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11 minute read – Posted by Wendy Pat Fong (<https://7geese.com/author/wendy/>) – March 16, 2020

Advice on making the shift to remote work

Over the last few weeks, we've fielded a lot of questions from clients about how best to support remote working. They want to know what are the remote working challenges and do they need to change their performance management practices?

In this post, we're going to address those questions based on our own experience of supporting people who work remotely.

Challenges with remote work.

In the office, we have an abundance of informal information. We learn about projects, problems and new initiatives at the water cooler or over lunch with colleagues. It's easy to walk over to somebody's desk or tap somebody on the shoulder for a quick 5-minute chat to figure out a solution.

These informal interactions become difficult when you move to remote work.

Leaders report feeling in-the-dark about how much progress has been made on projects progress and worry whether people are still accountable for results.

How can leaders hold their teams accountable without micromanaging?

The answer to worrying about a lack of accountability is not micromanagement.

The accountability problem.

The answer to worrying about a lack of accountability is not micromanagement. The solution is more transparency and more precise communication.

Some companies implement a policy where staff must notify their manager if they are going to be away from their computer for over 10 minutes, and to be available for video call anytime between 9-5. We don't do this. We believe rules like this can erode trust with a team and risks treating adults like children.

Instead, we recommend a series of required team check-ins in order to boost transparency. They should be quick and simple with very clear agendas so that in the event of a video-call breakdown, you can move the update to email or Slack.

Before I jump into the meetings 7Geese requires when working remotely, I wanted to share how we developed this advice.

Our advice comes from years of remote working experience.

7Geese has had a flexible working location policy and has been remote-ready since 2011.

We believe that being able to support remote work – even if you aim to be a primarily office-based company – adds a level of psychological safety to your team. Staff don't need one more thing to worry about, and we believe removing uncertainty is key to a happy, productive company.

Improve the flow of information.

We rely on OKRs for strategic direction (<https://7geese.com/features/objectives-and-key-results-okrs/>). When we're in the office, we make sure to have team OKR review every two weeks as a minimum.

When remote working, such as around holidays, when many of our team operate remotely, we increase how frequently we review and check into OKRs.

There are three core elements we recommend.

1. A weekly team kick-off. (30 mins, Monday.)

Goals: Have each team member up-to-date on the strategic goals they are working toward, and have updated their peers on the current progress and blockers.

Agenda: Team check-in. (5mins)

We go around the table (or call), and each team member has 30 seconds to one minute to update the team. We keep this non-work related, talking about the weekend and things like that.

Team lead reviews the organization level OKRs. (5 mins)

Larger organizations, evaluating OKRs at a division or department level might be more appropriate. The goal is to remind ourselves of the strategic focus driving our work and why our projects matter. We're going to be spending less time talking about work, so it's more important teams understand the strategic goals — it allows them to make key project decisions with less input from peers.

A review of our OKRs at a team level. (10-20 mins)

We review the results, the owner and contributors to each OKR give a quick update on the status (on-track/off-track) and what went well in the previous week, what didn't go so well or what is blocking progress. It's a chance for the team to ask for help, and to offer advice to colleagues.

We ask team members to have checked into their OKRs on the Friday before the weekend. Every team member can read each other's status updates before the meeting. This speeds up the time we spend on a video call and make sure that in the event of a technical difficulty, everybody is up-to-speed.

Actions/Decisions. (5 mins)

The team-lead should try to remove as many obstacles as possible on the call or to set future 1-on-1s to remove team obstacles outside of the meeting.

2. Daily standups. (15 mins, Tuesday-Friday.)

Ideally, on a video-call but can be done using Slack or Microsoft Teams.

Via video call or Slack, each team member attends a meeting at the same time. We prefer 9 am, but in the mornings between 8.30 am, and 10 am are considered best practices. Keep this short. Typically 15 minutes. These are micro-versions of the weekly check-in.

Each team member speaks on or writes a few lines on:

- What they worked on yesterday.
- Progress they plan to make today.
- Things blocking their progress.

Similar to the weekly check-in, this process makes sure that projects don't lose momentum, and teams don't feel out-of-touch with progress.

Some teams even include an end-of-day check-in, but this is entirely optional. Some people find this overkill.

3. End-of-week reflection. (Digital update in 7Geese – End of day Friday.)

Goal: Improve cross-company collaboration and transparency. The previous check-ins I've described have the goal of improving communication within a single team. The end-of-week reflection is a little different. This check-in is designed to make sure communication between different teams isn't lost.

How it works:

Everybody checks into their OKRs in 7Geese. After team members check-in, managers update their OKRs, creating a roll-up summary effect of company progress.

The update should contain a more detailed update message, giving context to other teams about the work that has been done.

We use the 7Geese Slack integration (<https://7geese.com/features/integrations/>) to publish our OKR updates in a particular Slack channel for the entire company to see. Live updates maintain transparency within the company. People outside of our immediate teams can get a window into progress made by other groups.

Note on change.

Change causes uncertainty and anxiety, which can negatively impact engagement and productivity. New hires who are adjusting to the company culture, existing employees who have moved to a new team, office or to remote working are likely to be experiencing more uncertainty.

Their manager or coach should check-in more regularly with them with a little more frequency, making sure to ask for feedback about how they are handling the change.

In times of change where there are more uncertainties, over-communicating is better than under communication to reduce anxieties.

Video-call 1-on-1s with each individual team-member is ideal. In 7Geese, all parties have the opportunity to build an agenda and prepare thoughtful answers which reduce the element of surprise in advance of the call.

Change causes uncertainty and anxiety, which can negatively impact engagement and productivity.

Note on difficult conversations.

Difficult conversations, such as critical feedback on a piece of work or project, need to be handled with more care when working in physically different locations.

Slack and email lack the body language and tone-of-voice that convey critical non-verbal information. People easily misinterpreted comments as overly terse or aggressive. It's a cost of text-primary communication. Like over-communication, around tough subjects, it's best to over-clarify the real meaning of a message. Doing so is best on the phone or video call. We want to avoid making and remove all assumptions.

As with our previous section, 7Geese's 1-on-1s (<https://7geese.com/features/1-on-1-coaching-and-feedback/>) and Feedback (<https://7geese.com/features/360-feedback/>) functions are great for preparing information to have productive conversations that are quick and valuable, but they are not replacements for a good old human conversation.

Tools we use to support remote working.

- Google Hangouts and Slack Video for internal-team calls.
- Zoom for customer calls (can be recorded and shared at our client's request). We also use these for our own training purposes.

- Slack and Email for summaries.
- 7Geese OKRs (<https://7geese.com/features/objectives-and-key-results-okrs/>) for strategy communication, transparency building and check-ins.
- 7Geese Feedback (<https://7geese.com/features/360-feedback/>) to run surveys asking the team how things are going.
- 7Geese Slack integration (<https://7geese.com/features/integrations/>) for transparency.

Summary.

Remote work makes the informal flow of information harder, and leaders should overcome that with a set of structured check-ins that improve transparency and communication but don't lead to micromanaging or meeting overload.

Being clear about and communicating, the strategic reason why each project exists gives remote teams context to make quick, productive decisions when they can't immediately ask somebody for an opinion.

If remote working is new to you, feel free to reach out to us with your questions — we've been doing it for years.



Wendy Pat Fong

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