

ASK THE COACH

MANAGING REMOTE TEAMS FOR EFFICIENCY AND MOTIVATION

As a C-level executive with over 20 years' experience, **Marion Gamel** knows what it takes to keep teams motivated – including online. She started her career as an entrepreneur before working for Google, Eventbrite and Betsson Group. Marion has been coaching entrepreneurs, founders and C-executives around the world since 2015. In this regular column, she provides advice to business leaders to empower them on issues ranging from improving efficiency to driving transformation and international growth within the company.

There is nothing new about remote management: most gaming companies have employees in international locations, some of them working from home in non-regulated or in brand new territories.

What COVID-19 has brought to the surface is that there is an art to remote-managing people that was not indispensable to master when only 10 per cent of your team was working from home. As leaders now often manage 100 per cent of their team remotely, best practices should be shared, understood and adapted.

What are we really talking about when we refer to the challenges of remote management?

Well, the core of the challenge is a by-product of the long period of isolation, and, questions are raised about how to keep team members engaged and on track.

The risk with a lowering level of motivation is that it spreads throughout entire teams like wildfire. On Monday you have one demotivated employee, by Friday, 80 per cent of your team is wondering why they do what they do.

Here are a handful of tips I learned working in tech for the past 20 years, managing international and isolated team members, with a focus on keeping motivation high, as well as alignment with the company strategy.



YOU'RE DEMOTIVATED? WE'RE DEMOTIVATED! LET'S TALK!

At some point, lack of motivation affects everyone who works solo. Let's get the guilt out of the way! When I coach leaders, I often ask them how they speak with their team members about demotivation. 99 per cent of leaders simply don't! It's the elephant in the video conference meeting.

Leaders, too, can suffer from a lack of motivation at times. When I repeat to them what they've just opened up to me about and ask them how it sounds: 'Understandable', 'Like what a lot of people go through', and 'Authentic' are common answers.

So I invite leaders to open up with direct reports about their own occasional lack of motivation. While

you're having a one-on-one online meeting with one of your direct reports, try something like 'I have been procrastinating about [task] because I feel demotivated right now. Does that ever happen to you?' and see what comes up.

By turning demotivation from a taboo into a valid topic and by framing it as a reality we're all dealing with, leaders can deepen the bonds that unite their team, based on authentic feelings and experiences. So talk about demotivation with your team members! Ask them to share their tips to get motivated again. Try to find out when it happens and to whom, so your team can turn into a support system.

CARROT AND STICK: CLEARLY IDENTIFY THE CARROT. (YOU WON'T EVEN NEED THE STICK!)

In today's context, the factors that lead to demotivation are shared among many: isolation, lack of structure, distractions, uncertainty about the future, lack of benchmarks, and so on.

But the good news is that factors that lead to high levels of motivation are also shared among many. So find out what they are in your team and for each of your direct reports, and use them.

During one-on-one meetings, ask about times when your direct report was the most motivated. Understand what his sources of motivation are. Was it a recent big win? Reward or recognition? A new role or responsibility? The start of a new year or quarter? Use this information to lead this particular person moving forward. New circumstances call for a new leadership approach. It's the role of leaders to adapt.

BE CAPTIVATING: INVITE YOUR TEAM TO THE BALCONY

When people feel isolated, it is important for leaders to remind them why they joined the company in the first place. Leaders are the only ones who see the entire context of what's going on as, below them, people tend to focus on their task and on delivering to the best of their ability.

Leaders should share what they 'see at the top' with their team more often, and across more formats. I encourage leaders to become aware of what they know (because they're at the top) that their team does not know, because it could be helpful and motivating. Executive coaches call it 'from the dance floor to the balcony':

- Employees are on the dance floor, where they dance among team members and see all the

details of what's being done. They're 'in the trenches'. They see in detail what's being worked on around them.

- Leaders are on the balcony. From this high viewpoint they see the entire venue, the dance floor where employees are dancing, the cloakroom, the bar, the entrance door... However, they don't always know the mood on the dance floor.

Leaders need to invite their team 'to the balcony' often to give them a long-lasting glimpse of what's going on 'up there', which will help to put their own work into a broader context. It will also help them to stay motivated and focused on the projects that fuel the company's big objectives. →



PEOPLE FORGET NUMBERS, STRATEGIES AND CLEVER QUOTES. BUT THEY NEVER FORGET A GOOD STORY!

Stories are used from birth to communicate complex concepts such as courage, loyalty, kindness, and so on. I encourage leaders to do the same at work. You want to talk to your team about resilience? Efficiency? Keeping your eyes on the ball? Giving it all you have? Collaboration? Making the most of an opportunity? Share a story! Structure your message into a memorable and logical thread. Each leader should find the storytelling structure that best suits him and customise it. For instance, one of these storytelling structures is the Intentional Change Model. It works for most situations, and uses five steps:

1. Where do we want to get to? Fast forward to January 2021 for instance. Think about your company size, impact, revenue, position... Make it aspirational.
2. Where we are now? The good and the bad.
3. How we're going to get there? The steps and the timeline matter. Explain what the journey's likely to look like, step-by-step.
4. What will need to be tested and learned along the way? Describe the lab mentality you want to create, where even 'failures' are valuable if they bring learning. It's not going to be a straight line – there may even be some drawbacks. But what matters is psychological safety, an agile mentality and to keep on making progress towards our big goal.
5. What resources at our disposal? HR, training, colleagues, the intranet, Slack, shared know-how, experts, mentors, coaching... Your team should feel supported and empowered as support functions and programmes are available to all!

FEW PEOPLE CAN RUN A MARATHON, BUT EVERYONE CAN GIVE YOU THEIR BEST 100-METRE SPRINT!

When people are isolated, long-term goals mean less to them. They tend to find 'now and here' guidance a lot more helpful. Some employees even admit that, what is most helpful to them when working remotely, is to have a quick call with their manager every morning to help decide their to-do list for the day.

This means leaders should help their direct reports focus on what needs to be done now. Ambiguity is the mother of lethargy. Help to lower ambiguity by agreeing on short-term goals and immediate recognition and rewards. Shorten the seasonality of OKRs from quarterly to monthly, make feedback immediate instead of bi-annual. Remote teams often respond better to sustained rhythm that comes in short waves, as short as a day!

MANAGING TIME WHEN BENCHMARKS ARE FADING

One of the main differences about working from home is that time is a lot more fluid and seems to disappear! In the office, you just need to look around you to know what time it is:

- Smells of coffee? It's before 10am.
- People starting to leave their desk in groups? It's lunchtime.
- Gathering in the kitchenette? It's snack-time so probably around 3.30pm.

None of these benchmarks occur when you're working from home. So how do you control and manage time more efficiently when it seems to have become much more volatile?

A simple tip is to block chunks of time in your calendar and allocate them to specific tasks on your to-do list. Slice your day into a multitude of 30-minute units. If you're not efficient or motivated during a specific time slot, move on to the next task. Don't focus on what you just failed to achieve, do something else! Tomorrow you can allocate a new time slot for the task you did not complete today.

REMOTE MANAGEMENT HAS ALWAYS BEEN CHALLENGING FOR LEADERS

Make sure you don't let demotivation settle in. There are several ways to help teams stay on track, from talking openly about the elephant in the room and identifying what motivates people and using it tangibly, to using storytelling to keep people engaged, encouraging people to work in short bursts of energy, and blocking time in calendars to accommodate and plan the execution of each task. Pick the tips you feel are the best-suited to your style and values as a leader, and the most helpful to your team. Test, enhance and customise! igC

Got a question for Marion? Email her on marion.gamel@gmail.com