

A Leader's Guide to
**MANAGING A
HAPPY AND
PRODUCTIVE
VIRTUAL TEAM**



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In March 2020, anyone who could stop commuting did.

For those who'd spent hours each day fighting traffic or waiting for public transit, the change brought precious time back into their days. For others, the challenges of productivity at home and the isolation from coworkers negated any time saved.

As we've adapted to our new routines, leaders in our organizations have developed new ways of supporting their teams. We've seen the challenges of recreating the camaraderie of the office environment and understanding what work is getting done on your team. It's never been more important to intentionally remind our teams that their work matters.

Beating the isolation and malaise of working from home takes concerted effort and new tools. Organizational psychologists studying virtual teams have found members of the highest performing virtual teams have [clearly set interdependent goals](#) that make their contributions visible to the whole team. They also use [technology](#) to support cross-functionality and increased visibility.

Whether this is your first time working with a virtual team, or you've been doing this for years, we hope these best practices can empower your organization to find success during this challenging time. Onward and upward!

LEADING A PRODUCTIVE REMOTE TEAM WITHOUT MICROMANAGING

Following the transition to remote work, managers scrambled to ensure their direct reports were set up for continued productivity while remote. [Bloomberg reported](#) a surge in panicked purchases of 'spy software' to keep tabs on remote employee activities. While implementing 'Big Brother' levels of micromanaging may be a tempting shortcut to productivity, it is not a replacement for an authentic culture of trust, accountability and transparency that keeps team members focused on key tasks without feeling smothered. As remote teams adapt to their own changing situations, the right tools for productivity will be those that focus on results, while providing team members the flexibility to execute within their evolving remote environments.

Let's dive into 5 ways teams can use technology while working remote to maintain focus and productivity without sacrificing the autonomy and privacy rights of their employees.

Recognize Team Accomplishments

Keeping team members focused on the work that moves the business forward while being remote means finding ways to celebrate wins and recognize accomplishments in new ways. Replacing quarterly celebrations of achievements may not be front of mind, but creating a culture of gratitude will be more critical than ever for maintaining team productivity and engagement.

Tracking achievements in a central location where managers and teammates can offer kudos and recognition goes a long way toward recreating the collegial encouragement we get from the office. At Align, we use a Team Accomplishment Feed in [Slack](#) that posts updates when progress is made on Priorities or updates are made to Critical Numbers in the Align system. The team can all see where progress is being made and offer encouragement in real-time. Many offices have celebratory traditions. At Align, we developed a ritual of playing music in the office after a big sale to signal the good news to the whole team. We have adapted that ritual to a slack announcement and our team members created their own personal emoji or GIF reactions to replace in-person high-fives. Just as we have had to adapt, all remote teams should adapt ways to share in the feeling of accomplishment when the team moves forward on major initiatives.

Transparently Track Goals

Goals that are neither clearly laid out nor centrally tracked are unlikely to be accomplished in any organization, especially a remote one. Instead of attempting to closely monitor every action of remote team members, organizations can structure work around transparent tracking of the business's most important outcomes.

Measuring and tracking goals in a central location can improve execution by [2X over time](#). Transparent goal tracking works because team members perform better when they understand how their contributions move the broader organization forward. While micromanaging tasks fosters resentment and moves focus to appeasing managers, [effectively managed goals](#) boost team performance by emphasizing the collective impact of individual actions.

Communicate News and “Progress Updates” Consistently

Communication may be the most critical skill for leaders of remote teams. The ad-hoc communication of information in the office must be replaced with consistent opportunities for information transfer and honest expectation setting by leadership. As situations evolve while moving into a post-COVID world, leaders must prioritize communicating accurate, up-to date information across their organization to maintain engagement and productivity.

At Align we continue to [huddle daily](#) as a collective team and even temporarily held twice daily check-ins to ensure team wellness and project completion as we moved to 100% remote work during a time of rapid change. The frequency of communication depends on how quickly information is changing and can be tailored to conditions. Yet consistent check-ins remain critical for team member productivity and well-being remains critical while adjusting to the emerging “new normal”.

Share Short, Medium, and Long Term Plans

As your business adapts to changing market conditions, sharing the most realistic plans for the future as they emerge is critical for morale and engagement. At Align, most of the companies we work with deemphasized annual plans in 2020 to focus on what needed to be done in the next 30, 60, and 90 days to keep the business moving forward during the COVID disruption. In 2021, we have seen companies create flexible and adaptable annual plans with some even modeling contingencies so they can react faster. In the most rapidly changing industries, even just setting monthly goals for new initiatives helps structure and prioritize the work team members are doing while remote.

Set a Daily Focus Everyday

By now, we’ve all heard the advice of setting a daily routine with meditation, exercise, and set working hours. Especially for those with young children or other responsibilities at home, days are rarely so predictable. Staying focused on important tasks amidst the chaos of homeschooling

and house management requires clear expectation setting. Setting a [Top Priority](#) each and every day, shared publicly with the team, creates focus and accountability on completing the most important task regardless of what (hopefully) metaphorical fires may crop up during the remote work day. Setting a Top Priority means fully committing to the most critical item on the to-do list. Without monitoring every movement of team members, the Top Priority creates purpose every day and holds the entire team accountable for completing the work most critical to business success.

A Happy Team is a Productive Team

With the turn to remote work, finding an escape from the chaos and stress of home at the office is no longer an option. Employees must be given freedom to complete priorities on a schedule that fits their individual needs.

Micromanaging in response to virtual work only restricts the autonomy employees have and reduces the levels of trust in organization. Only with transparency and honest communication will employees find ways to stay productive while ensuring the mental and physical well-being of themselves and their families.

KEYS TO EFFECTIVE AND EMPOWERING 1-ON-1'S FOR MANAGERS WHILE REMOTE

With our work and home lives in constant flux these days, one pillar of management has become especially important: the regular 1-on-1 with direct reports.

Keeping your team productive and focused on what matters, especially while working from home, means establishing good communication rhythms. These consistent check-ins provide an opportunity to share updates, identify roadblocks, and maintain authentic connection to drive engagement.

“Your job, as a manager,” explains Julie Zhou in [The Making of a Manager: What to Do When Everyone Looks to You](#), “is to get better outcomes from a group of people working together.”

Streamline your management by carving out time to specifically address individual progress and concerns. This time spent will pay dividends in team productivity especially with time and energy at a premium.

What's the most important factor for an exceptional 1-on-1?

“The answer is preparation,” says Zhuo in *The Making of a Manager*. “It’s rare that an amazing conversation springs forth when nobody has a plan for what to talk about.”

Preparing well ensures conversations are valuable for managers and reports. Effective preparation for 1-on-1’s helps managers empower their reports to get things done, making their jobs and their lives easier.

With good preparation in mind, let’s break down the Top 8 Keys to making your 1-on-1’s efficient, effective, and empowering for your team.

Write Everything Down

Before your 1-on-1 meetings with reports, make sure updates are recorded in a centralized place prior to your meeting. Writing down items to address ensures nothing is left out during your meeting. Recording decisions made and action items during the 1-on-1 creates accountability and allows quick recall when the next check-in rolls around. Sharing this between you and your report means everyone stays on the same page. When [performance reviews](#) or promotion opportunities roll around, having this written record of progress helps inform your assessments.

Share Updates on Objectives

Employees feel empowered and engaged when their individual goals connect to your team and organizational goals. Recurring 1-on-1’s provide an opportunity to discuss where your team and company stand and to acknowledge individual contributions. Transparently [tracking progress](#) towards SMART or FAST goals helps you quickly assess whether your employees are falling behind on priorities. 1-on-1’s provide an opportunity to ask employees “What can I do to help move this along?” when they are falling behind on goals. Consistently tracked and well managed goals are more likely to be successful, and 1-on-1’s are the best opportunity to ensure forward progress.

Set a Recurring Time

Keeping 1-on-1’s efficient and effective requires they are regularly scheduled and honored. While conflicts inevitably arise, committing to the weekly or bi-weekly cadence helps build the habit. While committing to a half-hour or longer every week may seem time consuming, especially if you have many reports, these check-ins should save you and your employees valuable time by quickly getting everyone on the same page and preventing issues down the road. Instead of wasting time confused or stuck, consistent 1-on-1’s ensure obstacles are addressed and steady progress gets made.

Create Accountability by Clearly Defining Success

Regular 1-on-1's are most effective when they break work on bigger priorities down into mini "[sprints](#)". They provide an opportunity to reflect on what got done since the last meeting and to set objectives due before the next check-in. To maximize the likelihood that they get done, work can be structured into tasks that team members commit to completing. Writing these tasks with specificity in mind helps define success for employees. During 1-on-1's and during performance reviews, employees know where they stand because their managers have clearly defined the milestones of success along the way.

Discuss Obstacles

If a member of your team is falling behind on a goal, your role as manager is to probe why. By addressing this during regular 1-on-1's you avoid realizing a goal is out of reach when it's already too late. A critical question for managers to ask their reports is "How can I help you be successful?" If that means engaging with leaders of another team, providing closer coaching support, or adjusting goals based on new information, consistent 1-on-1's provide an opportunity to identify how to get priorities back on track. This sets your team, and your organization up for success.

Give and Receive Feedback

Feedback is a gift. When done correctly, it builds more honest relationships and helps us grow. Delivering feedback during regular 1-on-1's prevents issues from building up until performance reviews. It also offers a chance to highlight strengths and reward successes. Just as good management aligns individual efforts to organizational goals, feedback is most effective when it not only boosts your team's productivity, but also individual development. Stanford Business School Professor [Carole Robin](#) recommends that managers let reports know "how changing their behavior will help them, and tell them why you are giving them this feedback – for example, you're doing it because you care about their success, or because you are invested in having a productive relationship with them."

Get Personal

Especially while organizations are forced to work remotely, understanding your team's individual needs is critical for success. Regular 1-on-1's are an opportunity to learn more about your employees, what obstacles they may face working from home, and what motivates them. When employees feel their leaders value them not just as cogs in the machine, but as vital members of a thriving collective, their work can provide meaning for their lives. Regular 1-on-1's provide an opportunity to discuss their professional development goals, personal goals,

or anything else that may be on their minds. After completing regular agenda items like goal updates and next steps, asking employees “What’s the best use of the rest of our time today?” gives them freedom to drive discussions in the most valuable way for them.

Bringing It All Together

While other meetings like a team [Daily Huddle](#) or monthly all-hands are still pillars of good communication, 1-on-1’s form the backbone of communication between managers and their teams. It’s an opportunity to build personal relationships and address individual concerns.

Anyone who has had multiple jobs can identify their best and worst manager. Awesome managers help us achieve more, by investing in our personal development while helping us work effectively to achieve collective success.

Building [trust](#) starts with good communication, and a well-structured 1-on-1 is the first step towards building the trust that powers a successful team.

MEASURING REMOTE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Measuring Remote Team Engagement

We live in a time of heightened anxiety. When our homes become our offices, the stress of our work, our families, and the world at large becomes hopelessly entangled. Leaders of organizations have a duty to support their employees during this time and protect their most valuable assets.

At Align, we recommend tracking a tried and true measurement of employee engagement and happiness: the eNPS (Employee Net Promoter Score). Beyond driving profits and business objectives, eNPS measures how leaders are doing in their most important job function: providing purpose and rewarding, meaningful work for their employees.

Rather than ask employees about their overall satisfaction with their company, eNPS focuses on cultivating employee advocacy with one simple question: “On a scale from 0-10 how likely are you to recommend working for our organization to your family or friends?”

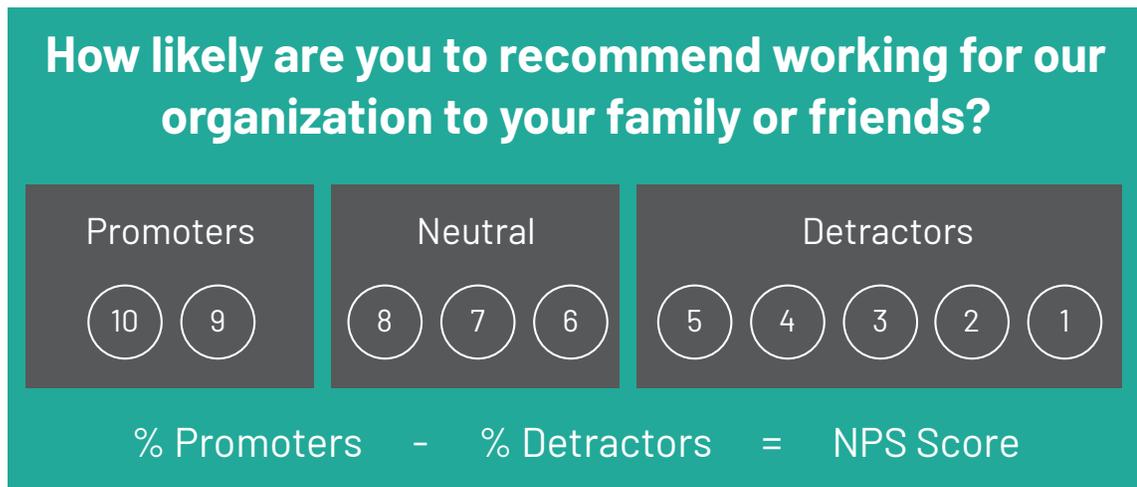
By turning engagement into a tangible metric, eNPS provides a method for quantifying engagement over time, helping leaders identify where efforts need to be made to improve team culture. Implementing a consistent eNPS survey can not only unveil areas for progress, but also develop a culture of feedback in an organization where people feel comfortable expressing themselves freely.

About eNPS

eNPS is a spin-off of the widely used NPS (Net Promoter Score), first introduced by Fred Reichheld and Bain in their 2003 HBR Article “The One Number You Need to Grow”. The power of NPS, they said, lay in its ability to capture customer likelihood of marketing and promoting a product or brand to their friends in a single number.

Calculating eNPS

While eNPS asks for a 1-10 score, the calculation of eNPS score goes beyond a simple average to give insight into overall satisfaction.



As the graphic above shows, the eNPS weighs scores to give an overall picture of the satisfaction of your employees. While all sorts of factors may determine where employees rank themselves numerically, the categories are extremely helpful for leaders assessing the overall health of their people.

Promoters are highly engaged employees, likely willing to go above and beyond to move the company forward. Passives may be satisfied in their jobs, but may not extend themselves beyond what is expected. Finally, detractors may be disengaged or willfully shirking responsibility due to lack of motivation.

Why Use eNPS

The beauty of eNPS is in its simplicity and its consistency: the same question on a regular basis. Employees understand what is being asked and can set their own reference point. This enables comparisons and trend identification over time. By setting a baseline, leadership can better understand their impact.



How has remote work affected employment engagement?



56%

of US employees working from home during COVID-19 would prefer to continue working remotely

Companies using Align saw improved net engagement since March 2020



1.25x
increase in Align Daily Huddle Check-In usage year over year



35%
more productive than In-Office Counterparts



41%
lower absenteeism while working remotely



\$650 Billion
cost of distractions in the office



\$11,000/year
savings per remote worker compared to their in-office counterparts

Read the full blog at <https://aligntoday.com/blog/the-hidden-benefits-and-pitfalls-of-remote-work/>

FOSTERING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION ON YOUR REMOTE TEAM

As health and safety concerns swept the globe, new conversations about the role of discrimination and systemic oppression entered the mainstream. Business leaders faced the crucial task of not just forming a diverse team, but ensuring every voice was heard.

The importance of diversity and inclusion for high-performing organizations is not recent news. In 2015, McKinsey found that the public companies in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity in management were 35% more likely to outperform their competitors. Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity were 15% more likely to have returns above their industry average.

In an age of seismic transformation, the creativity and productivity advantages of diverse teams is critical to surviving disruption and seizing opportunities.

Harvard Business Review found more diverse teams solve problems faster than those with similar abilities. Deloitte Australia found teams that foster diversity and inclusion are more inclusive and outperform peers by 80% on team-based assessments. Research from John Bersin found diverse teams are 1.7X more likely to be leaders in their industry.

With the transition to remote work, the challenge of creating an inclusive workplace took on new dimensions. Leaders needed new strategies for replicating conversations about inclusion that may have organically happened in the office. In this virtual age, only an intentional approach to diversity, inclusion, and mental health will effectively create productive and positive team cultures.

Let's explore a few key strategies for making diversity and inclusion a priority for your remote team.

Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Tiger Team

If your team's diversity efforts require substantial action, creating a cross-functional team focused on recruiting and fostering diverse talent may catalyze your efforts.

In the model of other stand-up teams, this group should establish a long-term vision, plan quarterly goals and annual initiatives, meet regularly, and communicate their work to the company at large.

Creating a similar team may be helpful for addressing employee engagement overall. While diversity initiatives may roll up into larger engagement goals, leaders will want to keep these teams separate to ensure focus on the right outcomes.

Possible long-term goals for this team may include equal gender representation or fair racial representation amongst the leadership team, supplier diversity, or investments in D&I initiatives and causes. Quarterly or annual goals might include expanding diversity in recruitment by sourcing new hiring channels or establishing Employee Resource Groups for underrepresented groups.

Diversity, like engagement and any other business critical functions, requires management by measurement. To build a culture that fosters diversity, leaders must clearly define success, build a comprehensive plan around SMART or FAST quarterly priorities, and measure results to ensure outcomes match intent.

Employee Resource Groups

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) serve as voluntary, employee-led networks providing a safe environment for the discussion of identity and inclusion. ERGs offer programming, mentorship, and opportunity for important conversations regarding the intersection of work and societal issues.

With the myriad of intersecting challenges facing workers on remote teams, ERGs ensure that employees have a community that supports their unique needs and personal growth. ERGs maintain communication with leadership for inclusive decision making. They may also provide resources for the rest of the company to better understand their community and its needs.

While typically self-started, company leadership can encourage and incentivize ERG creation to get them off the ground. Sarah Cordivano has a comprehensive guide on [Starting Your Employee Resource Group on Medium](#) that lays out specific requirements for starting an ERG. Let's break down two types of ERGs essential for virtual team inclusivity.

Identity-Based ERGs

Identity-based ERGs are open to anyone who identifies themselves as a member of a respective group. These identities may include:

- Race and ethnicity
- People with cognitive or physical disabilities
- Women

- Religious identities
- Gender identity minorities
- Sexual orientation minorities
- Age minorities

For historically marginalized identity groups, ERGs help build a sense of psychological safety. Along with investments in physical well-being, investments in providing a sense of security and belonging are critical for building an inclusive team culture.

While these networks may organically form in in-person offices, fully-inclusive ERGs for remote teams require intention and support from leadership. The experiences of these groups with respect to pandemic challenges and broader social change warrants special attention on today's remote teams.

Parenting Employee Resource Groups

Supporting working parents is critical for any business with real adults. Parents face new barriers to productivity as they balance childcare needs and work commitments especially those working from home. The stress and distraction of telecommuting with children at home pose a significant threat to working parents' mental health.

Designating a resource group specifically for your team's working parents supports a culture that prizes work-life harmony. This group serves a critical role in elevating the concerns of parents to company leadership.

Diversity Related Programming

As part of their inclusion efforts, ERGs can also help spearhead D&I related programming. This programming can include cultural celebrations, internal or guest speakers on relevant topics, or community volunteering projects. Devoting the time and resources to these events pays dividends with increased engagement.

Team building events should also reflect a cultural emphasis on diversity and inclusion. Many remote team building events can be structured to reflect the diversity of your remote team. Relying on Happy Hours may alienate employees who do not partake in alcohol or cannot attend evening functions due to childcare. Coffee chats, recipe sharing, or lunch-and-learns can all be turned into opportunities for building an inclusive remote community.

Flexible Holidays

Recognizing that not every employee celebrates the same cultural heritage goes a long way towards fostering inclusion. Attempting to recognize every single holiday on your team may encompass too many days. Instead, strategies like Flexible PTO or floating holidays ensure fairness to each employee.

While business may be slow in late December, it may also be a good time for employees to complete focused work or target markets without seasonal slow-downs. Maintaining full flexibility is not just the right thing to do, but is also required by law for such policies in the United States.

“Employers should be careful about establishing rigid leave policies because the enforcement of such policies may materialize into a claim for religious discrimination under Title VII,” says Lori Rassas in *Employment Law: A Guide to Hiring, Managing and Firing for Employers and Employees* “For example, if an employer has a policy that only two people in a department can take time off on any given workday and three people request the day off to attend religious services, the employer might be subject to a workplace discrimination claim under Title VII for religious discrimination by the person whose request is denied if a reasonable accommodation is possible and is not offered”.

Cultural and religious celebrations may also be rolled into team-building activities that celebrate diversity and foster inclusion. Creating celebrations that represent all religious and cultural traditions makes sense for high-performing virtual teams.

FINAL WORD: OUTCOMES NOT OUTPUT

The world is quickly becoming more diverse. Those who resist and resent diversity are repelling top talent and underperforming more diverse competitors.

With the transition to remote work, the future of teams has arrived. Leaders must act quickly to encourage the diversity and engagement of their workforce while remote or else see their team’s productivity and morale plummet.

Emphasizing diversity and inclusion creates a culture where employees feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to work. On virtual teams, a holistic approach to management is required to build relationships that power successful teams.

Remote teams present a unique opportunity for organizations to improve on their efforts. With intentionality and a little creativity, leaders have the power to create a more diverse and more productive workforce of the future.

OTHER RESOURCES

Articles

[Remote Strategic and Adaptive Planning: Separate But Together](#)

[Staying Motivated with Goal Planning in the Age of Coronavirus](#)

[9 Tips for Productive and Efficient Zoom and Microsoft Teams Virtual Meetings](#)

[Managing a More Efficient, Happier Team with Align](#)

[5 Best Practices for Managing Huddles with a Remote Team](#)

Downloads

[Quickstart Guide to Goal Planning](#)

[Virtual Backgrounds](#)

Fun

[Listen to Align's Work From Home Playlist While You Work From Home](#)

[15 Teambuilding Ideas](#)

Webinars

[Daily Dose May 1st with Hugh Gyton on Maintaining Productive Focus while Remote](#)

[Daily Dose for May 6th with Arnie Malham on Creating a Culture of Learning in Your Remote Team](#)

[Daily Dose 5/5 with Shawn Johal on Building a Resilient Remote Team](#)

[Daily Dose May 1st with Hugh Gyton on Maintaining Productive Focus while Remote](#)

[Daily Dose 5/11 with Andy Clayton on Emotional Resiliency for Leaders During Disruption](#)

[Daily Dose 5/15 with Neale Lewis on Creating a Culture of Recognition on Your Remote Team](#)

[Daily Dose 5/28 with Jennifer Faught on Keeping Your Remote Team Focused and Motivated](#)

[Webinar Recap: "A Leader's Guide to Building a High-Performing Culture of Accountability in Today's New World" with Hayley Erner](#)