

Collaboration and Teamwork in Remote Work Settings

Effective collaboration doesn't stop when your team leaves the office—but it does require a different approach. This course examines how remote teams can work together efficiently, maintain accountability, and keep projects moving forward without the benefit of in-person interaction. You'll explore proven best practices for coordinating group tasks, delegating responsibilities, and ensuring that teamwork remains a real and functional part of your remote work culture, not just an aspiration.

CREDIT HOURS 2 | FIELD OF STUDY BUSINESS | EXAM QUESTIONS 10

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LEARNING ASSIGNMENTS AND OBJECTIVES

Assignment

- Study the full course materials included here.
- Complete the review questions after each chapter.
- Answer 10 final exam questions.
- Final exam is scored immediately, 70% or better passes.
- Certificate of completion is available in your account.
- Failed exams can be retaken free of charge.

Course Objectives

- Identify the ways in which leaders can curb remote worker burnout.

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Chapter 1: GROUP TASKS: KEEPING THE TEAMWORK IN YOUR TEAM

Chapter Objective

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Identify the ways in which leaders can curb remote worker burnout.

One of the challenges company leaders found when their company was suddenly forced to work remotely was to keep up the level of teamwork. It's not that the team could not work well enough to meet deadlines. They still were able to accomplish group tasks, yet something was missing. There are intangible elements of working as a team: the camaraderie, the nonverbal communication that close team members can pick up on, and the predictability of each other's actions that colleagues develop when everyone is accustomed to working in person.

It's similar to the way an orchestra performs complex symphonies after weeks of practice together. In that scenario, the conductor is in charge of making sure everyone plays well in concert with each other. If the maestro were conducting the orchestra remotely, they would need to change the methods employed to gain the same effect. In a business setting, team leaders need to change the way they manage their teams if they are to keep up the teamwork and empower team members to work cohesively even though there are miles between them all.

Having a good remote work continuity plan will help a company survive should they be forced out of their place of work. However, in order to thrive, you must look at what hurdles your team will face when they are on their own but still expected to function as a cohesive team.

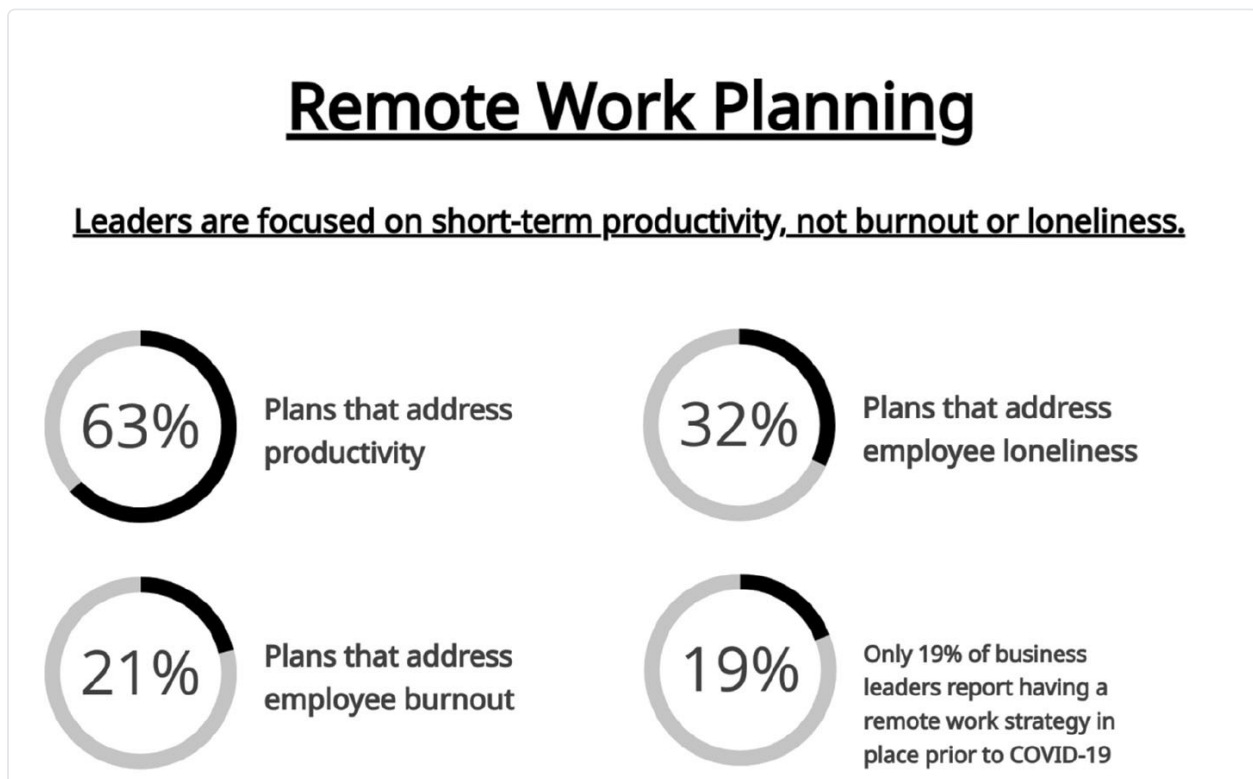
A remote leadership survey by engineer recruitment company Terminal surveyed 400 HR and engineering leaders during the COVID-19 shutdowns. It found that remote work strategies in a number of companies failed to address what would end up being key issues. For example, 63 percent had plans to address remote productivity, while only 21 percent had plans to address the burnout that employees face from a sudden, forced work-from-home situation (Figure 6.1).

In this chapter, we discuss tactics and strategies to tweak management styles in the sudden WFH scenarios. By taking what you already know and making some adjustments, you can keep the team working closely and overcome the challenges of morale and remote work fatigue.

REMOTE WORK FATIGUE

An interesting phenomenon was observed after weeks of forced working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, work-from-home (WFH) fatigue was played off as something imagined, but executives soon came to realize that it was a very real thing. And it had a negative impact on employee morale, productivity, and teamwork.

FIGURE 6.1: REMOTE WORK PLANNING



Working from home came with some positives for many employees, but for others there were pent-up frustrations. It is one thing to voluntarily work from home. When you have choice, you are exercising your free will and you can pop into the office and work next to others when you choose. When a crisis hits and everyone is forced to work apart for an unknown amount of time, it causes an upheaval that you have no choice in and little control over. That realization can color how one responds to the new challenges of forced remote work.

Lowered Work/Life Balance

One of the reasons that becomes obvious for the work-from-home fatigue is the blurring of the lines between home life and work life. People may find that they are quickly overworked and reaching burnout from the new WFH scenario because it is very hard to switch off for the day. Unwinding after work has become a challenge for many. There is no clear agenda for getting off work when you

are suddenly working from home. You don't have the ritual of packing up, leaving the building that you work in, and commuting back home. Those daily activities create a clear physical and mental indication that the workday is over. They give you a signal to disconnect from that part of your life until the next workday, and it readies you to reconnect with your home life.

In August 2020, a worker survey conducted by remote job website FlexJobs and **Mental Health America** showed some interesting data regarding WFH burnout during the pandemic. The survey showed that 70 percent of respondents have experienced burnout from their work, with 40 percent of them stating that the burnout occurred during the pandemic. Additionally, 37 percent responded that they found themselves working longer hours than normal during the WFH experience of the pandemic.

Without that daily routine of going home, remote workers find it hard to switch off for the day. They find that they make themselves available for work-related tasks at all hours of the day and evening. This is another indication of the imbalance of work and life, which can easily create higher levels of stress and a feeling of anxiety.

Mental Health

Mental health is an issue in every country even during the best of times. During times of personal or professional crisis, the levels of stress and anxiety are heightened. If not checked, these elements not only can lead to burnout but can exacerbate pressures that lead to depression in coworkers. The crisis that causes your team to work remotely could be a catalyst for mental health issues. If a team member had struggled with mental health issues prior to your crisis, those issues may seem more acute during times of increased stress.

It is vital for the physical and mental health of the team that leaders are cognizant of these very real issues when they are in the middle of crisis management. Heightened levels of awareness and empathy are required during these times. If you are able, make mental health care accessible in some form. You can opt to perform an anonymous poll or survey among employees to see how everyone is faring. This may help you discover new ways that you can better support the team. Try to gain some insights on what their stress levels may be and identify anyone who may be struggling.

You want to recognize problems before people begin to feel the effects of burnout. The World Health Organization classifies burnout as an occupational phenomenon in its international classification of diseases. It is defined as follows:

Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- *Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;*
- *Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job;*
and

- *Reduced professional efficacy.*

Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.

Encouraging preventive self-care and overall wellness is a must if you are to keep your team safe and healthy. However, promoting self-care is not enough. Strong leaders must take firm action by adjusting their management styles and the way they conduct remote business. This will help to empower everyone to be in a good and healthy team environment within their own home. Acting preventively is key. Be sure to do this for yourself as well. When a team leader begins to show the signs of stress and being overworked, it creates a ripple effect that touches the rest of the team. If you feel as if you are experiencing symptoms of burnout, take a mental health screening. There are a number of free mental health screening tools available online that are anonymous and confidential.

Best Practices

Employers should take their employees' mental health into consideration just as they would their employees' physical health.

Perform a Reset

Once you get settled leading a team in your office, you create a certain style of management. You take the skills that you have learned over your career and adjust them to that office work environment. You need to become more agile in your leadership to meet the demands of the crisis and the new remote environment. In this situation, your listening skills as a leader are needed far more than your need to be heard.

Making a conscious effort to adapt your in-person management style to be a stronger remote leader will best serve your team in their efforts to work cohesively. By doing so, you can establish a boundary between work and home, reduce employee anxiety, and relieve stress. All of this combined will create a better mental health environment and create a stronger ability for the team to work together. It can also help foster creativity and boost the imaginative processes.

ENCOURAGE BOUNDARIES

One of the major contributors to stress during the WFH experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic was the lack of boundaries between work and home. As discussed earlier, losing the routine of going home made it difficult for people to punch out, so to speak, at the end of the workday. People found themselves working longer days and making themselves accessible for work-related communications into the evening. To prevent burnout and work fatigue, employers should strongly encourage boundaries between work and personal life during the forced WFH time periods.

Know When to Log Off

When dedicated people are working on a project, they tend to lose track of time and can end up working very late. Doing so certainly demonstrates a strong work ethic, but it is not part of a healthy work ethic.

Without balancing out work time with time to decompress and to engage in regular enjoyable activities that reduce stress, burnout is an inevitability. It's not an "if," it's a "when." In short, in order to remain healthy, people need a balance between work and play time. This is a difficult concept for many hard workers to accept. I grew up in a household where hard work was considered the sign of an honest and good person and that relaxing or having fun was considered goofing off and was discouraged. Many people have had a similar experience growing up or have worked with supervisors who had a similar outlook on work ethics. The latter involves jobs where breaks are given begrudgingly and only because it is required by law.

Sometimes, people with such a strong work ethic will only log off if told to do so by someone in a higher position in these situations, it's important for the team leader to encourage logging off for nightly downtime. If the team leader simply gives permission or sets a time for close of business for the day, some employees are more likely to stop working.

Turn Off Emails

It's not very effective to walk away from your computer monitor if you are still going to work from the mobile screen on your phone. Encourage people to set collaboration tools, email, and other communications tools such as chats to show themselves offline or busy during non-work hours. Turn off work notifications, and keep dedicated work devices asleep or off.

Disconnecting helps set the stage for stronger boundaries between work and non-work hours when working from home. It will help keep teams from reaching out to each other when it is not appropriate and encourage people to maximize their downtime for de-stressing activities. It's like the difference between getting a good night's sleep and a bad one. If you get hours of deep and uninterrupted sleep, your body and mind will be recharged and ready for the coming day. However, if your night is peppered with short periods of light slumber interrupted by moments where you can't get back to sleep, then you wake up frustrated, unrested, and hanging on to the stress from the previous day. You can promote periods where teams can more deeply relax and enjoy their downtime by encouraging them to avoid work communications when they are not absolutely needed.

Encourage Breaks

As we discussed in previous chapters, breaks are essential for maintaining your personal resources throughout the day. Once depleted, those resources are difficult to get back. Feeling run down will only exacerbate challenges that one may be working with and can tend to magnify the severity of

issues. Encourage breaks within your team. Have them schedule regular breaks if need be. Be sure that these breaks are not wasted by team members using the time to catch up on other kinds of work, whether it be job-related or personal.

Educate your team on the wisdom of taking better breaks. Get them to do something preferably away from their workstation, or at least something that they will find fun and enjoyable. Spending some time outside with fresh air, sun, and a change of scenery can help recharge a person's mental batteries quickly and get creative juices flowing.

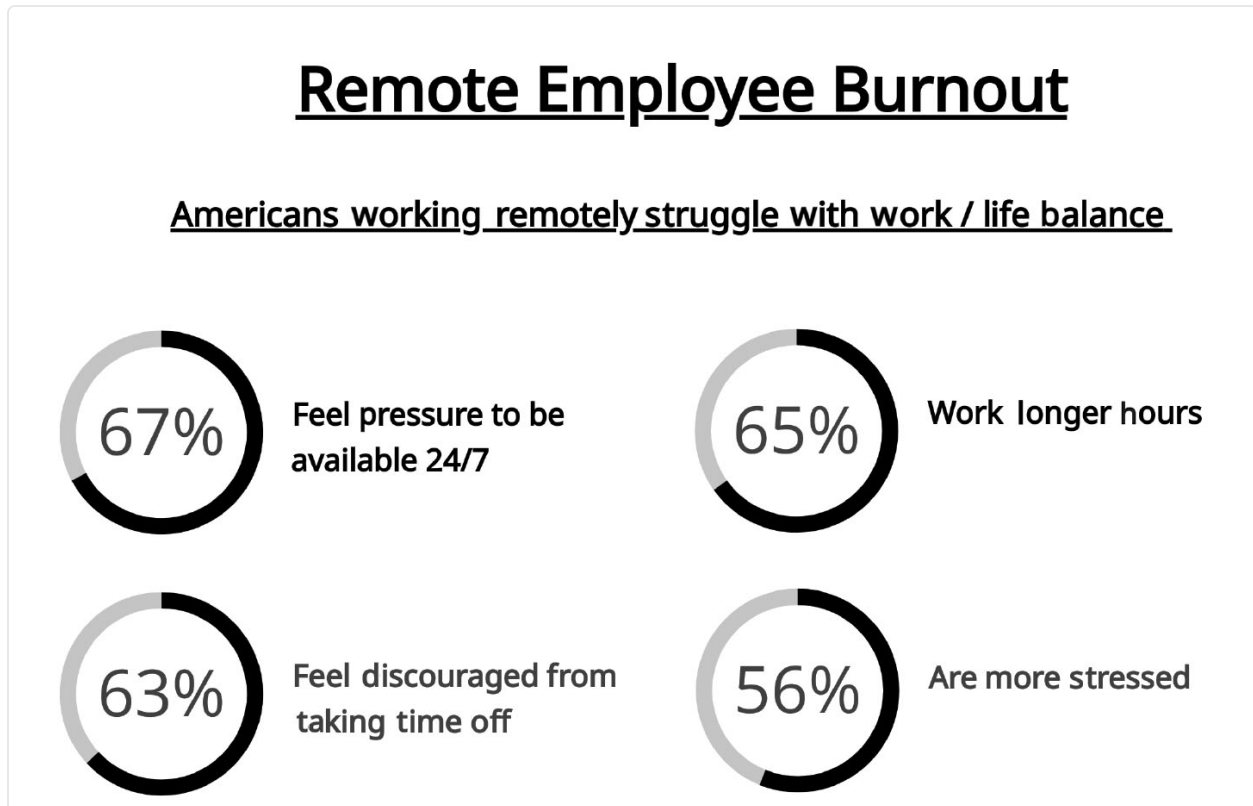
Best Practices

Team leaders should actively encourage breaks and downtime as a preventive measure against burnout and WFH fatigue.

Foster an Environment of Engagement

When people feel engaged, they are more mentally present. They tend to forget other issues they may have and focus on the moment. A person who feels engaged also feels a sense of belonging, which is important for a team member, especially when work seems stressful. It makes them feel wanted and cared for. It makes them feel accepted as a valued member of the team.

In the summer of 2020, a survey of 2,000 remote workers was conducted by OnePoll for CBDistillery regarding how workers were coping during the WFH period of the pandemic. Seven out of 10 workers said that they struggled to maintain a healthy work and life balance. Further, 65 percent said that they were working longer hours than ever before, while 56 percent said that they were more stressed about their job than ever before (Figure 6.2). Increased stress and anxiety represent an unfortunate side effect of being forced to work from home while being separated from your team for an unknown period of time. However, what causes more stress and makes the WFH situation worse is when you feel that your employer does not care about this added weight. Six in 10 respondents *feared* that their job would be at risk if they didn't go above and beyond by working overtime, and 63 percent agreed that time off is generally discouraged by their employer.

FIGURE 6.2: REMOTE EMPLOYEE BURNOUT

Strive for an environment that values the team as well as the individual, making them feel noticed and appreciated. In the same OnePoll survey, only 21 percent said they were able to have open, productive conversations with HR about solutions to their burnout. Fifty-six percent went so far as to say that their HR departments did not encourage conversations about burnout. Feeling that you have nobody that you can turn to will only hasten burnout. Be sure to recognize your employees' individual contributions. Be open to input. In fact, create opportunities for feedback and input. Schedule time at the end of meetings where feedback can be given. Have an open-door policy where employees feel comfortable coming to you with both concerns and good news.

Establishing an open-door policy when working remotely can be easy to achieve. Simply make your team know that they can come to you to talk at any time about anything. Let them know that you are around by showing yourself online and available in your collaborative tools and communication apps. You can go a step further by showing yourself as “in-office” on your shared team calendars.

If you see signs of burnout in your employees, suggest that they take some paid time off. This will bring back huge rewards for your company, your company culture, and the individuals in your team. That small investment will be paid back many times over with employee satisfaction and retention.