

How Managers Can Address These 5 Bad Habits of Remote Workers

By Ed Beltran

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During the COVID-19 shutdown over the past year, many managers have learned a great deal about themselves and their employees. They realize that even when their employees aren't at the worksite, they can remain highly productive via conference calls, video or phone meetings.

What many managers have also discovered is that some of their remote employees have developed bad habits.

Corporations dove into the remote-work world not knowing what to expect, and months passed before many executives realized they needed to develop a set of rules about "virtual" office decorum and engagement. Now that those rules are in place, it might be necessary to identify and address behaviors that can limit productivity or appear unprofessional. Check out these descriptions of five common personas—and find out how to help them break their bad habits.

The Recluse

You might notice during your team calls or meetings with clients that some people never seem to turn on their video or audio. They might politely sign on with video and audio, then go dark as the meeting progresses. They hide behind their names or a picture of their pet or a scene from their favorite TV show. They rarely participate in the conversations, making it unclear if they're really listening or ignoring the business at hand.

What you should do: Set ground rules for your videoconference meetings—such as telling everyone to "stay on mute until it's time to talk," and "keep your video on throughout the meeting." Seek out comments from individual team members. Ask direct questions instead of throwing out an open-ended question and asking people to chime in. Consider break-out meetings for smaller group conversations.

The Slacker

Leading remote workers has put more pressure on executives to rely on team members to work independently. That creates an expectation that employees are all self-starters, well-organized, and push forward on their tasks and responsibilities with little or no direction. However, some employees need all the direction they can get. Some remote workers tend to miss meetings due to "issues" that pop up continuously. They miss deadlines or are late responding to e-mails asking for project updates.

What you should do: If you notice that a worker's productivity is dropping and engagement level is declining, it's time for a one-on-one meeting to discuss the employee's performance and provide suggestions for improvement. Tell the worker if you don't see a recovery, the worker will face loss of pay, demotion or termination.

The Poorly Groomed

The rules on workplace attire have changed a lot over the years. Today, "business casual" tends to be the norm—but remote work has pushed business casual to the limit. What is proper dress when your team members are working out of their homes? Many managers can attest that over the past year, they have seen it all: sweatshirts, hoodies, rumpled T-shirts and unbrushed hair. While that may be acceptable for meetings of very small teams, it can be concerning when employees repeatedly bring these pandemic-related grooming habits to important meetings with senior-level executives or major clients.

What you should do: Alert employees when executives or important clients will be attending your meetings and say that appropriate business attire is required for everyone, especially people who may be presenting or leading the conversation.

The Juggler

Working remotely has forced employees to multitask as they help kids with schoolwork, care for relatives, and attend to pets or household duties. While it seems inescapable, it becomes problematic when you realize a team member is juggling too much. While on video calls, they're sending you e-mails about other projects or seem caught off guard—as if they weren't paying attention—when asked a question. As a team leader, you realize that some employees never seem "present."

What you should do: Be firm about your expectations of when employees should be working. Explain that while multitasking may get a lot done, it does not ensure the highest quality of work. If you have assigned a worker numerous tasks, prioritize what needs to get done by what date, so the employee can manage her time.

The Distracted

Remote employees have found themselves having to work at the kitchen table, in a bedroom or even in walk-in closets to escape the distractions of children playing, dogs barking and the next-door neighbor mowing his lawn. You may find your remote employees can't focus or complete a meeting without having to switch rooms.

What you should do: To help minimize distractions, offer team members additional resources—perhaps a new desk that could be set up in a more private part of the house or flexible hours so they can help with a child's schoolwork. By having a conversation with individual team members, you will get to know them better, which can help you provide what they need to be focused and productive.

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