

Home or Away – Who Has the Advantage?

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ABSTRACT

In the current climate where work needs to be turned around as quickly as possible while being the most cost effective many companies have departments spread across locations or have employees working from home. The managers of these employees are often sitting in a different location. Can an employee be managed as effectively without face to face contact or do they in fact benefit?

This paper will look at the needs of both the employee and the manager for both employees who are remote from their manager and those that are situated in the same office. The ways in which these needs are addressed for each type of employee will be explored.

INTRODUCTION

It is becoming more and more common that employees do not sit in the same location as their managers. This can be for various reasons including availability of staff to allow work to be completed as quickly as possible and cost saving measures by the company to allow studies to be conducted at lower budgets than otherwise possible.

All employees require management irrespective of where they are located. This paper will look at the needs of both the employee and the manager for both employees who are remote from their manager and those that are situated in the same office. The ways in which these needs are addressed for each type of employee will be explored.

NEEDS OF THE EMPLOYEE

When my role changed from managing a team of programmers in one location to managing two teams sitting in different locations plus a homeworkeer I started to wonder if I was giving both teams the same level of management.

I decided to ask all my employees what they felt they required from a manager. The list that I compiled from their needs consisted of a combination of requirements on both personal and professional level.

COMMUNICATION

Employees need to know what is happening within the company, department and study. They need a manager who will ensure that all relevant information is passed to them in a timely and understandable way.

APPROACHABILITY

Employees need to have a manager that they feel they can approach. They may need to discuss difficult subjects such as issues affecting their personal life, difficulties on a study or difficulties with another team member. The manager needs to be able to make the employee feel that they can do this.

CONTACTABILITY

The employee needs to know that they can contact their manager whenever they need to. This could be via any suitable method and could include face to face meeting, phone, email, or instant messenger. They need to know that they will receive a response within a reasonable timeframe, even if that response is to let them know that their issue is being dealt with.

UNDERSTANDING

Once an employee has approached the manager with an issue, the manager needs to be able to be understanding. They need to understand the practical aspects of the role that the employee is undertaking so that they can provide

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support if necessary. They also need to understand why certain issues may have arisen and try not to judge the employee unnecessarily. The employee also needs to feel that the manager understands what they need as a person in order to feel confident that the manager is going to help them make their job as fulfilling as possible.

SUPPORT

There are many occasions where an employee will require the support of their manager. This support may be related to personal, professional or project related issues. It may be ensuring that the correct resource is in place to help with a study, helping them find the correct training for their requirements or providing back-up during a meeting with a difficult client or department. The manager needs to be able to make the employee feel as comfortable as they can in an awkward situation.

TRUST

The employee needs to feel that they can trust their manager to do the tasks that they say they will. They also need to believe that their manager will make sure that the employees point of view is heard during any decision making process.

NEEDS OF THE MANAGER

Managers also require certain things from their employees. Many of these are traits which are required from both parties.

TRUST

The manager needs to trust that their employees are completing the tasks that they have been requested to complete and that they are following any guidelines that they are required to follow in order that they complete the task. They need to be confident that the employee will approach them if they are experiencing any issues and that they are not wasting time when they should be working.

COMMUNICATION

The manager needs to be confident that their employees will communicate openly with them. Whether it is to keep them informed about concerns on a study or within the team or with good news received from a client or any other source.

ARE THE NEEDS MET?

APPROACHABILITY

If a manager is sitting in the same location as their employees it is easy for the employees to see whether a manager can be approached either by the expression on their face, their body language or whether they have their door open or not.

But just because an employee can see if a manager is approachable does not mean that they get to approach the manager more often. The manager needs to ensure that they do open their door whenever they can and try not to appear too stressed all the time so that they do not put people off approaching them.

It is not so easy for away employees to determine the approachability of a manager. They could use the status of instant messenger as an indication but this may not always be accurate as it relies on the manager constantly changing the status as their work load changes and this is not always practical and is often forgotten.

Having a lack of visual signs may benefit an away employee because they may phone, email or messenger their manager on the off chance that they are available and get through to them although they may be sitting with their door closed so local employees are not approaching them. Also the manager may overcompensate for the fact that they don't see the away employee everyday by responding far more quickly to any communication.

The key to this is making sure the employee is comfortable enough communicating this way. Some people are more likely to raise a point to someone if they see them face to face than rather then ever mention via another communication method.

CONTACTABILITY

If a manager is sitting next to their employees it should be easy for the employees to contact them. The can be addressed in person at any time they are available.

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Although it appears that there would be no problem with contactability in this scenario, because it is so easy for each party to get in contact with the other scheduled meetings may not be booked which could lead to the employee missing out. The manager needs to ensure that scheduled meetings are planned and although they can be rescheduled fairly easily, the manager needs to ensure that if a meeting does need to be rescheduled, the new time is not too distant from the original time. For example if an employee is scheduled to have bi-weekly meetings and one is rescheduled for two weeks after the original date, the employee actually misses a meeting however it was rescheduled for a few days later they would still have two meetings.

UNDERSTANDING

It can be a lot easier for a manager to understand a local employee. They can see body language and facial expressions which can portray a lot more about what the person is trying to say than words alone, particularly when the manager is trying to understand more personal issues that an employee may have rather than technical difficulties.

For technical understanding the manager and employee can be looking at the same piece of code, log or output making it easier to clarify exactly what the issue is.

Although an away employee can convey the same words it can be more difficult for the manager to interpret quite how it is affecting the employee. In this case the manager needs to try and ask more questions to try and understand the situation fully. In my experience it takes more time to fully understand both a person and a situation if you cannot see the person you are dealing with. However, the same level of understanding can be achieved if the time is put into the relationship.

Advances in technology now mean that although a manager may not be able to physically stand next to an employee and see what is on their screen they can share desktops, or send emails with screenshots of errors. This enables both parties to see the same error and discuss the solution.

In both situations, the manager needs to listen to what their employee is saying and decide the best approach to move forward. The manager needs to be careful not to make assumptions or to put blame onto either the employee or another party. If an error has occurred it needs to be understood that everyone makes mistakes and to help the employee overcome any mistake they may have made and to find a solution to try and help the employee to avoid making the same mistake again.

SUPPORT

If a manager is suitably approachable, contactable and understanding they should be able to provide the support required by their employee.

COMMUNICATION

When a manager and an employee are in the same location there are many ways of communicating. Verbal face to face communication is the easiest method. When both parties are in the same location it is very easy to speak to each other on an ad-hoc basis for example as you pass the other persons desk. In my experience I get more communication in this way than in any other.

Other methods of communication are available to all employees, home or away. These include:

- Emails which are good for documenting details about a situation particularly if it is something that will need referred to at some point in the future.
- Instant messenger which is very useful for short questions that need answered fairly quickly, or to check if the recipient is at their desk.
- Telephone can be used for longer conversations but you lose the benefit of seeing facial expressions that you gain with a face to face meeting.
- Video conferencing could overcome the issue of lacking facial expressions. As it allows both parties to be sitting in different locations and still to see each other.

The main issue that could be faced with all these methods is that both parties need to have access to the required hardware and software.

Provided that these tools are available both home and away employees should be able to have sufficient communication with their manager.

TRUST

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Trust is something that generally takes time to acquire. If the manager and the employee see each other everyday it is a lot easier for the manager to see what the employee is doing without them feeling that they are being watched. The manager can tell if employees are at their desks or if they are spending long periods on breaks. This can be done just by walking around the office and can be done without making the employees feel that they are being watched. This also works in reverse that the employees can see more easily how hard the manager is working. Over time both parties can trust that the other does what they say they are going to do.

It can take longer to achieve this trusting relationship with an away employee as they do not always have the day to day contact. Also due to the issues of not being able to read facial expressions it can be more difficult to read situations correctly. In my experience a face to face meeting between the manager and the employee can make an enormous difference to the ability to build a trusting relationship.

INFORMATION SHARING

There is the tendency for managers to share more information with local employees as they are easily accessible and they can make comments in passing.

However, if the communication channels are set up correctly there should be no reason why the away employees should miss out on this information. The manager needs to take care to ensure that they send all information they are sharing to all employees. If they need to discuss the issue they should call the away employees and discuss with them. Otherwise an email to all employees required would ensure that everyone has the same information.

CONCLUSION

There are many expectations that an employee has of a manager and vice versa. It has been shown that with the appropriate level of planning it is possible to manage both home employees and away employees to the same level. The key to managing the relationship is good communication and trust.

There are many methods of communication available. The best method for being able to understand people and tasks is face to face as this allows facial expressions and body language to be seen. This leads to greater understanding of situations and can speed up the process of gaining trust between the parties involved. In my experience even one face to face meeting between an employee and a manager can drastically improve the relationship. If at all possible face to face meetings should be arranged with away employees at regular intervals such as weekly, monthly or annually.

CONTACT INFORMATION

(In case a reader wants to get in touch with you, please put your contact information at the end of the paper.)

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