How to Build Trust and Boost Productivity Within Remote Teams

BY ADAM HICKMAN, PH.D.

We can't help ourselves. We all want to know the answers to these two questions:

- "Are people really working as much at home as they did in the office?"
- "Can you work from home and be and *stay* productive?"

Despite wanting to give your teams the benefit of the doubt, you're likely still having trust issues or, perhaps, you're starting to see mounting evidence of idleness.

Whatever the case, right now *is* the best time to ask these questions.

Five in 10 workers say they don't want to work in an office anymore and your business is likely considering the pros and cons of honoring those wishes.

The stigma of remote work is that it inhibits collaboration and productivity, which together may cost companies money.

But we haven't seen any data to support these fears yet.

Gallup has been studying [the variables that influence the productivity and wellbeing of remote workers](). Our findings in short: Your remote workers' productivity depends on one role -- the manager.

No matter what angle Gallup takes in our research on management, how managers lead their teams and position each team member for success is critical for the productivity and engagement of employees. No other role in an organization has more influence.

So, while organizations are facing a necessary remote work environment -- which may become permanent -- there are a few things managers need to get right to keep team productivity consistently high.

Here's how to equip your managers for the future of remote work.

Study past performance, then trust it.

The first thing leaders and managers must do is [ditch their trust issues]().

If you are struggling with trusting your teams, try this exercise:

1. On separate pieces of paper, write the names of individuals on your team.
2. Create two piles: "trust" and "don't trust."
3. Place each slip of paper into one of these piles.

4. Regardless of which pile a name lands in, ask yourself, "How did this happen?" and lean into exploring your answer.
5. Study how you've been involved with each group -- those you trust and those you don't. Being aware of whether you have or have not helped a team member should come before faulting the individual. You, as the leader, are accountable for and should take ownership of both piles of paper.

As is the case with any relationship, a lack of trust in your employees can lead you to become [a pesky micromanager](). The type of manager who questions people's every move and focuses on what's going wrong, which can perpetuate a cycle in which your team does the same thing to others in your organization.

No one can wave a magic wand and go poof, "Now I trust everyone." And if a manager *did* do that, it could lead them to pull back too far, putting their team in a spot where they receive *too little* guidance.

Instead, managers can learn about their [employees' intrinsic motivation]() by studying a person's past performance. Then, managers can use that knowledge to work alongside each team member as individuals discover their new, best means to high productivity.

For example, some employees want to start a project immediately -- figuring out the details as they go. Others take their time, ask questions, reflect and set deadlines before they begin. Both approaches are correct as long as the work gets done.

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So, as a manager, you don't have to stress over *how* your people approach work -- instead, you can learn to [leverage the different talents your people use to get the job done]().

To get a read on your teams as a whole, look for clues and existing context to gauge their collective ability to function well off-site and contribute to future projects together -- from a distance:

- "What past accomplishments have proven team's ability to depend on each other when it counts to complete a project?"
- "Who was involved and what was their role?"
- "How were expectations communicated?"
- "How was the work completed -- via email, phone, video conference, or in meetings here at the office?"
- "How were people assigned to their functions? What was the criteria?"
- "How was success measured? How was it communicated back to the employees?"
- "Where did the emotional highs come from?"

Ask those questions and you'll hear success stories. Armed with that knowledge and awareness, managers can get the right people in the right roles with the right talent and then trust them to produce.

Understand the unique contributions of each team member, then activate.

[Stress and worry have been high](#) for a lot of workers since the pandemic began. Teamwork has likely never been tested so much -- or been more important.

Some teams have generated a sense of fellowship with team members joining video chats from their homes. This sharing of their personal space with coworkers naturally leads to sharing a lot more about their personal lives and establishing a bond because of the challenging situation everyone is facing.

Other times, virtual collaboration feels like a game of telephone or like working on a renovation project with your roommate -- it's tough to get to the right end product without miscommunication or hurt feelings.

When teams fail to thrive in a remote setting -- meaning they exhibit behaviors such as missed deadlines, less collaboration and employees directly expressing their stress -- managers need to [discover what's at the core of their employees' talent](#) to prevent disruption within the team or downstream.

To equip managers for that conversation, teach them to ask this question:

"What do I get from this team member, and what do they give?"

There are a lot of ways to answer this question, but the best answer is *not* just a recitation of the employee's tasks. Instead, it's a reflection of the employee's natural talents as they apply to the demands of their specific role.

To quickly spot how someone's talents play into how they get work done, [the CliftonStrengths assessment](#) categorizes strengths into [four domains](#): [influencing](#), [relationship building](#), [strategic thinking](#) and [executing](#).

Managers can position remote employees for success by capitalizing on those innate abilities, as opposed to focusing on tasks assigned alone. Here are some insights into the four domains:

EXECUTING

Executing themes answer the question "How do you make things happen?" High-performing teams rely on people with strong Executing themes because they make things happen.

Manager Insights: When your team needs to get things done, look to people with Executing themes. They can take an idea and make it a reality. And they'll work tirelessly to accomplish the goal.
Indicators a Remote Employee Is Using Executing Themes:

- Listens for opportunities to take responsibility of projects and requests ownership
- Accepts deadlines assigned and creates new personal deadlines to meet or exceed the expected timeline
- Understands and appreciates the strengths of others, adjusting their style to maximize the potential of getting the work done

INFLUENCING

Influencing themes answer the question "How do you influence others?" High-performing teams rely on people with strong Influencing themes because they take charge, speak up and make sure others are heard.

Manager Insights: When your team needs to sell its ideas and persuade others, look to people with Influencing themes. They can help your team reach a much broader audience and convince others to aid in accomplishing your goals.
Indicators a Remote Employee Is Using Influencing Themes:

- Understands and is aligned with key stakeholders
- Can convey their message and influence employees using technology without manager direction or coaching
- Intuitively knows when to speak up for others and carry critical messages forward

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Relationship Building themes answer the question "How do you build and nurture strong relationships?" High-performing teams rely on people with strong Relationship Building themes to bring individuals together and make the team greater than the sum of its parts.

Manager Insights: When your team needs to become stronger and more cohesive, look to people with Relationship Building themes. They can unite the group and galvanize them to achieve shared success. They are the bond that holds great teams together.
Indicators a Remote Employee Is Using Relationship Building Themes:

- Proactively connects with manager and peers for both work and personal reasons
- Shares emotional high points of projects with their manager as well as with peers and partners
- Looks for opportunities and communicates about projects or initiatives that helps foster and builds relationships

STRATEGIC THINKING

Strategic Thinking themes answer the question "How do you absorb, think about and analyze information and situations?" High-performing teams rely on people with strong Strategic Thinking themes to absorb and analyze information that informs better decisions.

Manager Insights: When your team needs to become more creative and innovative, look to people with Strategic Thinking themes. They can stretch the team's thinking for the future and inspire new ideas that can lead to high performance.
Indicators a Remote Employee Is Using Strategic Thinking Themes:

- Understands and anticipates consequences of decisions made and plans for how to overcome challenges
- Questions peers about having the right data or not having enough data to make decisions
- Seeks out and values the thoughts and opinions of others

Knowing what team members *give* helps managers create better team dynamics and position employees to do what they're naturally best at to get the work done.

Your employees may want and need to continue working from home.

As of now, half of all employees say they'd prefer to continue working from home -- and they may never change their minds. Leaders need to [draft the policies and start making decisions that will enable workers to be as or more productive at home in the long term while keeping their employees' wellbeing in mind as well](#).

Managers, however, need to focus on today and the performance of their teams. No matter where their team members are located, managers are responsible for employee engagement and performance.

Asking the right questions is how managers will get the right results today and set their teams up for success tomorrow.

You *can* build an incredible remote workforce. Dive in and learn about our best strategies:

- [Learn how to incorporate CliftonStrengths into your talent management approach](#).
- [Download our perspective paper on employee burnout](#).
- [Read our COVID-19: A Leader's Guide to Developing a Work-From-Home Strategy](#).

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