Effectively leading dispersed teams

In Caterpillar’s global workforce, many leaders have grown comfortable leading dispersed, remote work teams. They adjust their leadership styles and behaviors to ensure their teams are engaged and effective.

Leading dispersed teams presents some unique challenges for leader that must be managed. Even small distances can have a negative impact on the team. Leadership becomes even more important when dispersed teams face major changes, crises or they are asked to work remotely with very little preparation. It’s not rocket science. But it’s not trivial either. For leaders, all the suggestions for general employees working remotely still apply. Here are some suggestions specifically for leaders to support success in a remote work setting.

1. **Keep an open, predictable schedule**
   Technology has bridged many gaps. However, communication and collaboration are just simply more difficult when you aren’t working in close physical proximity. Schedules and routines help keep us organized and productive. But when your team knows your schedule it helps them feel a sense of predictability and control.

   Make sure your calendar is available to your team. Instead of blocking your entire schedule, use the “private” function on specific meetings when needed. Use the Teams’ “availability” functions to communicate even small periods away. Let your employees know where you’ll be working. Be as predictable in your schedule as possible with consistent start/stop times. Remember, even if you don’t intend to, you are modeling the expectations for your team.

2. **…but be flexible and build trust**
   Working remotely eliminates many habits we’ve established for work-life balance; and your team will be pressured to “be on” more when working remotely. Arriving and departing the office no longer signals, “I’m working” or “I’m off for the day.” If there are rules for work, make them clear up front.

   Some leaders tend to want to “crack down” and micromanage their remote teams to verify that work is getting done. Be cautious. While this may make you feel more in control it can breed resentment and erode trust.

   Give your team as much flexibility as possible to establish new routines. Then encourage them to be as predictable and consistent as possible. If remote work follows a crisis (even a snow day) allow more flexibility to work atypical hours. If some are working remotely and not others, set the expectation that this is OK and remote employees should not be judged as less engaged, productive or valued. Manage less on process and more on specific results. Set reasonable deadlines to give employees “guard rails” and structure. But allow flexibility when your team is adjusting to a new way of working.

3. **Ensure employees have what they need**
   Have routine conversations about how remote work is going for your team. Often employees may not ask for what they need. Don’t wait for problems to arise or employees to request it. Make sure they have the tools and technology and are comfortable using them. Coach employees on setting up private workstations at home and setting limits with their time and their families.
4. **Encourage and model limit-setting**

Work-from-home can easily turn into work-all-the-time. Give overt permission to *not* be online all the time. Encourage the use of evenings, weekends, holidays and sick time as opportunities to refuel and unwind. Encourage employees to benefit from working remotely, including informal dress and multitasking with personal activities (we can all tolerate the occasional dog bark). Be a good role model. Spend time before and after meetings to informally catch up. Check in with the team on how they are doing and what is happening outside of work. “Potluck” lunches may not work. But engage the team in ways everyone can have fun and connect outside of work activities.

5. **Overcommunicate**

Working remotely can leave us feeling isolated and detached, particularly if some are still in the office. Openly acknowledge the challenges for you and your team. Be clear about the expectations and any schedules for communication, including how long your team can expect for you to reply to messages given your travel or schedule.

Every handshake and passing “hello” in the hall can be replaced by a phone call, email or instant message just to say hello. Increase the frequency of one-on-one meetings, but also informal random “check-ins” to ask, “how’s it going” and “RU OK?” Use multiple communication methods. When something hits your desk ask, “which one on my team could use this information to be more effective?” Now is a great time to involve more people in more projects, if they have time.

How you communicate can be just as important as how often. Be fully present, personable and transparent. In uncertain times you may be the primary source of information. Give as much accurate, transparent information about work status issues as you can. Consider encouraging employees to text you any time. There is a risk that employees will overuse it. But that’s unlikely. And you will build a lot of trust by being so available. Over time you will settle into a mutually beneficial cadence. But in the early days, you can’t communicate enough.

6. **Try to bring people together**

Depending on geography, budgets and other circumstances, this may be a challenge. But seek ways to physically bring the team together when possible. Team engagement is a contact sport. Physical proximity builds a level of connectedness and comradery that is hard to achieve when people never meet in person.

7. **Be patient and celebrate success**

As a leader, you are accountable for results. But be patient, particularly in the early days of working remotely or when it is temporary. People who are successful working remotely are disciplined and refine their workstyle over time. And some are wired for it more than others. Be tolerant and gracious about stumbles. Recognize and celebrate when the team is adjusting well. Overcommunicate recognition when individuals are deserving. Adjust your behavior and leadership style over time once you learn what works and what doesn’t.

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*Major changes to our routine and uncertainty about the future can be stressful. If you identify an employee that may be experiencing significant stress or performance problems, contact your HR manager or Caterpillar’s Employee Assistance Program for consultation and information about making referrals.*

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Remember that wherever you are, Caterpillar’s confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available and accessible 24/7/365.

- **1-309-820-3604** EAP.cat.com
- **1-866-228-0565** CaterpillarEAP.com

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