Productive Leaders

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Effective Leadership for Work-from-Home Employees and Virtual Teams

On the days they worked in 2015, 24 percent of employed people did some or all of their work at home. The share of workers doing some or all of their work at home grew from 19 percent in 2003 to 24 percent in 2015. Workers in managerial and professional occupations were more likely than workers in other occupations to do some or all of their work at home.
(Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics)

It is a rising trend across a variety of industries. Companies are using remote employees — some exclusively — for a wide variety of operations. Everything from data input, SEO, strategic planning, IT, business development, law, medical practices, systems analysis, research, technical instruction, marketing, and advertising is evolving at an exponential rate with respect to remote personnel production.

Architects, engineers, systems engineers, content developers, teachers, professors, marketing managers, lawyers, heavy equipment fleet-managers and operators — even doctors — are beginning to understand the future of working remotely. Companies and corporations are adopting the bottom-line financial benefits of having supervisors, managers, and directors working remotely as well.

It is fair to predict that some entire industries will be dominated by remote employee production.

The Benefits of Virtual Teams

In order to determine the viability of virtual teams, it is necessary to weigh the pros and cons of on-site employees.

1. Office Space

The cost of office space can be the difference between a lucrative business and a business struggling to survive. Real estate, whether rented or owned, is expensive. By contrast, remote employees who provide their own office space or who work in collaborative work space sharing offices such as WeWork are more cost effective.

2. Longer Productive Hours

Commuting time is lost time for both the employer and the employee. When employees are forced to manage the logistics of a commute and the time spent commuting, there is an expected start and an expected end time at work.

Remote workers can start their work day earlier or work later than their peers, and remote workers can be productive while their counterparts are fighting traffic. Remote workers simply have more available time during the day to be productive without the commute.

3. Higher Rates of Production

Studies show that a huge percentage of time spent in an office is wasted on non-work related activities. Simply interacting with other people, which some people enjoy, wastes time. For those people who do not enjoy casual work conversation with co-workers, the time spent in idle chatter is misery, as they would rather be working than wasting time. Studies show that productive work drops for most employees after five to six hours of time spent at work.

Paying employees for production, as opposed to hours, can save companies from paying for wasted time.

As a result, production can increase when workers have more time and focus on work.

Types of Leaders Best Suited to Lead Virtual Teams

While great leadership remains great leadership, the criteria for leaders of virtual teams are slightly different from those supervising 9-5 employees.

1. Flexibility

People attracted to remote employment may be driven by different motives than those seeking the security of an office or on-site job. Some prioritize hours in the gym in the morning. Others may want to begin early and spend the mid-afternoon hours with their childrens' activities. Others like to begin early, take a break to run errands, and finish late.

Leaders of virtual teams must understand the difference between production and time committed. Leaders of remote teams need to decide whether they want their teams to be available like a traditional worker, or if those workers are hired to produce a specific outcome. In most cases, leaders will have to manage both kinds of workers, and this will take flexibility.

2. Trust

"She will never be promoted because she works from home" I heard this statement about an employee named Sally this week. I asked, "Why not? If she is doing the work, why do you care where she is working?"

The supervisor said, "If I have to be here, then she has to suffer here, too." This is antiquated thinking. Worse, it means that supervisor KNOWS the workplace is toxic! No

wonder Sally is more productive at home!

The statement about Sally is far more about her boss than Sally. He expressed that he felt that she needed to suffer with everyone else, and if she was not sharing in the suffering, then she didn't deserve the reward pf promotion, even though, he admitted, she was the best project manager he had. This thinking is outdated and ridiculous.

The most successful virtual team leaders provide the tools, the resources, the direction, and the trust that employees need to succeed.

Virtual team leaders know how to provide employees with what they need to produce, and that includes trusting them with doing the job they are hired to do, wherever they are.

3. Communication

The idea that technology hinders communication is outdated as well. Technology *is* communication. Leaders of virtual teams who communicate most effectively, most often, and most efficiently with technology are the most successful.

Remote workers need more communication and they are often more eager to receive feedback and guidance, making them less apt to lose productive time.

4. Tech-Savvy

One of the biggest failures a virtual team leader can have, beyond the inability to trust employees or to communicate effectively, is a lack of understanding of the technology the team uses to be productive.

Despite some companies like IBM and Yahoo pulling back on their remote workers, virtual teams are a cost-effective way to harness talent and maximize resources.

Large corporations are going where small businesses already are – they are moving work to where the workers are. And the remote workers are proving their value. Which companies will move forward to making themselves viable in a more virtual world?

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Do you have any burning questions?

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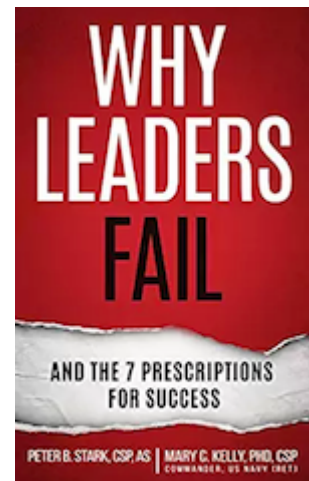
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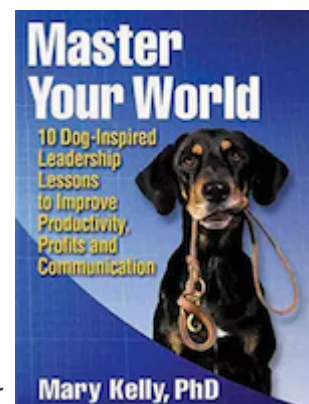
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Mary C. Kelly
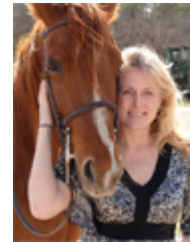
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