

# Guide to Managing Remote Teams for Leaders



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# Preface

In 2023, I was invited to lead a roundtable discussion titled “Do’s And Don’ts For Team Building in a Remote Environment” at **e-Tail Connect** in Florida, an awesome conference format and great show.

There were fantastic participants that provided valuable insights into how their companies were handling the push to integrate “work-from-home” policies. Most of the participants indicated they were already back to a hybrid workplace, or they have recently been told they must go back to hybrid soon.

You can see this in the headlines for other major corporations including Apple, Amazon, Starbucks, Chase Bank and Disney.

The discussions at the conference focused around how to manage this workplace transition in order to support our teams.

Here is a brief overview of the nine key points that our discussion group identified as fundamental to successfully integrate remote work.

## Nine Key Points for Remote Team Success

- 1. Clear Communication:** Take extra care to send a message in multiple ways, on multiple days, and then verify it is being understood.
- 2. Establish Expectations:** Clarify what is expected from each employee, and how it will be tracked.
- 3. Remote Work Equipment:** Ensure your team has the right equipment, or provide them with the funding to get what they need.
- 4. Encourage Collaboration:** Enable your team to connect, communicate and collaborate seamlessly while keeping track of communications.

**5. Results over Attendance:** This was the item the group spent the most time discussing, and it was universally accepted as the key to driving performance and retaining employees.

**6. Work-Life Balance:** We reviewed the Harvard Human Resources process, and found it an indispensable tool (link included), for anyone who is struggling to find balance as a remote worker.

**7. Company Culture Counts:** Building a strong sense of belonging and culture within your organization, is key to ensuring remote workers feel connected to your organization, and not alienated.

**8. Be Flexible:** Be prepared to work with individuals to understand their challenges and motivations. Not all home environments are equal, some team members may need more support than others.

**9. Security:** If you have not addressed this yet, ensure you prioritize it. Place the appropriate policies in place, and add appropriate layers of protection to protect your organization.

Thank you to everyone that participated in the conference. I left with a clearer understanding of what various companies are going through, and how other leaders are approaching challenges and pressures.

Ultimately, everyone was trying to figure out how to best navigate the situation, and provide their teammates with the best possible support to maintain their productivity.

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# **Clear the Air for Constructive Communication**

Let us start by diving into the one thing that is the glue that connects, and ensures all your employees, including your remote workers, are able to effectively work as a single unit: communication. It has been at the root of human issues over thousands of years.

*So, why do we underestimate its importance?*

Firstly, we tend to make the assumption that our communication is effective in conveying our message loud and clear. And secondly our daily communication methods have evolved, and the speed at which we can communicate today has dramatically increased, with the use of technology.

Face to Face → Stone tablets → Paper  
→ Telegram → Telephone → Pager codes  
→ Voicemail → E-mail → Text → Social  
media → Text/messenger → Video calls

*What do you think the next medium will be?*



Except for stone tablets and pagers, all are still in use today... So which ones should we use and when?

Every few years, I hear myself say “Who the heck is still leaving me [insert communication method here], and expecting a timely answer?” (yeah, I still say timely)

Two years ago it was voicemail (for work), and now it's email as a method I am beginning to question. With company messaging like Microsoft Teams, or Slack now available, email is the new snail mail.

During Covid we experienced an increased reliance on digital communication, which stimulated a rapid period of change. But now, your team, customers and suppliers expect responses immediately, or they think there is a problem. This places increasing pressure on your employees to respond to every notification, email and Slack message. And responding to every notification can be incredibly distracting, and that means less productivity.

Therefore, it is important to consider it from your company's perspective, and make decisions about what your standards are when it comes to company wide communication.

*What is your primary communication method?*

Whatever app you use to communicate with employees, the expectations will vary by company and culture about response time. At SimpleTire (where I work), when using Slack there is an expectation of near real-time response, but at worst a few business hours.

*What is the secondary method?*

For us, email is our secondary communication method with a 24 - 48 hour expectation for response, but with wiggle room for "I'm sorry I missed that".

*What do you do in an emergency?*

At SimpleTire we follow these steps:

Slack → Text Message → Phone Call

We do this until we get an answer. Then we proceed to a video meeting/huddle to work through it together.

Asynchronous communication is great, but it may be stretching your communication timeline, allowing hours, and days to pass before an issue is resolved.

*What is replacing your ability to walk down the hall?*

In my experience short, daily meetings with an open agenda, which anyone can add to (via your company's internal communication channel), has helped keep our team coordinated. This has ensured team members get answers fast, and don't lose hours waiting for simple answers.

Here are two questions to consider:

- *Do you onboard new employees, or are they left to figure things out on their own?*
- *Do you have 'norms' your company, or team apply that could add confusion?*

Clearly define your communication methods, ensure you train all your employees, and keep them updated to any changes.

Then operate under those guidelines. It will go a long way to improve efficiency, and reduce daily stress when timely (there it is again) communication is required... which is every single day.

I'm avoiding being prescriptive with my guidance as the variations are huge. If you need help, reach out to trusted colleagues or mentors to refine your approach.

**Clarify Expectations  
with Care**

Now that you have established how to communicate clearly across your team, use this to set clear expectations for the future.

There is an old saying about gathering wood before a long winter, “when you think you have enough, get 3x more”.

Repeat the expectations to the team in multiple ways, multiple times. Schedule one-on-one calls to be absolutely sure everyone understands what is expected of them. And ensure everyone agrees to how it will be executed and tracked.

Setting expectations starts with defining those expectations. I’m sure, as leaders, we have all had moments when we thought the whole team was clear on what needed to be done, because it was obvious. Only to find out that they felt lost, and had a completely different idea of what needed to be done.

As you work with your teams, be sure to encourage feedback from them, by periodically asking them what the expectations are. You may be surprised by the blank stares, and confused looks. But don't get upset, just understand that it is due to a failure in your communication method.

Simply identify where the breakdown has happened, and fix it. This is why it is critical to have base expectations established for remote work. Establish the main guardrails needed to stay effective as a remote team

Here is an example: *Must cameras be on, or is keeping them off ok?*

This is a major one, and may need additional rules about what the meeting is, who is attending, etc. Don't forget that people have different situations at their "home office", and may not be comfortable sharing all of that.

Show caring and be flexible, but be clear about what is expected:

- What are your core business hours?
- When are meetings expected to be set?
- What is the outer ring as well? (don't forget multiple time zones)
- What are the primary, and secondary communication channels?
- What are the expectations for response times?
- How late is too late to show up for a meeting?

This list can go on and on, but you'll need to figure it all out. By thinking through these expectations, everything will start to run smoother when everyone can start to plan around how work will be done. But only if you communicate these expectations clearly, and adhere to them yourself.

Once you have defined these expectations, be sure the team actually understands them and their importance.



*How will the roll out of these expectations work?*

You should expect to repeat yourself a lot. Be ready for it. But find a way to communicate them in every form possible. Write an email, a short message for Slack (or whichever app you use). Then have a 30 second version that you use to open every group meeting, for as long as it takes to hit all the groups.

Then wait one week (or however long matches your cycle), and do it again. Use adoption as the gauge, and repeat until you see it working. If you do not see wide adoption then question the expectation.

Assess the response of your team. Are these new expectations helping your team work better, or are they indirectly telling you, “it’s not a good idea” by avoiding it?

Your team may be right. Simply be open to that. Check with a few trusted advisers, but if you find they are

just ignoring you because they hope things won't change, (it's easier to not change), then reiterate the expectation, why it matters, and reinforce it.

If a few folks are not aligned, meet with them individually, and fine tune things for them if there are valid reasons.

# **The Right Tools for the Right Results**

Employer satisfaction comes in many forms. We have seen those key satisfiers change for everyone, with the hasty shift to remote work, driven by Covid. There are a million ways it may have shifted for each of us. But let's focus on one area... tools to get the job done.

If you expect certain behaviors and outcomes, you must provide the proper tools to work remotely. Your team might need a device (desktop, laptop or tablet), headset, access to meeting tools, or funding for supplies.

Maybe even post-it notes and pens. But now that they are out of the office, are you still providing this?

Before remote work was a thing, we all used to go to an office. There everything we needed was supplied to us. And if we needed something else, we could simply take what we needed from our company supply closet. Whether it was a keyboard, mouse, pens, pencils (am I the only one that hates pencils?),

notepads, headset, batteries or post it notes. The question now is:

- Where are those “tools” coming from now?
- Are there different tools needed for remote work?
- Do these tools vary based on each person's working environment?

Remember, that environments are no longer the same for all. They are not static, and primarily focused on work. I've mentioned it before, but not everyone has a dedicated home office. Therefore it's important to assess each employee's needs individually.

*You know supplies are needed, but is anyone asking for them?*

Not all employees are going to ask. They might feel uncomfortable to ask, and won't say anything unless you ask them first.

The solution is more straightforward than the other topics in our list:

1. Think about what is required.
2. Find out how it can be funded.
3. Make a way for it to be requested.
4. Define the method for it to be provided.
5. Follow-up to ensure the team gets what they need.

As with everything else, the variables are endless, but that is why you get paid the big money to figure them out, and take care of your team. Don't over complicate this one. Keep it as simple as possible. Perhaps you just need to enable online ordering, delivery and reimbursement.

The pace of life, and work seem to be moving faster than ever before. It's for this reason, we need to take a moment to think carefully about the changing environments, challenges and needs of our

employees. If we do this, we can elevate our teams to achieve new levels of productivity that are way more than the cost of a stack of post-it notes.

Ensure that your work from home resources have clear, fast, and reliable ways to gain access to IT support. It is a very disheartening feeling to have a connection issue, or other IT challenge which leaves employees feeling lost at sea.

Supporting your employees in this way will be another plus in the employee satisfaction column, which can only lead to better efficiency, and higher retention rates.

**Encourage Collective  
Collaboration**



This one is tricky because collaboration, and by extension your company culture, does not work when it is forced. It will flow naturally from your team once they realize their contribution will be appreciated, by both leadership, and their team.

If your team wants to achieve the desired results, and meet their targets, then collaboration must be constant and purposeful.

In this section I will share my framework for collaboration that I personally use with my team, but you may need to refine it for your own purposes.

Firstly, don't fool yourself into thinking team collaboration is "just happening organically"... it's not. If you can't point to a handful of things you, or your company are actively doing, then you need to do more.

For my team, we have a 30 minute per day leadership meeting with an organic agenda. The attendees enter

items throughout the day into a dedicated slack channel. Then we meet daily to review them in order. And as soon as we are through the list, the meeting is done.

This stops critical items from rolling into the next day, which helps us maintain momentum, and avoids us wasting unnecessary time. This meeting is all about acting, not talking it over.

If a conversation starts to get detailed, identify who is responsible for the said item, and take the conversation outside of the group meeting. The team members involved can then record the final action in the meeting thread.

We have another full team meeting once a week, for 30 minutes, to review current work, and successes from each area. We share personal highlights and have a laugh. This is a preset agenda with little wiggle room.

And to top off the weekly round of meetings, I have rotating one-on-one meetings that drive engagement with me, and allow for direct Q&A.

This may all seem a bit much. But you cannot underestimate the impact of finding a solution, then leading by example, which can be hard to do.

Even on those days when you don't feel like being engaged, it's probably true for many of the team members too.

▶ Maybe work has been intense recently - that's going to be true for most of your team.

▶ Maybe it's the day before a long weekend - that's going to be true for most (not for everyone on a global team).

▶ Maybe it's just the first really nice day in a while - that's going to be true for many, and can be distracting.

You still need your team to be engaged, and provide them with standard tools that work, and are easy to use.

This should be part of your “autopilot process” that happens without much effort. I will assume your company is using collaborative tools with shareable documents.... if not, for goodness sake, get one.

The internet has plenty of resources for this. Simply search up “team collaboration tools”, and use what works for you. Visit G2, <https://www.g2.com>, to get reviews, and hear what customers say about them.

There is a need for connections that run deeper between resources, than simple digital responses to requests.

The fiber of your team is about the relationships. Don't be afraid to try new things to encourage your team. Some may seem silly, but resonate with the team.

Other ideas may seem great, yet won't get their engagement. Either way, test a bunch of ideas, change it up, and don't push what doesn't get their support .

Team collaboration is like dating (no don't call HR, and don't really date your team but...), it feels the same. Awkward at first, when meeting people, and sharing your opinions.

In fact, you may hate doing it, but you need to do it either way. The key is, ask questions, get to know your team, and understand what makes them tick? Share their likes and dislikes.

Find what makes your team think, and what makes them laugh. You will be well on your way to building a strong relationship that will survive the ordeals of 'work'.

**Focus on Results  
Over Attendance**

In the world of remote work, performance has become a key measure of employees productivity, rather than how much time they log every week. And this is what you should know.

Do results matter more than where your team is between 8-5 local? This is a question our group spent the most time discussing. And it was universally accepted as the key to performance, and retaining employees.

The first step is to do the hard work of defining what successful execution looks like, and how to track it. We agreed that it is best to monitor employee performance, and forget about the other constructs of what a “good employee” is, in the classic definition of attendance.

Those variables do not matter if your employees are delivering the quality of work, and performance that is expected. But the extra flexibility they get matters a

lot to your employees. If you can make that shift, you get performance, improved morale, dedication, engagement and more. But all those wins are never easy.

You have to work for it.


And all that work comes in the form of defining your expectations, and communicating them clearly. Dedicate yourself to defining the trackable goals. Communicate them, and it will allow everyone the freedom to accomplish them in their own way.


The “accomplishing” can happen when they are engaged after, for example, taking their dog for a walk. This may help them clear their mind, and reflect on how enjoyable their job is. And how seamlessly they can blend their work into their real life, in the way that works best for them. This can help reduce burnout and increase retention, which is a good thing.





But if you are going to nurture the freedom that comes from being “performance based”, you certainly need to set and agree on the metrics.


You know the solution, you’ve just been too busy to focus on this. As I said before, I don’t like to be prescriptive, but here are a few guidelines you can follow...

 At the start of the year, or as soon as possible, write down and review the goals for every individual. They could be similar for the same functions.

 Meet regularly with your team, and insist that your managers do the same. Try to meet monthly at the very least.

 At those meetings, resist talking about tactical items as every other hour of the day is spent doing that.

 Use your one-on-one time to talk about performance goals and progress. Celebrate their progress, if they are on track, or correct them if they are falling behind. It will be far easier to manage in smaller bites.

 Do formal mid-year and annual reviews. This puts the right amount of reality to the goals.

Remember, your mindset is the starting point. If you want to go this route, then put in the time to define what really matters. Record it and live by it.

Focus on where you need to go as a team and company, highlighting the performance that is being delivered, or not, and manage it.

Then, don't look back. Don't fixate on *where* someone is now. Rather focus on what *their* goals are, or what they are not achieving.

# **Balancing Work and Life for Remote Teams**

Remote workers, by default, don't have the "benefit" of leaving home, and going to an office. And although this is considered a major plus, it does mean employees need to be disciplined enough to separate their business from their personal lives, which for many can be challenging.

As I mentioned, I was part of a group at the e-Tail Connect Conference and one of the things we did, was review the Harvard Business School HR process.

We found this to be a great tool for anyone, including yourself, who is struggling with managing the work from home shift.



[Click here for Harvard Business Remote Work Resource](#)

As the title suggests, it covers the basics of remote working. But we found that it grounded us in areas we had rushed past while grappling with the subject. It is amazing that even in that document we can see the riptide of conventional “conference call” etiquette, being highlighted before “virtual meetings” tips.

Take three minutes to read it (it’s very brief). Ignore the impossible tips of starting meetings five to ten minutes early to be ready before attendees join.

OMG, could you imagine actually having enough time to join early, to prepare for work you are about to do??!!

Anyway.... all joking aside, you should find a way to do this for the few key meetings where your preparation defines the productivity of the group, and will keep you from looking like a mess.

My favorite tip is “Plan lunch in advance and take a

break when you eat it”. I do consciously make a point of this, and almost succeed each day, albeit only fifteen to twenty minutes. Even that short break allows me to refocus.

Even though many of the points covered are targeted for beginners, it does make a great reference for anyone looking to improve how they manage their remote work.

Wouldn't it be great to have a guide like this tailored for your company? It might help your employees be more efficient, or even feel you care. Or will it become another forgotten item on the intranet? I honestly don't know.

But, I challenge you to collect your best tips, and put it in a guide that your team can access and use, to improve how they work from home.

# Company Culture Counts

I have said it for many of the topics we have covered this far, and it remains true for culture. You must do it actively, and purposefully. It may feel uncomfortable, but remember you will get what you give.

Speaking of uncomfortable, I realize that not everyone has a positive company culture as a foundation. And that is a whole other topic. But for our purposes here, know you can have a positive team culture no matter what .

If you do not put effort into defining and creating the culture you want... a culture will form regardless. It may take the form of individuals working together, and nothing more.

When asked, it could be described as “eh it’s fine, it’s a job”. We’ve all been there, or know people who have worked in that kind of environment.

It may be surprising, but I’m not going to tell you that



they are wrong. There is nothing wrong with a company not wanting to be more than an employer, with employees who are not looking for their company to be more than just a job.

That works for millions of people and 1000s of companies very well. My point is that the first step is to decide what you want for your company, team, and team members.

Try to keep it to a few points... these are mine:

- Cultivate a supportive work environment, and encourage each other (up, down and sideways).
- Support both personal and professional growth (as our careers are more than *this* job).
- Be obsessed with progress, results and service (we all want to be the best at what we do, don't we?).

- Keep life in perspective, and keep it enjoyable. (Ultimately we are all working to support our real life. Our families, our pets and hobbies. I like to keep that in focus and drive for a balance).

The next step is to figure out how to bring that all to life. Just writing it down and sending it out, or making a mousepad with the values in an infographic won't work.

List whatever cultural values you have defined as important to you, and your company's success. And be sure to keep success in mind, because a failing team or company will challenge your culture for certain.

Always keep it simple, but select specific tactical things that occur regularly.

Pick one thing that happens daily, one thing weekly, and one thing monthly to put your cultural values into practice, and bring them to life.

Use feedback and participation to guide you through changes. If the team is not participating, change it up.

Most importantly, you must be an example of the culture. If you want people to care for each other, then you must care for them first. If you want the team to support each other, you have to provide an example of what support is.

If you want them to produce a high level of service, then you must demonstrate that same level of service in your work.

It will be a lot of work... but it will be worth it.

**Flexibility Facilitates  
Adaptability**

We have made it to number eight in the list. Number eight, huit, acht, otto, ocho, oito, hachi, ath....eight.

The first time I wrote “eight” in the series above, it was perfectly familiar. But after I wrote it in the other languages, it felt new and unusual. It made me realize how much we can overlook, and assume that things are the same for everyone.

When evaluating how to make working from home the best for everyone, you need to be flexible, and work with each employee to understand their challenges and motivations. Not all work environments at home are created equal. Not all employees are motivated in the same way.

There are environmental factors that need to be considered. Not everyone enjoys working from home. Not everyone has a quiet office area conducive to focusing, and doing video calls all day.

Factor this in when requiring that cameras be on, and when setting expectations for working hours. Maybe daycare (child or elderly) is a factor for someone.

If their work can be done asynchronously, does it matter that they work a split shift, with solid hours in the morning, and a few hours later at night? Perhaps that is when their environment is “calmer” to work.

It is easy to assume it's a beach, or a mountain view concealed beyond the amazing selfie icon, but maybe Grandma is at the kitchen table behind them, and that's why they want their camera off.

Since we have recently started “dating” our teams (#4 Encourage collaboration), we have had the chance to understand everyone's individual situations, including children, parents, pets, and those looking to enjoy life and meet people.

Take the time to figure out the reasons, beyond pay,

that motivate, and impact your team members. Both you, and your employees will come out ahead.

Those factors have a real life impact on how we navigate our daily lives, and the quality of performance we can deliver at work.

We all talk about work-life balance and how important it is. But how can you help achieve the balance, if you do not understand the factors affecting your team?

Those that know me, know that balancing my work and life is not one of my talents. It is a constant struggle. I clearly do not always have balance, but this has helped me realize that it is my responsibility, and not my employer's alone.

Rather we need to work together to create and maintain a healthy balance between both work responsibilities, and personal priorities.

# **Secure Your Data and Communications**



We have all faced challenges in maintaining our devices and access to company resources since the beginning of Covid. In many cases, companies only had one weekend to make the changes required to allow employees to leave the office, and start working remotely by Monday...

Years later, we find ourselves in an entirely new environment, where connecting to work has opened up a myriad of entry points that now need to be secured. If you have not yet set any standards, or added any layers of protection to your company, be sure to go back, and do it.

As leaders in your respective organizations, it is imperative to recognize, and address security threats to safeguard your company's sensitive information and maintain business continuity. Unfortunately, remote work exposes your organization to a higher risk of cyberattacks due to a dispersed workforce accessing critical systems and data.


Hackers actively target remote workers as potential weak links in your system. Employees connecting to unsecured Wi-Fi networks which increases data interception risks. According to Forbes, 40% of respondents had their information compromised while using public Wi-Fi.


"Shadow IT" with personal devices can create blind spots, further challenging security enforcement.


In the last 3 years, 20% of companies have faced a security breach related to a remote working environment. Allowing remote workers access to company resources can lead to reduced security, lacking oversight and best practices, leaving your organization vulnerable to avoidable risks.


For organizations operating in highly regulated industries, maintaining compliance with industry standards and data protection regulations can make remote work arrangements highly complex in practice.

To address these challenges, consider implementing the following strategies:


 Comprehensive Security Training: Educate your employees about security best practices, emphasizing the importance of identifying, and reporting potential threats like phishing.


 Robust Endpoint Security: Utilize advanced endpoint security solutions that protect devices against malware, data breaches, and unauthorized access.

 Secure Access Management: Implement multi-factor authentication (MFA), and enforce strong password policies to prevent unauthorized access to critical systems.

 Secure Remote Connections: Encourage the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to encrypt data

transmitted between remote workers, and your company's servers.

 Regular Security Audits: Conduct periodic security audits to identify vulnerabilities, and proactively address potential risks.

 Establish an Incident Response Plan: Develop a well-defined incident response plan to handle security breaches effectively, and minimize their impact on your organization.

In the digitally connected world we now live in, you need to equip yourself with the knowledge to safeguard your organization against security threats that could compromise a seamless remote work experience.

# Final Thoughts

I realize the list of suggestions above may seem a bit lofty. Even as I write this, I have thoughts of how I've missed the mark. But the root of the content was not my own, and reflects the great conversations that we teased out for each of the topics covered.

My goal was to capture them and provide others (and myself) the core practical takeaways to gain an overall perspective of the pressures faced by companies, and how to begin to deal with them as leaders.

I have honestly tried to work within these ideals daily. I know it can be very challenging to do as you face a long list of priorities and responsibilities daily.

Pick one point that you feel will be the most impactful for your team and start... right now.

But since you have not started yet... I'll tell you something else that's really interesting. Before I left to go to the conference, I decided to run a small experiment .

Since ChatGPT had just been released, I thought it would be a great idea to ask ChatGPT to list any key factors that it “thought” would be required to manage a successful remote team.

Just bear in mind that ChatGPT only had pre-pandemic knowledge of remote teams.

I asked it my question, and it managed a staggering 8 of the 9 items.

Seriously, AI was able to determine in a few seconds what 10 people would conclude over the course of an hour.

But guess which one it missed?

# COMPUTER SECURITY.

An irony?

01111001      01101001      01101011      01100101  
01110011

Ok, seriously, now go start!

# About the Author



Chris Vitale has over 20 years experience in eCommerce technology and has worked for companies including Corporate Express, InfoMC, Millstar, Target Stores Corp, GSI Commerce, Icahn Automotive, Pep Boys focused on building highly effective technical and operational teams that help position the enterprise for increased valuations, mergers and acquisitions.

Over the years he has led multiple teams, and worked with brands including Ralph Lauren, Quiksilver, Roxy, BCBG, Dockers, Charlotte Russe, Dick's Sporting Goods, National Sports Franchises (NFL, NHL, NBA) and VF Corporation (Nautica, Kipling).



Chris is currently the SVP of Technology, leading his teams to manage the rapid growth SimpleTire has experienced, earning them multiple industry awards.

In his spare time Chris is a private pilot, certified rescue diver, enjoys the outdoors and camping, learning languages, and loves being a husband, and father to his three children and two dogs.

# Share Your Thoughts

If you found this guide useful, interesting or worth sharing with your team, I'd love to hear about it.

Feel free to send me a message via email, or DM.

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Thank you!