Effective Management in the New Normal

How can organizations take an intentional and strategic approach to engaging employees and building connections?
The past year presented numerous challenges and opportunities for managers. From quickly adopting a virtual environment, moving into home offices, and adjusting processes and procedures to be most efficient, agility and adaptability were more important than ever before. In addition to environmental shifts, management best practices have also evolved. Without being together in physical office locations, building connections and engaging employees requires an intentional and strategic approach. Expectations around productivity and goal setting are being redefined, while new skills and attributes are required of leaders. In this guide, experts from our team share best practices and insights for four key areas of management.

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ENERGIZING AND ENGAGING EMPLOYEES

By Abbe Sodikoff, Senior Vice President, and Blake Grimm, Assistant Vice President

There’s no doubt all individuals have been affected by the past year’s events in a variety of ways. Especially as many employees begin to experience “pandemic fatigue” and some regions are again tightening restrictions, it’s important to ensure current practices are still working. Now is the time for insurers to rethink all areas of business, including how they engage and energize their employees.

According to Gallup, employee engagement rates have fluctuated more in 2020 than any other year since the firm began its tracking two decades ago. Reestablishing a strong employee engagement program is imperative for success in 2021. There are a number of ways you can reenergize your teams and prepare to move forward stronger than ever.

FOCUS ON YOUR COMPANY VALUES.

While increasing employee engagement during a pandemic may seem like a potentially overwhelming task, let your company values guide your thought process and decisions. If your company prides itself on collaboration, how are you ensuring that’s a priority in the remote environment? If personal growth and development is a value, has it been given adequate consideration, or has it been pushed to the sidelines? Determine how these values can be incorporated into the everyday fabric of your culture.
FOSTER A CULTURE OF CONNECTION.
Now more than ever, a feeling of connection is vital. Encourage employees to focus on building and strengthening relationships within the organization. Schedule virtual coffee breaks with people from different departments and facilitate interdepartmental networking. You may even consider developing a formalized program that brings together employees who may not otherwise cross paths. Remember to pay special attention to new hires. Starting a new job is always daunting; make a concerted effort to engage them with individuals across the team and organization from day one.

Along with networking, expand special project teams and committees to integrate people who may not have otherwise been able to participate. Team up employees for projects to help keep daily activities from feeling stale. Working on a team can keep individuals moving forward, hold them accountable and even be fun.

LISTEN TO INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYEE NEEDS.
Personal challenges can be heavy during this time. Ask how you can support individuals as they navigate family demands, mental and physical health, childcare, virtual school and more. This may mean being flexible with hours and getting creative around how projects and deadlines are distributed. You may consider allowing individuals to bank hours or work longer days to create a four-day workweek. At the same time, be mindful of employees’ emotional wellbeing. Encourage them to take time off even if they’re not leaving their home.

In addition to being flexible with schedules and projects, ask if there are any obstacles you might be able to remove. Would two screens help employees be even more productive? Are certain employees experiencing slow internet connections because multiple individuals are online for work and school at their home? There may be simple solutions that can make a huge difference and amplify your employees’ remote experiences.

PRIORITIZE FREQUENT AND ONGOING COMMUNICATION.
Help counteract employees’ feelings of uncertainty with frequent and transparent communication. Create a plan that includes regular one-on-ones, team huddles and departmental meetings. Along with a sense of unity, this can give employees a chance to interact, act questions and gain clarity on various topics and changes. Hold companywide town hall meetings to provide individuals a chance to hear insight and plans directly from members of the executive team. Keep these events interactive, allow for humor when appropriate, and celebrate even small milestones and successes.

Within departments and functions, encourage conversations around goals and best practices. It’s likely even high-performing employees aren’t meeting the goals they originally set for the year. Talking with others going through similar situations can provide a welcomed support system. Additionally, it can help individuals – especially those typically working as individual contributors – feel more connected and less alone.

MAKE IT ABOUT MORE THAN WORK.
Even though post-work happy hours and all-team lunches aren’t possible face-to-face, think of how the bonding component of these activities can translate to the at-home environment. Ideas may be simple, such as taking a virtual team lunch break. Or, activities could be more involved or interest-focused, such as participating in a virtual cooking class or starting a book club. Small expressions of gratitude and acknowledgement can also add up. Some organizations are putting together care packages, which may include specialty snacks and treats, company-branded hand sanitizer and face masks, or even gift cards. If sending small items is outside your budget, consider a handwritten note to let employees know you’re thinking of them and appreciate their dedication.

INCREASE RECOGNITION AND INCENTIVES.
Rethink how you’re acknowledging employee accomplishments in the current environment. It’s been a hard year, and enhanced recognition programs and
Incentives can help create much-needed positive energy. Ask employees if your existing programs are still working for them – do they have any ideas for making them more effective?

What company-wide projects could be made into a contest? Friendly competition can bring those who are more introverted out of their shells and help connect individuals who are feeling isolated. In addition to business-specific competitions, create challenges around wellness. This could be a contest around daily steps, water intake or anything else that can unite individuals and help them connect with the company. Not only do these contests help promote employee health, they’re also great conversation starters for those who may not know one another well.

As you focus on enhancing engagement, remember your employees are all having unique experiences, challenges and feelings. What may have worked last year, or even earlier on in the pandemic, may not be working anymore. It’s impossible to create programs that will resonate without seeking feedback and opinions from staff. Take the time to solicit feedback on specific programs, areas you can do better and key challenges. Short surveys and conversations can provide a wealth of valuable information.

Reevaluating culture, communication and employees’ individual needs all play a role in creating a positive and energizing environment. By being intentional and taking the time to rethink your approach to employee engagement, you’ll be prepared to retain your top performers and help your team be most productive in the next normal.

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For the majority of 2020, organizations were reevaluating their ways of operating, implementing new processes and adapting their talent strategies. In today’s business landscape, which remains heavily virtual, insurers have largely moved out of survival mode and are determining how to best move forward.

Leaders are adapting to many changes, with a strong focus on how to manage and measure productivity, in addition to engaging employees. Organizational dynamics are shifting, employees are facing new challenges at work and at home, and expectations have evolved. To create teams that are truly productive, managers need to focus not just on output, but also on how they can best support their employees and position them to do their best work.

PRIORITIZING THE HUMAN CONNECTION
Individuals at all levels are under increased amounts of stress, both personally and professionally. Leaders are worried about the emotional fatigue the pandemic is taking on their teams as employees balance work with school, childcare and other responsibilities. In some cases, employees who are naturally social may be feeling isolated...
and confined to their living spaces, which can take a toll on mental health. At the same time, managers are concerned the toll of juggling both work and family will eventually become too much, especially for those in dual-income households, causing them to leave the workforce.

In addition to the fear of losing top employees, individuals are generally less productive and mentally available for work as these stressors compound. To help gauge employees’ headspace and release looming emotional burdens, find ways to connect with them on an emotional level, helping free up the necessary mental energy to focus on work projects. The past year has blurred the lines between business and professional; conversations do not always have to revolve around projects and timelines. When appropriate and welcomed, expand your conversations to talk about personal circumstances and gain a more empathetic perspective into what is on employees’ plates.

Here are a few ways to help alleviate the emotional burden and help position employees to be most productive:

- Connect individuals to one another and offer support through weekly or semi-weekly team meetings.
- Depending on each individual employee, adjust the frequency of your one-on-one meetings to provide the support they need.
- If you live in the same city, meet face-to-face in a responsible and safe way, such as taking a walk during a meeting or grabbing coffee.
- If your organization is able, consider offering employees the opportunity to give back to their community in its time of need by providing volunteer hours or donations.

Additionally, if your employees are going to be remote for the foreseeable future, make sure they are prepared from a technology standpoint. Consider offering a stipend to help boost connectivity levels and prevent any potential technology issues.

MANAGING PRODUCTIVITY

Once your employees are ready from an emotional and technological standpoint, there are several ways you can gauge and manage your team’s productivity.

Build camaraderie.
Leverage video conferencing to ensure employees have a chance to see one another face-to-face. Help frame your team meetings in a positive light and energize individuals to tackle the work ahead. This could mean sharing accomplishments at the beginning of a meeting, taking an intentional moment of team-wide gratitude, or sharing positive sentiments to set the tone. Encourage employees to acknowledge their teammates and celebrate even small successes.

Manage for individual needs.
All employees are handling the remote environment and the toll of the pandemic in different ways. Some employees may prefer impromptu phone calls and instant messages, where others benefit from formally connecting at least once a week. Professionals are motivated in different ways and prefer different types of communication. To be most productive, consider the unique preferences and needs of each individual and make sure you’re sharing information in a variety of ways.

Reset expectations.
Communication is key. Level-set expectations on a continual basis and share goals around where the team is currently and where you want to be by the end of the week/month/quarter. Encourage feedback from employees on any anticipated challenges or potential setbacks. Revisit your goals frequently and make adjustments to your team’s priorities and projects accordingly.

Consider visual reminders.
In an in-person environment, it’s likely your employees had visual cues to help them understand the overall performance of their team, department and company. Consider how these can translate to the remote workplace and explore ways to regularly share progress on a virtual platform or in meetings. What are your tangible goals and how are you measuring your progress toward achieving them? This can be a simple way to keep individuals aligned with
their goals, how those goals contribute to the team’s success, and how they are tracking against those goals.

**Explore new tools and technologies.**
There are a number of tools and technologies available to help teams be most effective in remote and hybrid environments. If your team previously worked in close proximity to one another, you may not have needed to rely as heavily on instant messaging platforms. Video conferences may have taken place a few times a month, rather than every day. Additionally, there are a number of project management and file sharing tools available, which can add value and provide visibility. Consider how your needs have changed and how new tools and technologies may be able to help your team stay connected and informed. Know your goals, explore what’s available and gather buy-in from your team.

**Catch potential setbacks early.**
By being in touch more regularly and in different ways, you’re better able to stay on top of potential opportunities and hurdles. During one-on-one video meetings, lean into non-verbal cues; it’s often possible to tell if your employees are stressed or concerned when you’re looking at them face-to-face. Invite candid and transparent conversation and encourage employees to ask for help when they need it. Rethink timelines and account for other teams and departments you are dependent on to complete projects. In the remote environment, individuals can no longer stop by someone’s desk or office to get a response and it may take more effort to communicate across teams.

**Ask for help.**
If your organization has never operated remotely and you now find your team in a completely virtual environment, there is a steep learning curve for everyone involved. Think about areas where you may need outside support. This could include bringing in a consultant who is an expert at managing remote teams and processes, or employing project teams who can help maintain workloads while your permanent employees ramp up on new systems and technologies. As new positions open, consider how you can bring in individuals who can help further build your remote culture and fill new needs.

**Acknowledge it won’t be perfect.**
All organizations are going through a transition. For many, it means an entirely new way of operating and innovating. Be open and honest with your team that at times, you may stumble and fall. However, be straightforward about the effort going into building an efficient and productive workplace and making the current situation as normal as possible.

There’s a shared learning curve and insurers must work to adjust their strategies to engage employees and promote productivity in the next normal. By acknowledging your employees’ emotional needs, resetting expectations and building strong paths of communication, you’ll be best set up to remain productive in the continually shifting environment.
REINVIGORATING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PLANS FOR THE VIRTUAL AGE

By Judy Busby, Senior Vice President of Executive Search and Corporate Strategy

Today’s leaders must effectively develop managers and grow teams that are set up to succeed in a remote and constantly changing environment. Many employees won’t be returning to brick-and-mortar offices for the foreseeable future. Additionally, a majority of insurers plan to offer flexible working arrangements even once their physical office locations have reopened. In our recent Q3 2020 Insurance Labor Outlook Study, conducted in partnership with Aon plc, we found nearly half of insurers plan to continue to offer full-time remote work options. Seventy-seven percent plan to provide the opportunity to occasionally work from home and 53 percent will offer flexible hours.

In order to remain competitive, organizations must reassess their long-term approaches to traditional working hours and locations. Most companies have successfully operated remotely for several months, and employees expect to maintain that newfound flexibility and balance. Hybrid workforces will be even more common moving forward and insurers will need to be proactive in developing future leaders who will thrive in this new environment.
Previously, it was possible to set goals at the beginning of the year and make adjustments to how they’d be accomplished as the year went on. However, in the virtual world, this will not happen as organically or fluidly as before. Your management teams (especially newer managers) will not perform at their highest levels without clear alignment. This is where the how and the who come into play.

**How will you support their development goals?**

In the virtual environment, the path to goal achievement, as well as skill and competency development, will look a little different. There are several factors at play and it’s beneficial to carve out time to evaluate how various levels of learning and development will be achieved.

One of the most common and effective approaches to learning is the 70/20/10 model. This model suggests 70 percent of learning should take place while on the job; 20 percent should occur from mentoring and shadowing relationships; and 10 percent should be educational. Even if you aren’t actively using this model, it’s likely your previous methods included activities in these three areas. Reassess each type of learning and how they can best translate to the current situation.

For instance, in a brick-and-mortar environment, it’s much easier for members of your team to sit in on meetings with other departments. Newer managers may be able to shadow more senior individuals to better understand how they interact with and engage their employees. Without physically seeing potential shadowing opportunities throughout the day, it can be easy for them to drop off the radar. Be intentional about working with your managers to seek out and create these opportunities.

**Mentorship relationships are also important in the virtual landscape.** In addition to longer-term mentoring programs, provide opportunities for micro-mentorships, where individuals can work on specific skills with colleagues who have mastered them. These relationships are incredibly valuable and can hold individuals accountable for further honing and applying their newfound skills.

While you previously may have focused on what individuals need to effectively grow as managers, in the new reality, you must also determine the how and the who.

**What is required for success and advancement?**

As you set new goals and reevaluate existing ones, defining what your managers need to accomplish is often the most straightforward part. By creating [SMART goals](https://www.jacobsongroup.com), you’re able to measure employees’ progress and easily pinpoint where they stand in relation to achieving their goals. However, while specific goals may look similar to the pre-pandemic state, they must now be more finite and clearly defined than ever before.

While formal education is the smallest component in the 70/20/10 model, it is still important. Ask managers to identify virtual conferences, continuing education opportunities, or even more general business and management courses. Follow up with them after these events and ask them to present what they’ve learned.

**Who will play a role in their development?**

Especially for those new to the organization or to management roles, be clear in who they
should connect with outside of their teams. “Water cooler” talk and introductions in the hallway are nonexistent in the virtual world and you must proactively facilitate similar interactions and exposures.

As you’re exploring various areas of development, consider who the best individuals are for them to learn from. Are there areas you as their manager must teach? Does one of their peers excel in a certain area and would they be willing to train on it? Who can serve in a mentorship capacity, especially for less tangible human skills, such as influencing, problem solving and emotional intelligence? In other instances, you may find an external expert may be best to help grow your managers’ skills in a more neutral environment. It’s likely you’ll need to formally partner with more people than ever before to develop a comprehensive and strategic plan.

**ASSESS MANAGEMENT SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES.**

When you’re not able to stop by your managers’ desks or connect with their employees on a more casual basis, evaluating their management styles and growth becomes less straightforward. Skip-level meetings, which are conversations with their direct reports, will enable you to gain insight into areas where they’re excelling and areas where they may need additional development to be most effective.

Additionally, you can gain an understanding of their management skills and progress by role playing and asking open-ended behavioral questions. Ask questions such as “Given your department goals, how do you know progress is being made?” and “What kind of conversations are you having to surface that information?” Gain insight into their thought processes by providing prompts like “Give me an example of a conversation you had around a problem or an issue and how you resolved it.” Focus on probing questions that can help you uncover any challenges or shortcomings your managers are facing.

Developing effective managers is one of the most important factors for your organization’s long-term vitality. Good managers are responsible for growing and retaining your best employees, and that role should not be taken lightly. The virtual work environment has removed the geographic barriers and relocation requirement that existed in the past, making talent more mobile than ever before. And, as the saying goes, employees don’t leave companies; they leave managers (and leaders!).

Take the time to rethink your development plans; and, if you’ve put development on hold due to the pandemic, start placing it front and center. The hybrid work environment is here to stay and managers must grow and evolve along with it. By reassessing and defining goals, working with employees to create a clear path to achievement and understanding how to assess growth in each area, you’ll build a successful and engaged management team.

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The past year brought about many changes, and it’s likely your team’s projects and priorities evolved along with the shift in work dynamics. Day-to-day responsibilities were redefined, individuals had to lean into remote work, and many were dealing with unforeseen personal circumstances. Effectively evaluating employees’ performance and setting goals for the new year in such a tumultuous and unpredictable environment can be a challenge.

However, similar to most of this year’s activities, it’s smart to step back and redefine your strategy within the available parameters. Consider each employee’s unique circumstances and the personal toll of the pandemic, understanding previous metrics may no longer apply. Your next review cycle provides an opportunity to strengthen your overall organization, rather than focusing strictly on awarding promotions and raises or reprimanding poor performance.

When you are completing 2020’s performance reviews or setting goals for 2021, approach the process with empathy and an open mind. Make sure your team is conducting reviews via video to ensure you can read facial expressions and other non-verbal cues. Be intentional in evaluating your employees’ progress and contributions over the past year, while also setting attainable goals for moving forward in the new landscape. Here are a few areas to consider as you reflect on 2020 and look forward to the new year.
MODIFIED GOALS
Ideally, you have periodically talked with your employees and adjusted goals that were no longer feasible due to the current environment (for instance, goals related to projects that were deprioritized, in-person training and events, etc.). These modified goals may look different than in year’s past; however, it’s important to make sure your expectations are still reasonable.

In addition to the tangible goals, take employees’ overall team and company contributions into account. Were they able to quickly adjust to a new work environment? Did they serve as a team player, helping others get ramped up on new technology and stepping into projects outside their standard scope of work? Collaboration, teamwork and flexibility should not be overlooked.

EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK
It’s important to look at the past year comprehensively and take employees’ perspectives and feedback into account within your review. Ask each individual what they think is going well, what areas they are struggling with and what tools they need to do their job better.

These responses will likely be influenced by their current personal situations, perhaps more than ever. For instance, someone assisting young children with virtual school may need the flexibility to work in the evenings rather than mornings. Individuals working in more remote locations may require an upgraded internet plan to avoid unnecessary delays. Now that virtual work may continue through the new year, multiple screens or other technology may enable employees to be more efficient.

If you haven’t already been having weekly or bi-weekly conversations with employees, ask them to provide this feedback a few weeks before the review so you can take it into consideration. If others work closely with the individual, seek out their feedback prior to the review as well, to help you gain a more well-rounded view of their work and contributions.

ONGOING GROWTH
More casual conversations around performance should occur on a regular basis throughout the year. Formal reviews are not the time for major surprises. Saving negative feedback for months in order to deliver it during review time will confuse employees and weaken their trust. If you haven’t already, establish an ongoing dialogue around the work individuals are doing well and the areas that need improvement. During standing weekly or bi-weekly meetings, share this
feedback with employees and provide them with the opportunity to correct missteps immediately, rather than weeks or months later.

This can be woven into the team’s culture by fostering an open forum where employees can share successes and wins, as well as areas in which they are struggling. Openly focusing on growth and development creates an environment where individuals aren’t afraid to have more sensitive conversations and can channel feedback in a productive way.

GOALS FOR THE NEW YEAR

SMART goals continue to be relevant in the current environment. However, it’s likely you may also need to set goals that are less measurable or that allow for flexibility. Consider how your organization’s core values can be reflected through those goals. For instance, if teamwork is a core value, what behaviors are associated with it and how are those behaviors expected to be exhibited? Additionally, once it’s determined employees will begin reentering the workplace, make sure to discuss their readiness and create goals for their return. Include them in the planning to help ensure a positive experience.

If a goal didn’t get accomplished in 2020, what was the reason? If time and prioritization were issues, consider performing a time study. What tasks are coming up on a day-to-day basis that distract from core functions and goals? What necessary administrative duties are taking time out of the work day, but aren’t being accounted for? If your standard productivity measures are no longer feasible, think about the tools or processes you may need to adopt in order to have transparency into your team’s progress. This could mean exploring project management tools, communication platforms, time tracking systems and more.

Provide employees with a greater sense of purpose by helping them understand how their work fits into achieving larger organizational goals. Set teamwide goals to help build collaboration among team members and grow a sense of shared accountability. You may also consider asking employees to come up with one of their own goals for the year and asking how you can best support them in accomplishing it.

While this year’s review and goal-setting processes may bring more ambiguity than in the past, focus on how you can make your team and organization stronger and energized for the year ahead. Rethink how you approach goal setting, take external factors and unforeseen projects into account, and remain empathetic. The past year has made most organizations more agile as they’ve overcome challenges and created new opportunities. Start the year looking back on successes and more importantly, preparing to tackle anything 2021 brings.
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