Tips for Remote Teams

Asynchronous work:

It can be challenging in many ways to get used to working asynchronously. The GitLab team gives this useful tip: To get into the right mindset ask yourself: ‘How would I deliver this message/present this work/move this project forward right now, if no one in my team was awake?’

Good documentation is the basis for asynchronous work. Make sure you have easy access to documentation and transparency, and a clear understanding of what tools you use for what kind of communication.

Clear communication is the key:

In the digital space we miss body language, facial expressions and tone of voice that in face-to-face interactions communicate a big percentage of our message. So when we only communicate by text, we need to be more direct and extra clear to avoid misinterpretations. If you are in doubt, ask yourself: is there anything in this message that can be misunderstood?

Be aware of over-messaging and notification overload:

Use the right tool for the right communication and manage your notification settings, including your ‘do not disturb’ hours. Encourage and teach others how to best use the tools and manage their notifications too.

Make sure you don’t need to message lots of times a day. Think in advance about what is the most important info others need to know? What questions should you be asking to have the info you need for a task?

Participation:

Digital spaces give more space for the quiet voices to express themselves, but it is a habit that needs to be built. Pay attention to who and how people in your team interact online, and encourage the quiet voices to comment and participate in discussions to bring them in.
Considerations for online meetings:

Before the meeting (minimum one week before):

- Find a time to meet, use doodle or any other tool that allows you to visualise the options and have attendees mark their preference.
- Agree who will be the facilitator of the meeting, that person can also take on the preparation tasks.
- Build agenda points asynchronously in advance. Share any info or documents needed for people to read and be prepared a few days before the meeting.
- Send an invite with info, agenda points, and any video call platform links. And a reminder the day before.
- Make sure everyone has access to all the tools and they know how to use them.

During the meeting:

- Make sure you have good headphones + mic.
- If possible you may be able to record the call for people that can’t attend.
- Ask people to mute their microphone while not speaking to avoid noise.
- Teach and use hand signals for easy signaling during the call:
  - Hand up for ‘I want to speak’.
  - 1 finger up (or moving from up to towards the screen) for ‘I have a point to add to that’.
  - Make a C with your hand to ask for a clarification on what’s been said.
  - ‘Sparkly fingers’/‘jazz hands’ to show that you agree to what the person is saying/that it resonates with you/that you feel the same, or to give them support.
- Decision making hand signs:
  - Thumbs up for yes, I agree.
  - Thumb in the middle for I abstain.
  - Thumbs down for no, I disagree.
  - Flat hand up or crossed fists for I block.
- Note taking: make sure you or an appointed person captures the main points and actions. Some groups like to have a live collaborative cloud document (Google doc, HackMD, etc) where several people can be taking notes at the same time.
- Some video call platforms allow for break out rooms that can be very useful to split big groups for more in depth conversations in specific topics.

After the meeting:

- Share notes, recording and action points with everyone, or on the right place for people to find it.
- If you use Loomio or any other asynchronous decision making tool you can also sign off the minutes.
Caring for each other:

Working from home can be isolating, so make sure your team communicates not only about work tasks, but that there’s also space for informal conversations and for support calls. You can use regular video calls to encourage people to socialize. Being at home is also a great way to get to know each other better as you can share more things about your personal life, like showing around your house, or your taste in wall art, and nothing better than your kid or pets showing up on camera ;)

Practices to encourage socializing:

- Make sure you have enough time for check-ins and check-outs in your meetings, and encourage people to share their feelings.
- If you use Slack or another team chat platform, set up water cooler, cool stuff, photos, and thank you channels for people to interact and share beyond just work tasks.
- Co-working hours on video call: a couple of hours a day where the video call is on and anyone can jump in to see others and work side by side, you can chit chat or ask a few questions but this is not a meeting.
- 1-on-1 video coffee catch-ups: set up time for short breaks with different coworkers to have a coffee and a chat, like if you were in the office.
- Small support crews/Pods: 3 to 5 people that meet up weekly or biweekly to support and care for each other. Eg, check-in about your week, share feelings, talk about your developmental goals, encourage each other. Remember caring for each other is also part of the work.

Remote work and healthy boundaries:

When working remotely it can be challenging to set time boundaries, and not overwork as we have access to all notifications all the time. So here are some tips:

- Set up your notifications to silence/snooze/do not disturb outside working hours.
- Don’t read your work emails or check on your work comms tools as soon as you get out of bed, use that time for any morning routines for you.
- Make sure you have a time to start and to finish your working day, and don’t look at your emails or work comms platforms after that.
- Make sure you take a few breaks during the day, get up, stretch, make tea, and chat with other humans.
- Make sure you have time set up for socializing every day, with co-workers and also enough time with friends and family.

Tension and conflict:

If you are concerned about miscommunication, or if there’s tension or conflict arising with some team members, then escalate the bandwidth of your communication tool: move from group channels > to 1-on-1 chat > to a voice call > to a video call. If the conflict is challenging to resolve, consider involving another person in your team that can help mediate.
Remote Team Rhythms:

Daily - Standup:
Set up an online standup channel where everyone working on the day writes every morning to update the team, following this format: (remember keep it short)

Yesterday I worked on: ______________ 
Today I’m working on: ______________ 
Blockages stopping me: ______________ 
For my wellbeing I’ll: ______________

Biweekly - Sprint planning calls:
At the beginning of your two weeks work Sprint, discuss the sprint’s plan: priorities, tasks, and people’s capacity. You can use Trello or other tasks management tools to visualise the info, move tasks around the different lists (Backlog, To do this sprint, Doing/in progress, Done) and assign tasks to team members. You can share the screen on your video call for everyone to look at the board.

Biweekly - Sprint review/Demo/Retrospective calls:
Check on tasks progress, review unfinished tasks, and organise your tasks management tool (e.g, Trello) board for next planning call.

You can run a retrospective to understand how the team is working together: What was good this sprint, what was challenging/not so good, and what can be done differently next sprint to address the challenging parts. Use a digital whiteboard (e.g, Miro) for digital post-it notes, and break out rooms on the video call platform, to have smaller discussions on a particular challenge to improve.

Spend some time celebrating wins and make space for a few people to demonstrate what they have worked on.

Accountability calls:
If you have an accountability buddy, or a small accountability crew, setup a weekly call for check-ins or a channel, to support each other on your tasks completion. At the end of each sprint you can make space to give and receive appreciative and constructive feedback.

If you are interested in learning more about these topics check out our online courses.