INTRODUCTION

As a community, we are navigating the new world of remote work in a time of heightened uncertainty. The lines between home and work life are blurred, and employees may be distracted, overwhelmed, even afraid. In these times the role of the manager takes on increased importance. There are actions managers can take to ensure shared understanding of expectations, connect individual work to the team’s shared purpose, maintain team cohesion, manage performance and care for employees as people. Some of these tips may be familiar and it will be a matter of applying them from a distance, while others may be new requirements of managing virtually.

STEP 1: ESTABLISH TEAM NORMS

Team Meetings
Communication and impromptu updates that happen naturally in a shared space will now require planning and effort. Team meetings are an ideal setting to get everyone on the same page.

- Hold regular team meetings, even more often than if everyone was in the same place (daily or weekly for most) because there are no opportunities for chance encounters.
- Select a time when everyone can typically participate and establish the expectation that they will unless an extenuating circumstance arises.
- Encourage use of the video camera to promote team connection.
- Keep scheduled team meetings, even if they end early; a quick exchange will strengthen team connection.

Technology and Tools
In a virtual environment it is even more important to have agreed upon tools. As a team determine which tool(s) the team will utilize for:

- Collaboration—sharing project status, seeing all the work in one place, and preventing duplication of efforts. Consider the tool(s) the team used in person, what needs to be
modified, and what will be most effective for the work and the individuals. Together decide when and how the tool will be updated.

- Communicating work hours, availability, and changes that arise (Outlook calendar, email, etc.).
- Establish norms around tool usage (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, IM, email, phone, etc.) and purpose (soliciting quick responses, sharing longer messages, time sensitive matters, discussion, decision-making, making requests of each other, etc.).
- Agree upon a response time within which individuals can expect to hear back from one another.
- It may take time for people to get used to new communication and technology norms. If you notice someone struggling with new processes or tools, work with the individual to remove roadblocks and offer support.

**STEP 2: REINFORCE CONNECTION TO THE ORGANIZATION**

In a virtual environment, where we are all juggling work and home life and aren’t physically co-located, it can be easy for team members to focus only on individual tasks. Reminding the team of alignment to the greater mission and the organization is even more important when working remotely.

- Collectively discuss if the new conditions we are working in warrant new values and/or an adjustment to the team’s purpose.
- Identify weekly team priorities and individual responsibilities to help with focus and shorten timeframes (think “inch stones” not milestones) given the uncertainty.
- Communicate priorities fully to the entire team even when people are not directly involved with a project. This increases transparency and helps mitigate an “us and them” mentality that can happen more easily when working virtually. Connections between projects may be identified and insights may be gained.
- Encourage open dialog and questions about University-wide news and guidance.
- Communicate regularly about what you know/don’t know about returning to the workplace and other guidance that may not be shared broadly.
**STEP 3: CULTIVATE TEAM CONNECTION**

A strong team is more likely to be a high performing team. In a virtual environment, managers need to use every opportunity available to create connections.

- Encourage project sharing during meetings to allow individuals to hear details of one another’s work.
- Make space for sharing personal news during meetings. Designate the first or last few minutes of team meetings. Knowing more about one another contributes to connection and can foster engagement and trust.
- Look for opportunities for team members to work together whenever possible. This allows people to get to know one another’s skills, enhances trust, builds confidence in each other’s abilities, and strengthens connections.
- Encourage team members to share their ideas, input and perspective. They will be more personally invested if they are able to contribute.
- Ask team members what needs to be in place to be connected to the team. Some may want informal get-togethers, others may already have what they need. A compromise could be hosting a weekly optional ‘drop-in hour.’ As the manager, you set up the virtual space and those who want to come, can. It serves as a space for informal connection.

**STEP 4: MANAGE PERFORMANCE AND SUPPORT EACH INDIVIDUAL**

Connecting with individual employees about both how their work is going and how they are doing personally is more important than ever. Being effective requires planned and deliberate interactions.

**One-on-One Check-in Meetings**

- Establish regular meetings (typically weekly or bi-weekly) and keep them, even if they end early.
- Use the time to check in with individuals (vs. check up on because they are remote). Discuss workload (do they have enough, too much, what do they have time and emotional capacity to focus on). Learn what challenges they are facing, solicit their ideas, answer
their questions, have development conversations, acknowledge their successes, and
connect on a personal level.

- Follow one-on-ones with an email to summarize and reinforce shared understanding and
ask for clarification. This may not have been a necessary practice in the office, however,
in times of uncertainty it can be extremely valuable.
- Communicate genuine interest, care, and concern for the individual’s circumstances. Ask
what they need from you.

Delegation
- Ask individuals how they prefer to receive new work (email with a follow-up conversation,
begin with a conversation to talk through the new work, etc.) and do your best to delegate
work in this format.
- Communicate what the work is, why it is important to the team goals and purpose, why
the individual has been selected for the work (expertise, interest, growth opportunity), and
what their role is (sole owner, lead, project member).
- Clearly define performance requirements and deadlines along with when and how check-
ins will occur to reduce ambiguity. Weekly check-ins are a natural place to discuss work.
Some work may require more frequent check-ins. Agree upon a vehicle and schedule up
front.
- Ask how they are doing and what they need in order to do their best work.

Feedback
- Use the technology that most closely resembles a face-to-face conversation (for most that
will be video via Zoom or MS Teams).
- Offer regular balanced (positive and constructive) feedback during scheduled one-on-one
check-ins. It is important for individuals to know you notice their efforts from a distance
and when they are on track and when work needs improvement.
- Be specific; describe the behavior, action, or observation and the impact on the team,
department, or organization.
Feedback Model

Positive feedback – to reinforce preferred behaviors

Example, “I appreciate your pulling together the Q3 data so quickly. I know it required you to meet individually with multiple people when you were juggling three additional priorities. Having the data enabled the Dean to make an informed decision about the future of project X.”

Constructive Feedback: to change/improve behavior

- Example, “You interrupted Alex and Vlad in the planning meeting. Were you aware of this?”
- We risk discouraging their contributions and losing valuable insights if their input is not heard. “How could you handle this differently in the future?”
- “Moving forward, I would like you to hear them out before jumping in.”
• Ensure the individual is part of the solution. Ask for their perspective and listen. Decide on a plan of action together and follow up with an email, particularly when providing constructive feedback.

• Refrain from providing constructive feedback in writing as tone of voice is especially important in these conversations.

• Manage poor performance as you would in person; provide specific feedback verbally, document the conversation, and communicate with your local Human Resources office before moving to discipline.

Coaching

• Regular check-ins provide a natural place for coaching conversations.

• Coaching conversations provide an opportunity to ask open-ended questions and learn more about an individual’s goals, motivations, perspectives, and insights.

• Ask coaching questions to get updates on the work and debrief after it is completed.

  Sample questions include:
  
  o What resources do you need to accomplish the work?
  o What ideas do you have for moving the project forward?
  o What was the most rewarding aspect of this project?
  o What were the most difficult problems you faced, and how did you overcome them?

• Connect personally with employees using coaching questions. Sample questions include:

  o What does a great day look like for you in the current environment?
  o When are you able to be most productive?
  o What trends do you see (in your work or the work function) as a result of the current environment?
  o How can I support you as your manager at this time?
SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- **Universal Manager Training**: a comprehensive, virtual-instructor-led program focused on managing in the Harvard environment.
- KGA Life Services: [Managing Remotely](#) (7 minute video. To access, go to "Continue without an Individual Account" and type "Harvard" in the Company Code/Username field)
- LinkedIn Learning: [Managing Virtual Teams](#) (56 minute video)
- For both managers and staff: [Harvard Coronavirus](#) (website)
- For both managers and staff: [Working Virtually Best Practices](#) (pdf)