



How to Manage Performance from a Distance

by Mareen Fisher

Free Resources

TARGET

AUDIENCE—

People who want to learn the fundamentals of performance management for off-site workers.

RECOMMENDED TRAINING

The Distance Manager

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Ask any manager and he or she will tell you that performance management, under the best of conditions, is difficult. The very words, “Performance Management” conjure up all kinds of negative images – disciplinary action, confrontation, and the dreaded annual performance evaluation process – to name just a few. For those managing remote employees, the process can seem even more daunting. Leaders often ask, “How can I manage the performance of people I don’t see very often?” “How is it possible to stay on top of what employees are doing on different shifts, in offices across town, or across the globe?”

It is true that there are definite challenges in managing performance from a distance and that there are clear advantages to managing a collocated team. In a collocated setting, feedback can be given immediately, and given face-to-face. Day-to-day interactions, whether in the hallway or a team meeting, offer quick insights into each individual’s current actions and need for coaching.

But take heart. There are a few fundamentals of performance management that, when followed, help ensure the success of virtual teams and of each individual team member. These basics include, 1- establishing clear expectations, 2- determining a performance management routine, and 3- regular evaluation of progress toward established goals.

1- Establish clear expectations

Perhaps no other factor is more critical to a virtual team member’s success than having clear expectations. When working from a remote location without the advantages of daily interactions with the team leader or other team members, a clear understanding of what each employee is expected to accomplish is critical to motivation and satisfactory performance.

Consider the process used by distance managers at Cummins Power Generation. Each manager of remote employees is charged with answering a series of questions *to the satisfaction of the employee*. Included are questions such as:

- What am I supposed to do?



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- How am I supposed to do it?
- How will I know when it has been done correctly?
- How do I get the resources (skills, tools, information, etc.) I need?
- How do I prioritize my activities?
- How will I get feedback?

To determine what questions would be most useful for your team's situation, put yourself in the position of a member of your virtual team. What would you need your manager to do for you so that you can achieve the highest level of performance (e.g., What questions could he or she ask you? What training would you need? What other actions could he or she take to help you succeed?)? Is this the kind of support you currently provide to those who are on the virtual team(s) you lead?

The value of these kinds of discussions with remote employees cannot be overstated. Not only does it provide the employee with clear direction, it fosters trust in the relationship, which is crucial, yet sometimes difficult to do, when managing remotely.

2- Create a performance management routine

Each team leader or manager needs to establish a regular routine for reviewing and discussing performance, both with the team as a whole and with each individual team member. It is recommended that the leader hold weekly teleconferences or Web conferences with the entire team to keep abreast of progress and to answer any questions the team may have regarding their daily work or a particular project.

Secondly, our best practices research suggests that each individual team member needs to have the opportunity to “meet” with the team leader every two weeks. These phone conversations allow the team leader to provide critical feedback and provide a time for the team member to ask questions related to his or her individual responsibilities.

A third element of a strong performance management routine is face-to-face meetings with the team quarterly or semi-annually. Face-to-face sessions facilitate team-building and foster trust between team members and the leader. Discussing key organizational and performance issues in this setting allows the team to focus and go deeper into subjects than what is typically possible in a teleconference or Web conference.

3- Evaluate progress towards goals regularly

None of us can be successful without knowing how we are doing and having the opportunity to make adjustments when performance gets off track. Therefore, the criticality of regularly reviewing progress toward established goals cannot be overstated. Some leaders will simply build this into their performance management routine. For instance, one leader reviews goal progress every other week in her regularly scheduled team conferences. Another chooses to do it monthly during the first conference of the month. How often and when these updates occur is best decided jointly between the leader and the team. However, it is recommended that some kind of evaluation be done at least monthly in order to keep the team focused and coordinated.

Summary

When working remotely, team members and leaders alike require routines that provide direction and focus in the absence of face-to-face contact. Three keys to remote distance management include, establishing clear expectations, establishing a routine process for reviewing and discussing performance, and instituting a process for regularly evaluating progress toward established goals and projects. A combination of these three practices will put distance teams on the road to effective performance, and give the distance manager confidence in the remote management process.

Mareen Fisher is an authority on leadership and teams. She is the cofounder of The Fisher Group and a best-selling author.