**Leading a team remotely**

Clare Moriarty, retiring as DExEU Perm Sec after 35 years in the Civil Service, wrote that leaders need to be focused on making it possible for others to do their best work. Leading a team remotely doesn’t change that but it may mean you need to be more intentional about it.

In MoJ we have a strong track record in working remotely. We are national organisation and so, operationally, working across geographies is what we do. And, driven first by the need to reduce travel during the 2012 London Olympics, we’ve progressively adopted Smarter Working practices in MoJ HQ. In the 2019 People Survey, 82% of MoJ HQ staff said that Smarter Working enabled them to be more productive and 87% said they felt confident in using modern workplace technologies to connect and collaborate with colleagues.

**Find your rhythm**

This gives us a really strong foundation to build on. But as people work remotely more often, and for longer, it’s worth reviewing the norms that give shape to the way we work and provide the space we need to get things done.

A key role for you as a team leader is to help your team find its new normal. This will look different for every team but may include:

* **Protocols** – for example: working and non-working hours; sharing and updating calendars; which communications channels to use and when; disciplined use of digital platforms to ensure information is properly managed and secured and to reduce technostress; clear reporting structures (including in medical emergencies and when staff are absent); and expectations of etiquette and behaviour in online communication and virtual meetings.
* **Check-ins** – like a Team Information Board or “10 at 10” session, a short daily video or teleconference to check in with each other, share progress and focus on the day’s priorities.
* **Progress Reviews** – often weekly, and using a Trello Board (or similar), progress reviews are longer video or teleconferences to review progress and decide which new work items can be brought forward.
* **Team Time** – regular space to develop as a team, whether by working collaboratively on shared problems, undertaking team development activities or simply doing something social.
* **1-2-1s** - dedicated time with individuals to promote their wellbeing and provide performance and development coaching.

**Get into the groove**

Once you’ve established your new normal it is important to embed it. This helps create trust which in turn provides a foundation for people to stretch and develop. As you transition into more remote working, studies have shown that it is important to:

* **Respect and protect workers’ privacy** – Remote work can become all-consuming as individuals’ personal and professional lives merge. Identify and highlight opportunities for remote workers to create space between their personal and professional lives and ensure this is respected.
* **Optimize social activity, not just productivity** - It is easy for remote employees to become isolated so build in opportunities for social interaction.
* **Remember that remote workers are real people** – Be sure to pay sufficient attention to people’s capacity for virtual working (mental, technologically and relationship-wise). Remember that they did not “sign up” for this and be prepared to provide additional support where needed.
* **Match communication channel to the message** - e.g., videoconferencing is best for replacing face-to-face conversations and non-urgent requests are best suited to email or instant messaging applications; etc
* **Act deliberately to build and maintain trust** - Build trust via activities (real world or simulated) that provide opportunities for each participant to learn about each other, how they operate and/or what their working preferences are.

You should also be careful to protect the time your new normal requires by:

* **Careful scheduling** - Mondays are good for progress reviews to focus the week’s work and often quieter Fridays can be good for more reflective activities like team time and 1-2-1s.
* **Peer Leadership** – Check-ins and progress reviews don’t always need the senior leader to be present, they can be facilitated perfectly well by a peer leader.
* **Planning ahead** – Scheduling a long period of Team Time with nothing may look like a luxury you can’t afford but planning ahead will help you its value.

**Turn up the volume**

People are people whether they are working remotely or not. However physical separation can mean messages are drowned out by background noise. As a leader of a remote team you need to do everything you would do with a team that was physically together but with more intentionality and sign-posting. This means creating an environment that includes:

* **Checking in** – Colleagues taking time to show genuine interest in what is going on for each other rather than jumping straight into the task at hand.
* **Connectedness** – Colleagues having a shared interest in each other’s work, even objectives that can only be achieved together, and designing roles without single points of failure.
* **Celebration** – Colleagues recognising each-others’ achievements and learning from each-other.

**Change the record**

New norms are great until they become bad habits. As a leader you need to be looking out for signs that things are no longer working as well as they might and, when you see them, consider changing your ways of working again. Things that can cause this include:

* **Changes in colleagues’ needs** –changes in personal or family circumstances may require you to reschedule regular events to a time where everyone can give them the focus they need.
* **Changes in the work** – the tempo of your work might increase for a period or your team might need apply new skills or adopt new processes.
* **Changes in context** – your work might become higher profile, or need to be done in a different way, for a period.