another person might say sometime that day, so it really depends on the person.

As the maager, you will need to come up with some kind of group understanding of the new norm of how quickly you respond to people and also when you're available.

People may not always want to be communicated with in the evening or at lunchtime. Some people may have to deal with other responsibilities at home during the daytime and want to work in the evening instead of during the afternoon when their kids are at home and in their most active state. Others may be on different time zones. We suggest thinking about how the team members will set up availability for interactions and how quickly they should respond.

The last thing is the medium of communication. This is key for accountability. Do we use video or chat or email or phone? Well, there are certain situations where you want to choose one over the other. First of all, the complexity of the information could require a conversation. If the issue is very complex and would benefit from showing something, a video is always

good. Sometimes, however, an email works best if you really need to spell something out and describe all the details and give somebody lots of specifics that can be useful for complexity. Usually you'll want to be able to check in to make sure someone is following or to see what their reaction is, especially if there's anything that is emotionally involved.

If we're talking about something that's going to be a surprise or a concern or giving feedback, we advise picking up the phone or starting a video channel to talk to people. Text and email are not good ways to share negative feedback, concerns, or unwelcome surprises.

Sharing Information and Updates

In remote teams, it is important to consider how you will share information. In terms of accountability, you'll be checking in a lot more frequently to find out if people are getting the work done. You may need to have shared documents, like Google Docs, where you can just get in and look at something. It might be a lot easier than emailing something back and forth and having multiple versions going on and everything getting confused. You might need to set something up technically to provide access to shared documents and other things.

Communication processes are another point to consider. When I work with remote teams, often we

have more regular check-ins. There might be a quick status email at the end of the day to say what you got done that day. There might be a quick group team meeting. It might only be 30 minutes at the beginning of the day. A check-in could be a 10-minute one-on-one with each person during the day or every couple of days, however often you think it's necessary for your team. I'm not suggesting an hour. If you set up hour-long check-ins you might say, 'oh my gosh, I'm never going to get anything done because I'm talking to people all the time!' Then you might stop doing check-ins altogether.

A quick 10 minutes of, 'do you have any questions, what's going on,' is all you need. This allows people to have opportunities for that open door and also for questions, because if people do have questions, they're not always going to come to you when you're not co-located. They might say, 'Oh, I don't want to bother them, especially a leader.' Having regular opportunities for people to have access to you is a way to share progress status as well as see if there's anything else you need to attend to.

Avoiding Miscommunication

Avoiding miscommunication is important in remote teams. The best way to avoid miscommunicating is over communicating. It's going to sound annoying and we can't say this often enough, but over, over, over

communicate. That means you say something, you say it again, and you check in to make sure they understood.

Active listening is checking in to see how the other person understood you. Ask what their understanding is. Have them paraphrase it back in their own words of what they understood the commitment to be. We all have different lenses of perception and we hear things differently. That gives you opportunity without judgment to clarify. You might say, 'well, ok, actually what I really meant was blah, blah, blah.' It is better than leaving it ambiguous and then coming back later and saying 'you didn't meet the commitment. This is what you were supposed to do,' They they'll say, 'that's not what I thought.'

Having that opportunity for people to repeat back, not necessarily in your words but in their own words, is much better, especially if it's in their own words. It is also a good thing for you to do for them. For example, when somebody says they're having an issue you can paraphrase back what you understood the issue to be so that you have a mutual understanding.

In sum, the best practices to communicate remotely are listed below.

1. Set expectations for communicating
    o   Team member availability & responsiveness

- o Time and medium (video, phone, chat, email)
2. Share information and status
   - o Tools and processes for sharing documents
3. Avoid miscommunications
   - o Over-communicate, be especially responsive
   - o Listen actively

Assigning Tasks Remotely

To start, we advise that you employ basic accountability principles. The first principle is to clarify the expectations. Making sure you're on the same page is important, as I described in the Communicaiton section. Another piece is making sure that the person is committed to the expectation and that they know what they're doing.

One way to ensure that people have a mutual understanding of the expections is to set measurable outcomes. This is the second principle of basic accountability. For example, you may set SMART goals. SMART goals are **s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**ttainable, **r**ealistic, and **t**ime-bound, so you know when they're going to be completed. There are many other ways to create and track measurable outcomes. Use the method that appeals to you.

Getting employee buy-in and commitment is the third basic accountability principle. If somebody commits to something, they're a lot more likely to get it done than if they don't commit. If you're just telling somebody what to do and they just listen and say 'uh-huh,' they're not as bought into the process or the outcome. We suggest that you figure out a way to help them buy into the outcome and commit to it. Have that conversation so that they really feel energized around it, and they feel that they're confident in being able to get it done. That will help you meet the accountability outcomes that you're looking for.

In sum, when assigning tasks remotely, it is important to be clear, ensure understanding, and get commitment using the techniques below.

- Clarify expectations
    - Active listening
- Set measurable outcomes
    - SMART Goals, etc.
    - Smaller increments
- Get employee buy-in & commitment
    - Commitment is key to accountability

Monitoring Progress

Monitoring progress remotely is not necessarily as straightforward as when people are working together face-to-face. Recall from the earlier sections on communicating and building trust how important it is to check in often open up opportunities to have social conversations. It is also important for you as a leader to be available to people in multiple ways so they can check in with you. Instead of an open door, you can have office hours where you have an open channel, like an open video channel going from 4:00 to 5:00 pm each day—or whatever time you want to make it—where people should contact you.

Other options include Slack, Teams, company project websites, google docs, email distribution lists, and so on. These are easy for groups to ask questions and inform each other of progress. You can monitor the group channel and see if they seem to be going off in a different direction than what you wanted. There are ways to monitor what people are doing, even if they're not in the office. This might be equivalent to roaming the halls in an in-person environment.

Setting up communication channels and times may seem like adding more structure to your communication. That is exactly what it is. More

structure is necessary in a remote environment because you don't have casual run-ins and you can't physically see what people are doing.

Course-correcting may be a little more challenging to a remote manager because it may involve a delicate conversation. As discussed in the Communication section, it is better to deliver performance feedback with a voice channel, such as the phone or video. This can be an opportunity for you to coach or mentor your team members—a critical aspect of leadership that often gets overlooked in remote teams. During a check-in or feedback session, you can empower a team member to do things by coaching them through the process. You can alternatively mentor and show them how you would do things. This is also the opportunity for you to help them get the resources they need.

On the other hand, sometimes holding people accountable can lead to difficult conversations, especially with people who aren't getting things done. My advice is, again, don't text them, don't email them, pick up the phone. Pick up the phone or set up a video channel so that you can have that conversation about what's going wrong, what performance is not being met, and how to correct that, and what steps they need to take.

It's really important not to let that slip in a remote team because when people are remote they might start

feeling that they don't have to be held accountable. That's when that slippery slope starts to come in and people start slacking off more and more. You don't want to be the police and be mean about it, at least at first, but you want to start setting the expectation of getting things done in the remote environment.

You may also want to engage team members in holding each other accountable to take some of the weight off you. You can engage your team members to hold each other accountable and not not turn them into the police either. Setting up these group chats is one way. Another way is to pair people up to work together. If people don't usually work together or have a reason to work together, you can set up accountability buddies to help each other stay on track and stay motivated. If you make it fun, it might be less threatening for people, and it'll free you up as well.

In sum, here are three ways to monitor progress and hold people accountable remotely once the work is started.

- Check in often
    - Increase structure of monitoring status
    - Be available in multiple ways
- Course correct
    - Deliver feedback carefully
    - Create opportunities to mentor and coach
- Hold accountable

- o Have the difficult conversations with voice/video
- o Engage team members in holding each other accountable

Conclusion

Keeping employees accountable is challenging when they are remote because it is harder to set expectations, see what they are doing, be available to them for help, and give performance feedback in a sensitive fashion. Remote teams tend to fare better when there are structured ways to measure progress, high levels of trust, and lots of communication. Using the techniques described in this book will help a remote manager more successfully hold their remote employees accountable to the goals they commit to.

If you are new to remote management or are looking to do it better, please contact Joanie at Flexible Work Solutions for a free consultation.

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