Managers can learn from supervising remote workers during the coronavirus
10 April 2020, by Linda Schweitzer

Managing employees from home may actually lead to more effective managers. Credit: Shutterstock

Managers are facing the sudden challenge of supervising a self-isolating workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There have been lots of tips, many questions and stories of hilarious failures.

But managers going the extra mile to effectively manage their employees virtually may actually hone critical management skills and develop habits with benefits that will outlast the current crisis.

Advancements in technology and the shift towards less physical work have long led to predictions that virtual work would rapidly become common. Even before COVID-19, some workers have taken advantage of the opportunity to work remotely.

According to the Conference Board of Canada, a majority of Canadian employers permit virtual work on an ad-hoc or part-time basis. However, the proportion of employees who mainly virtually has not risen as expected.

An estimated 10 percent of Canadians were working virtually in 2001 — that figure rose to only 11 percent in 2017.

The modern office came of age in the ’60s

The well-entrenched norm of the modern office was popularized in the 1960s. At that time, there was a need for traditional documentation and communication, as well as a push for work standardization.

All of these reasons are mostly obsolete in 2020. Yet old-fashioned management norms prevail: presenteeism, performance evaluations based on (overtime) hours worked, ad-hoc hallway communications, excessive meetings and attachment to inefficient technology.

The opportunity to work from home is largely sought-after. In the United States, 86 percent of those who have the option to work virtually have opted in. Research also suggests advantages to the organization: virtual work has been associated with greater commitment, satisfaction and well-being.

The greatest barriers to working virtually have been identified as managerial resistance, an unsupportive work culture and the limitations of technology. Interestingly, one of the common concerns of managers is employee productivity, whereas the main concern of employees is working too much and at all hours.
The 1960s office setting was romanticized by TV shows like "Mad Men." Credit: AMC

The fundamentals

Research and mainstream management advice mostly agree on the fundamentals of effective virtual management:

Communicating effectively: All communication is complicated by perceptions and assumptions. Language, tone and communication channel contribute to ambiguity. Effective managers make the effort to set communication norms, communicate regularly, keep everyone in the loop, confirm common understanding and take care not to waste employees' time.

Structuring work: Employees need an unambiguous understanding of what they are expected to accomplish, when they should be finished and, sometimes, how they are expected to do it. Effective managers clearly and explicitly structure tasks, set objectives and schedule checkpoints. When and where an employee works on their tasks is often not relevant.

- Performance by objectives: If objectives and expectations are reasonable and clear, employees are motivated to meet their goals efficiently. Managers interested in effectiveness should measure performance through met objectives, not hours.
- Leverage technology: A major barrier to effective virtual work has always been technology. Advances in technology and evolving communication norms provide managers with an opportunity. Effective managers learn to leverage the best technology, match the tool to the task and are open to trying new things.
- Positive culture: Employees base a lot of their expectations, behavior and perceptions on the implicit norms and perceived values of the work environment. Effective managers build and exemplify a positive culture of trust, collegiality, transparency, accountability and inclusivity. A positive work environment also includes time for socializing and getting to know one another.
- Respect personal time: Pervasive technology has led to the blurring of work-life boundaries. When work interferes with personal life, it creates the pressure of always being "on," risking overwork and burnout. Effective managers establish reasonable expectations and boundaries for themselves and their employees.

Researchers agree that managing virtually is harder, but the nature of the effort is the same as that for effective face-to-face management.

Why is managing virtually more difficult?

A brief review of management textbooks and executive education offerings shows that the skills required for effective virtual management overlap almost perfectly with managing in a traditional setting. Why is it harder then?

It could be that in a traditional workplace setting, long-established norms encourage management practices and habits that are not as effective as they could be. Why change what isn't broken?

One of the key skills of effective managers is self-awareness and lifelong learning. A self-aware manager understands their own strengths, weaknesses and instinctive managerial tendencies and habits.

Critical self-reflection can be an impetus for change.
and growth. Great managers question their abilities and put considerable effort into improving themselves. The current work-at-home disruption has forced many managers to face their limitations, try new things and rethink everyday activities that have long gone unexamined.

Virtual work is not appropriate for all tasks and jobs, but the key skills for managing virtually are relevant to all managers. The skills, habits and, importantly, new perspectives developed during the past and upcoming weeks may actually serve as a crash course in effective management.

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