

What Working From Home Taught Us About Employee Engagement

19 April 2021



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At the start of COVID-19, I was the manager of a highly engaged team when we had to begin working from home. This was a new challenge for me, managing a remote team. I was concerned how I would do this, let alone maintain the high level of engagement.

According to [Gallup \(2019\)](#), managers are responsible for 70% of the variance in employee engagement, making it crucial that employee engagement is at the forefront of managers' minds as we continue into the environment where working remotely is becoming the norm.

While a complex concept with many factors, a simple definition of employee engagement is the level of commitment an employee has to their employer and the extent to which they apply discretionary effort in meeting the goals of the organisation ([Kruse, 2012](#)). In Australia and New Zealand only 14% of employees are engaged, with 15% actively disengaged ([Busby, 2018](#)). [Burnett and Lisk \(2019\)](#) highlight the role employee engagement plays specifically in increased productivity, decreased turnover and improved customer service, with engaged employees outperforming disengaged employees by 20%-30%.

[Gallup](#) lists among the benefits of employee engagement:

- 81% less absenteeism
- 64% fewer safety incidents
- 41% fewer quality defects
- 23% higher productivity

[Chanana and Sangeeta](#) identified impacts COVID-19 and working from home had on employee engagement including dealing with the stress of impacts of COVID-19 on society, job security and financial concerns, lack of tools and equipment, work-life conflict, and interruptions from family members.

Although working from home got off to a rough start, recent [Gallup research](#) found that 55% of managers would let employees continue to work from home now that the kinks have been worked out. While engagement fluctuated throughout 2020, managers were cited as being the most influential factor on employee engagement.

[Chanana and Sangeeta](#) provide advice for managing employee engagement with remote staff.

- While the manager has the greatest influence over employee engagement, the organisation must support managers by providing suitable policies and procedures, flatter hierarchies, investment in technology, wellbeing programs and clear, timely organisational direction.
- Much of the work of developing and maintaining employee engagement falls on the manager's shoulders, more so when managing remote workers. It is their responsibility to make use of the organisation's management assets and apply them in a way that results in high employee engagement.
- Flexibility is highly important to managing remote workers. They are facing significant changes in their work and home lives, adapting to new technologies and ways of working, managing feelings of isolation and trying to cope with re-establishing routine in their lives.
- Employees are looking to their managers for guidance and support. Managers need to create an open and transparent environment where employees feel safe sharing their views. Using inspiration, motivation and support they can create connection.
- There is a need for regular feedback, setting clear expectations and providing recognition and appreciation.
- A manager must be able to develop mutual trust by explicitly supporting employees, being a good role model, focussing on core values and being able to make the right decisions at the right times.
- Managing remote workers requires a stronger communication regime, with direct communication and explicitly soliciting employee feedback.
- By committing to the employee's employment, they will more readily commit to you and the organisation.

There is no doubt that this presents significant challenges to managers, as they adapt to a new work environment themselves and have to draw on all their resources to rapidly evolve into a new style of manager who can lead in an age where old methods no longer work.

To tackle this challenge, I explored the elements which were most effective in establishing and maintaining employee engagement. At the fore was open communication and plenty of it, making personal connections, showing genuine concern and setting and maintaining a culture that allows team members to be their best. These are difficult to achieve when you're working face to face but pose some serious problems when you can't have the team co-located to experience incidental interactions and you don't have direct contact.

I was fortunate that a lot of the groundwork had been established. For my part I increased the amount of one-on-one contact, ensuring there was plenty of time for informal discussions. We continued to have weekly team meetings and casual catch-ups. The team themselves realised they missed their informal communications and set up channels to keep in touch. Given the degree of stress and uncertainty, I think it was important to provide plenty of open and honest information, but also to set realistic expectations.

[Gallup](#) provides some insightful observations relating to how organisations can tackle the challenges of remote working to create favourable outcomes.

- Workers can be more productive remotely than in the office. Key to this success is the quantity and quality of manager feedback.
- Burnout can be avoided. There has been a rise in burnout risk due to increased stress and high workload. Effective managers can mitigate this by inspiring, motivating and supporting employees, enabling them to perform more work with considerably less stress.
- Even prior to COVID-19 existing performance management systems were ineffective. This was exacerbated by the changing environment of working from home. There is now a need for managing changing expectations of the organisation with regular, timely and informal performance discussions.
- While leaders fear becoming micromanagers, employees feel they receive too little feedback, resulting in increased stress due to a lack of clear expectations and meaningful feedback.
- Employee wellbeing is now more than ever a key factor in the success of organisations. With the relationship between employee wellbeing and engagement being both reciprocal and additive, with supporting wellbeing increasing engagement, performance and productivity.

My takeaway from the experience is that managing remote teams is very different and you need to adopt a different style. In my case, I was interested in understanding what my team needed of me and changing my approach to suit. Generally, this was being more informal and approachable, providing reassurance and encouragement. This was a real-time for the servant leader to come out.

How can you manage remotely to ensure high employee engagement? Be better than you were before. Communicate. Connect with your employees. Dare to do things differently. Listen. Learn. Adapt.



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A highly motivated lifelong learner with 20+ years' IT leadership experience, Michelle's passion is enabling organisations and employees to achieve their potential through employee engagement.