

A woman with brown hair in a bun, wearing glasses and a mustard-colored turtleneck, is looking at a laptop screen. She has a thoughtful expression, with her hand near her face. The background is a blurred office setting with a window.

LEADING WITH GRATITUDE IN REMOTE TEAMS

AN INSTRUCTION MANUAL



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INTRODUCTION

Remote work brings benefits and problems for both employees and employers. Employees appreciate not having to commute, being able to use their time more flexibly, and being able to respond more appropriately to personal and professional needs. Employers appreciate being able to reduce the costs involved with providing workspaces and greater technological responsiveness. However, mobile work arrangements also create problems such as less rich communication, more challenging coordination, less collaborative cultures, and sometimes even distrust.

A surprising cure for many of these challenges is gratitude. Leading with gratitude on remote teams helps team members to think of each other more, and thus remember to inform others of things they might otherwise forget. It helps team members feel appreciated, and this more inclined to collaborate. It helps employees feel less controlled by their bosses and more appreciated instead. It becomes the foundation of a culture of thanksgiving. Further, gratitude also provides many other personal and social benefits—the research on gratitude and its benefits is now quite extensive.

This manual provides instructions for practices that leaders and use or introduce to help their remote teams to feel appreciated and to express more gratitude. Teams need not use every practice. Pick one that sounds like it is a good fit for your team and try it out. Adapt it to fit your team. If, after you try it out, it doesn't work, try a different one instead. If it works for weeks or months, but then starts to lose its impact, try another one. Although this is an instruction manual, the instructions are intended as helpful suggestions rather than as controlling prescriptions.

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1. TEAM JOURNAL

One common recommendation from research on gratitude is the importance of keeping a journal that describes the things for which a person is grateful each day. The well-being benefits are enormous. This is certainly a good idea for anyone, but a variation of this for remote teams is to keep a team journal, in which team members submit an entry each day of at least one thing for which they were grateful.

Remote teams often use technology platforms such as Slack or Microsoft Teams that can be adapted easily to create team journals. Threads in discussion boards or blogs can be used for this purpose are examples of tools that could be adapted. If you adapt a tool for this purpose, consider the following suggestions.

Set Up

- Run the idea by team members in one-on-one conversations first to see what they think, and if they have any suggestions for adapting the idea.
- Choose and set up the online tool before launching the practice.
- Set aside time at the beginning of a meeting to introduce the idea, discuss it as a group, explain why you are doing it, and what is expected.
- Ask the team to commit to daily entries. Tell them time expectations are minimal (2-3 minutes).

Instructions for Team Members

- Make sure every entry has a date, name, and subject line.
- Tags are also useful so that later, if people want to search for gratitude topics, it will be easy to do so.
- Decide as a team whether to limit topics to work, or to let people express gratitude for anything.
- Discuss who to include: what are the boundaries to the team and to journal participation?

2. DIGITAL MESSAGES

Research on gratitude suggests that expressing gratitude to others has even stronger well-being impacts than journaling. Moving from an individual journal to a team journal is one way to take advantage of these benefits. Another, even more powerful way is to express gratitude directly to people for who they are and what they have done. Remote technology makes this easy. Not only can email, text, instant messaging, and other remote work tools be used for these purposes, but there are also online gratitude tools that teams can find with quick queries into search engines. Find the ones that work best for you.

Set Up

- Before asking others to do this, leaders should make sure they practice it consistently themselves. Set a regular time to do it in your calendar and be sure to follow through.
- You may want to invite the whole team to do it at once, or invite those who are most ready to participate one at a time.
- If the team members all agree to do this, have a discussion about how often, how to follow through, and what would make the practice successful in everyone's minds.

Instructions for Team Members

- Direct thank yous' to specific people for specific actions.
- Say exactly what you are grateful for when you send messages.
- Add a sentence or two of explanation for what was so valued about what they did, and why it matters to you to express gratitude for it.

If the business requires outside investment or external investors, include how much is needed, how it will be used, and how it will make the business more profitable. Think of this section as the first thing a potential investor reads, thus, it must capture their interest quickly. Suggested headings to organize this business plan include the following.

3. CELEBRATIONS

Digital teams seldom get to celebrate the way in-person teams get to celebrate, but if no celebrating occurs, remote team members can come to feel especially isolated.

Set Up

- Decide what to celebrate.
 - Consider celebrating both individual and team events for maximum impact.
 - Accomplishments and non-accomplishments are both important. For example, non-accomplishments, such as birthdays or life-outside-of-work events let people know that you value them as individuals independent of their work, while celebrating accomplishments lets people know that you value what they do.
 - Be careful about what your celebrations communicate to your team. For example, W.L. Gore has Champagne celebrations when people try to develop new products and fail, because they worry that only celebrating successes prevents people from trying risky ideas.
- Decide how you will celebrate. Perhaps a video call with the team. Perhaps set up a time for everyone to go out to eat in their separate cities but do it at the same time. Perhaps everyone takes a picture celebrating and then posts them together online.
- Set a schedule for celebrations throughout the year or set triggers for celebrating when projects or other activities are complete.
- Share the load. Delegate responsibility for some celebrations to different team members.

Instructions for Team Members

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4. AWARDS

Another way to practice gratitude in remote teams is with awards. Whatever form awards take, if you want them to increase gratitude and improve your culture, they need to be awards that people want and care about. For example, some people feel more appreciation with gifts. Others want to be recognized on social media. Others want the organization's managers to know about the good work they do so they have a higher chance at promotion. What makes the people on your team feel appreciated? If you do not know, it would be good to learn these things.

Awards may be monetary and formal, but they need not be. In fact, in remote teams, cost-free, digital, playful awards can be fun and can even have fun names, like the ones from high school yearbooks, such as "class clown." It can be fun for a group to make up serious and silly awards together.

If you have a formal nomination system for awards, find out the stories behind the nominations and share them. Perhaps even share the nominations with people who were nominated but did not win so that they still know that people think well of them.

Set Up

- Get clear about the kinds of behaviors you most want to reinforce with awards. Do not create awards for behaviors that you do not want to increase or fail to create awards for behaviors you want to increase.
- Talk to your team about what they think awards should be for, and what kinds of awards they want to receive.
- Decide on appropriate frequency and amounts of awards.
- If awards are monetary, create a budget.
- The more complex the award system, the more planning you should put into it, including asking yourself what how people might respond to each element, to avoid unexpected negative responses. Make the process fair—especially if there are nominations or voting involved.

5. VIDEO MEETING OPENINGS

Another way to increase gratitude is for team members to express gratitude verbally in team video meetings. If your team does not have a regular meeting time, you may want to create one. If you have a regular meeting time, consider devoting the first five or ten minutes to gratitude. To do this, you simply ask each person to share one thing for which they are grateful. Leave a little time—not a lot—for people to respond to gratitude statements as appropriate. Too much time takes over the meeting and inhibits getting work done. Too little time for people to respond to others' gratitude statements make the process feel robotic and less meaningful. If you are the leader, set the example by saying meaningful things first until others get used to the practice.

6. DISTRIBUTING GOOD NEWS

On a regular basis, perhaps monthly, ask your team members to share good news with you. This may be personal as well as professional. Give them a specific amount of time to respond. At the end of the response period, compile their responses into a mini newsletter to send out to the team electronically. You (or they) may also want to include pictures or videos. When you send out the mini newsletter, encourage team members to reach out to others to congratulate them, talk about new things they learn about each other, or build bonds in other ways. If the good news includes professional accomplishments, consider sending the mini newsletter to other people in the organization who evaluate you and your team, so that they know about these accomplishments.