

What to Do If Your Team Doesn't Want to Go Back to the Office



As the pandemic continues, there are growing tensions at organizations where employees who have been working from home are now expected to come into reopened offices. Many knowledge workers — who have happily shed their commutes, decreased their interaction with difficult colleagues, and let go of other frustrations of the office — relish the freedom, flexibility, and the increased productivity of working from home. But some senior leaders — who may not have confidence in their own ability to manage remote workers — aren't necessarily on the same page.

These leaders may be informed by anecdotal evidence that working from home is too distracting or doesn't support group creativity. And they may share the view of Reed Hastings, the co-CEO of Netflix, who described the inability to get together in person as a “pure negative.”

As a manager, you may now be in a tough situation, especially if senior leaders at your company have started floating requirements for employees to come back to the office ASAP, despite the rise in Covid-19 cases over the past few months. How can you support your team if your senior leadership team remains skeptical of work-from-home arrangements? Here are seven approaches to help you make an effective case and come to a reasonable set of accommodations that everyone can get behind.

Focus on what your leaders care about.

As long as the organization is following all government mandates for safety, whether or not employees have to come back to the office may be determined by your leaders' preferences. This may seem unfair to employees, especially those who are balancing family commitments or who have concerns about their health and safety. If your boss tends to lack sympathy for these individual needs and motivations, discussing personal issues, such as a team member's concern over exposing an elderly parent to the virus, may only trigger their defensiveness and dismissiveness. Instead, focus on what your leaders care about and find ways to show that remote work is beneficial to the company, such as retaining skilled employees who might otherwise have to leave to provide childcare, or because of their own health risks. You might also point out that virtual work has been a boon to recruiting talent that has been locally unavailable or hard to relocate.

Determine if their concerns are personal.

Sometimes leaders' negative feelings about one or two employees can cloud their judgment of the entire group. Ask if they have the same concerns about employees they like and approve of. I used this technique successfully with a leader who believed that employees were "getting away with" the equivalent of playing hooky. Once I got her to articulate the specifics of which people she believed were taking advantage and which were not, we were able to focus on what we could do to improve the unsatisfactory performance of individuals rather than having her blame and disapprove of the entire team. And if there are employees who actually *are* taking advantage in some way, it's your responsibility as their manager, perhaps in conjunction with HR, to specify expectations and help them come back into line, so they don't undercut the effectiveness of the rest of the team.

Highlight the engagement of all employees, wherever they're working.

Some people are truly happier working from the office, and if it's safe for them to be on premises, the presence of these "volunteers" can be reassuring to executives who want to see people. Invite leaders to video meetings that include both in-person and remote workers and emphasize accomplishments on the leaders' most significant priorities. Showcase any achievements that the leaders take particular interest in, whether that's volunteering for the local "touchless" food drive or spearheading an industry association project. If employees have newly found free time because they aren't commuting or can work more efficiently, putting some of it into upskilling or other forms of professional development is another way for them to demonstrate commitment to the company and its goals.

Emphasize habits that make things seem as normal as possible.

Some leaders can feel a sense of loss and disarray when a change outside their control disrupts rituals they've come to rely on. And they may unknowingly project their

discomfort onto your team. If a senior leader routinely met with your team for coffee, for example, try scheduling virtual coffee hours at the old days and times, restoring as many comforting details as possible, even if you have to ship supplies to employees' homes. For one of my clients, small niceties, even something as seemingly trivial as sharing a favorite kind of biscotti twice a week, made "touch base" meetings feel more relaxed. The strengthened relationships will also benefit employees. Similarly, if your organization's town halls or huddles have fallen away, reinstitute them by phone or video, or encourage your executives to hold drop-in video sessions, if they're missing their open office hours.

Mirror leaders' mode and rhythm of communication.

Leaders who are accustomed to giving instructions by popping over to employees' desks, catching people in the hall, or who typically have a line of people waiting to see them can feel neglected if they're in the office, but their team members aren't readily accessible. Matching their cadence and style of remote communication isn't quite as satisfying, but it will demonstrate your team's commitment to being responsive. Ask specifically about the most desirable channel for different subjects and inquire if they have any preferences for time of day or frequency. If it's not an undue burden, ask team members to accommodate these preferences as a way to demonstrate presence and availability.

Encourage employees to treat company leaders as their most important customers.

An emphasis on formal respect and personal interest can mitigate some leaders' concern that employees aren't taking their work seriously when they're at home. One of my clients is offended by the idea of people working in pajamas and slippers; he thinks it's lazy and trivializes the importance of the work. If your boss is a traditionalist, consider switching out the hoodie for a button down, or spiff up with a scarf. Employees may feel that this is inauthentic and unnecessary under the circumstances, but it's similar to creating the right impression for a big pitch. Expressing personal interest before talking shop, or sharing nice-to-know news or articles can also warm the relationship.

Reach out for organizational support.

Your HR department can be an ally here. They may already be aware of your leadership's tough-minded approach and may be able to provide them with helpful data and research about how working from home is actually paying off for your company. They may have the understanding and capacity to provide concrete and frequent feedback to help your leaders adjust to the current unfamiliar, uncomfortable working conditions. Similarly, if other senior executives in your organization have adjusted their work processes and team management successfully, you could ask if they'd be willing to share their experiences with your leadership.

Given the harsh realities of the pandemic, it may feel like it shouldn't be necessary for you or your team to make these accommodations to leaders' idiosyncrasies. And, in an

ideal world, you wouldn't have to. Yet, keeping senior leaders calm and happy is definitely part of managing up and maintaining good relationships. If your leadership is applying pressure for employees to come back to the office prematurely, and you believe there's a balance that could work better for everyone, applying some of these approaches may help ease the tension and bridge the gap.

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