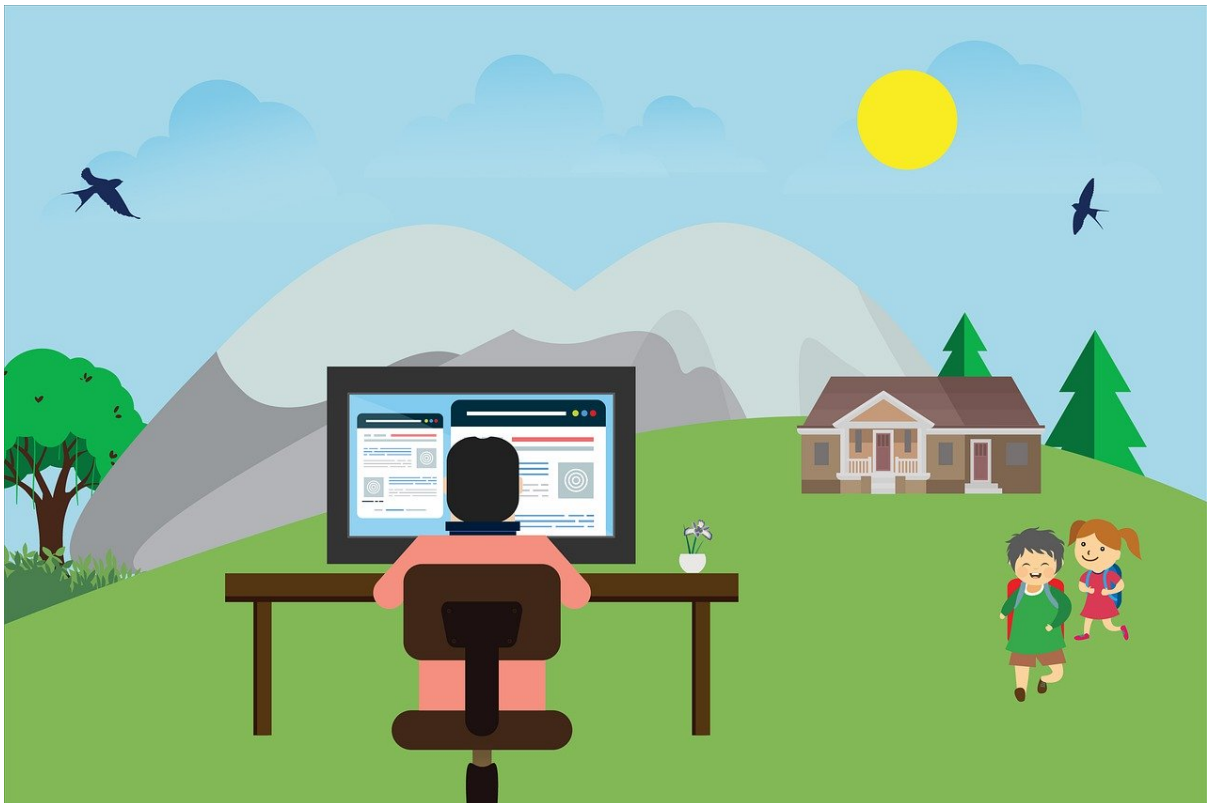


Remote supervision



(Image: Pixabay)

Like the virus, supervising remote workers can mean you're not sure whose got it yet. Are the team members clear about their responsibilities?

How can the managers of people who are all over be sure their people are able to get work done? We have the benefit of amazing communication and work-sharing technologies. We also have the advantage of other countries being a little ahead of us – so we can look to them for useful ideas. McKinsey has just published a summary of what can be learned from the experience of Chinese managers as they organized their team's remote work. I have incorporated their suggestions into four lessons.

Start with teams. Organise the business into small, output-oriented multi-disciplinary teams – to pull together the skills required to produce solutions. They need to be trained to work as a team – particularly to be able to solve problems and make decisions, while also being clear about when to escalate issues. The smaller they are the more readily they will build up trust and norms around mutual support.

Training needs to include (but not be limited to) the uses of the communication technology (Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or other), the development of shared understanding of how you will work together – for example weekly meetings (team targets) and daily catch-ups and problem-solving. An Auckland firm includes communication protocols into team invitations – who will facilitate, who will keep time, who will summarise action points – rotating around to build team effectiveness.

Lead as well as manage. Leaders provide clarity – around the over-arching goals, as well as what the teams need to deliver. Take the time with the team to develop KPIs for the team’s tasks – the discussion helps to build commitment as well as shared clarity.

Leaders also provide support. In other contexts support is about developing people’s capabilities, right now it’s helping people get through the next few days (or hours). Acknowledge pressures, validate feelings around those. However you rate Jacinda Adern as a politician her 80% approval in a recent poll indicates she is doing some things right. She is providing clarity (“stay home and save lives”, “be kind”) as well as support – she is empathizing with how people are feeling about developments, and providing time in near-daily stand-ups with the media.

Share your own issues – modeling the appropriateness of self-disclosure (so long as that’s not of the ‘you think you have problems, what about my worries...’ variety). Build in one-on-one catch-ups – to ensure psychological safety – the key skill here is open questions and good listening – learning how they are coping with children, partners – the people outside their bubble they are concerned about.

We are getting pulled around all over. Writer Ashleigh Young (in The SpinOff’s ‘Lockdown Letters’) covers off some of those pushes and pulls as she attempts several jobs while staying connected with family and community. You will have noticed that life has got a lot more social as people reach out, and you do the same. Tune into where your people are at in this shuffle towards the ‘next normal’.

Be serious about security. That’s not just firewalls and keeping scammers out. It’s being explicit about confidentiality, IP, health and well-being – building a culture that values these critical things - ‘this is why we do things this way’.

Keep open and flexible. New Zealanders are learning that some things are being developed on the fly. (What is an essential enterprise? How far can I ride my bike?) Your people need to be comfortable with approaches that don’t emerge perfectly shaped. Reinforce this by experimenting with different approaches, reviewing how things go (‘what went well, what could have gone better, what new approaches could we try?’)

This might feel as if you, and your colleagues are just getting by. It’s a steep learning curve. But rather than being a temporary virus-induced diversion, more likely than not, this is a step towards how we will be working and living after we’ve got the pandemic under control.

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