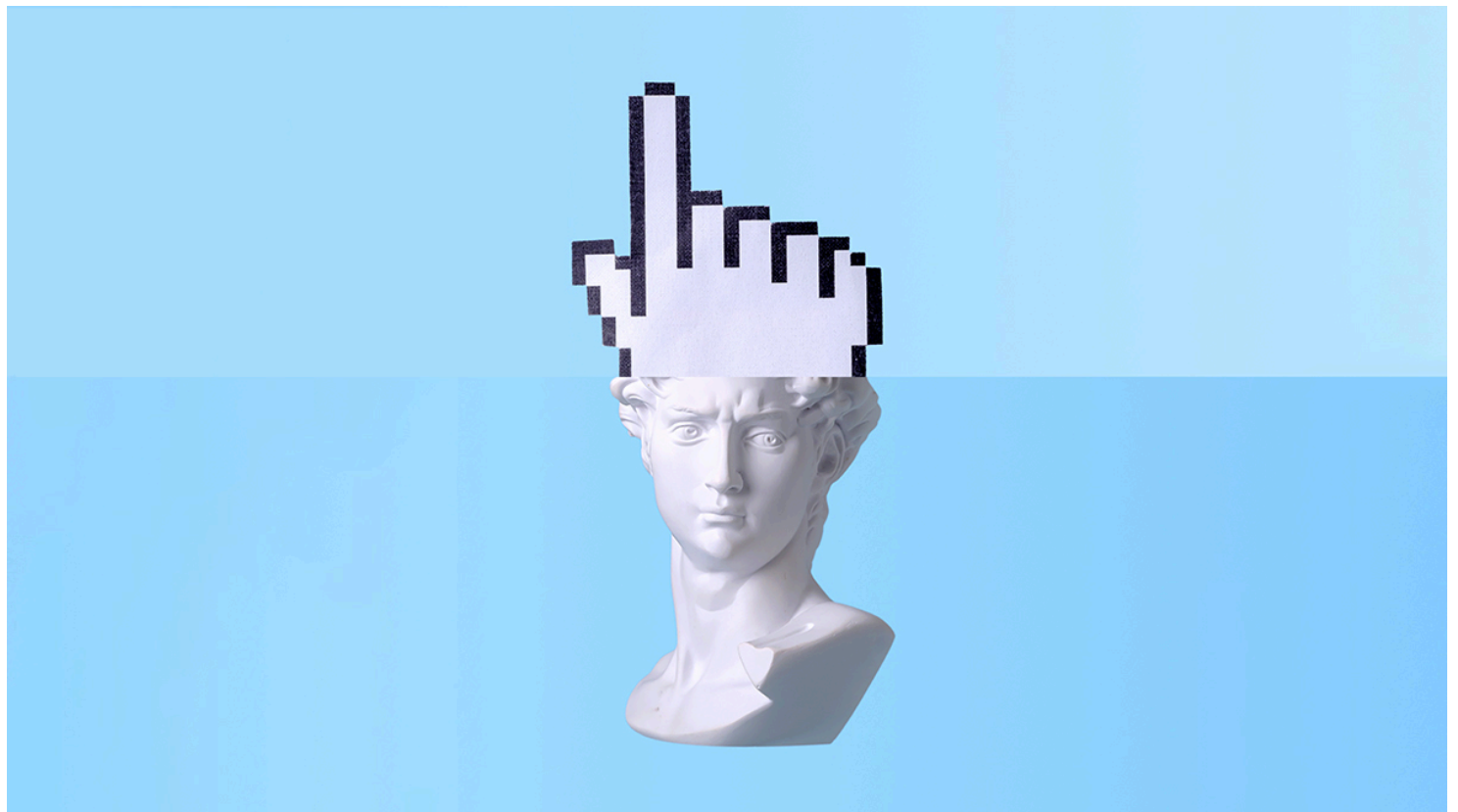**Harvard Business Review**

Collaboration And Teams

What Great Remote Managers Do Differently

by Raghu Krishnamoorthy

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Summary.   No one anticipated the massive shift to home-based remote work that happened in 2020 with the onset of the pandemic. A new study surveyed managers and employees alike for what worked and what didn't as they navigated managing and being managed remotely. The key finding was a subtle but important shift in how employees expected their managers to work with them. They wanted their managers to be present, hands-on, and operationally vigilant without being intrusive. They don't want their managers to micromanage them; they want their managers to micro-*understand* their work. The author explains what micro-understanding is, cites examples of it in practice, and identifies three situations in which it is particularly important: Setting priorities and clarifying, problem solving, and checking in and showing compassion.   **close**

"It's like learning to drive on the wrong side of the road," exclaimed Larry when I asked him how he experienced the shift to leading remote employees. "You have to get to the same destination as before, but you now have different signals, cues, and controls — and that does take some time getting used to!"

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Neither organizations nor employees anticipated such a swift move to home-based remote work in March 2020. Not surprisingly, early in the pandemic, a Harvard survey found that 40% of leaders were unprepared to manage remote employees,

and 41% struggled to keep their remote team members engaged. Similarly, only 40% of employees working from home reported feeling supported by their superiors.

Two-and-a-half years down the road, it's clear that remote work is here to stay. The burden of choreographing the performance of team members, now increasingly dispersed — at home, at the office, and in different time zones — has left many managers unsure about how to best get work done. Not surprisingly, many managers prefer their staff to return to the office, only to face resistance and even rebellion.

I investigated how effective managers engaged people and drove performance when they worked from home in 2021 and 2022. My key finding was a subtle but important shift in how employees expected their managers to work with them. They wanted their managers to be present, hands-on, and operationally vigilant without being intrusive. In other words, employees don't want their managers to micromanage them; they want their managers to micro-*understand* their work.

Micromanagement is restrictive, with heavy managerial meddling that undermines trust, disempowers employees, and manifests itself, among other things, in the form of exhaustive reviews, checklists, and levels of approval. Micro-understanding is about better integrating yourself into your team's workflow and problem solving remotely. The micro-understanding manager can identify

vulnerabilities and construct a radar for potential trouble spots. Micro-understanding is about trusting, but making sure there are no unanticipated bumps; delegating, but being there to keep workers from stumbling; and being flexible, but always heeding the warning signs.

Managers as enablers, not enforcers

Remote or not, the role of a manager at its core remains the same: to motivate employees and organize resources to drive performance excellence. So *what* managers do remains the same; it's the *how* that changes. Many managers are concerned about how to manage their staff when they can't see them. Presenteeism, or the need to show facetime at work, is often assumed to be necessary for productivity. However, productivity data during the pandemic demonstrated that people could perform just as productively without being monitored for time spent at work or being physically present.

My study shows that employees began to appreciate the role of the manager more while working from home full-time in 2020. Having a manager was helpful, provided the managers shifted from managing time, activity, or physical presence to managing results and outcomes. Further, employees considered the managers to be even more of a key resource in getting the job done remotely. They expect their managers to devote more time and effort to removing interpersonal and work barriers, coordinating among many stakeholders, as well as coaching and

orchestrating their performance. As Liam, one of my respondents, said, "My boss has amped up the operating mechanisms over the last few months; we have regular meetings whereby we go over our goals, our accomplishments, and gaps on a frequent basis so that we are all aligned as to what needs to be done. It has lent a level of predictability and consistency to our world — necessary, since we do not have easy real-time connections anymore." In a virtual setting, good managers act as enablers, and not as enforcers.

Being in the game without being on the field

Managing remotely is a delicate balance. Leaders are accused of micromanagement when they exert excessive oversight. One participant in my study remarked that her manager insisted on redoing everything she did, so much so that she eventually stopped caring about producing her best work. "I mentally and emotionally checked out," she said.

On the other hand, insufficient monitoring may lead to a laissez-faire leader, which is also problematic. Janine in my study remarked, "My boss disappears for weeks. He always seems busy in meetings. It is as though we are nonexistent for him. Our group imploded as each team member did their own thing without alignment from the boss!"

Both of these types of leaders impair employees' productivity and morale. This is where micro-understanding comes in. It's like being a coach who is very much in the game but not on the field.

A present leader generates better organizational outcomes and increased employee engagement in a virtual environment. Presence here entails being approachable, visible, mindful, and having frequent individual and team check-ins, as well as being a valuable resource to employees in accomplishing their tasks.

As one participant, Mary, told me:

> I joined my firm during the pandemic and had not met anyone in person. My boss made it a point to call me every evening to check in on me — on how I was doing, if I needed anything, always pointing out important things for me, connecting me to various people I needed to get to know, and involving me in meetings that had nothing to do with my work but helped me get up to speed. I never felt as though I was alone. She always was there for me — very present and very affirmative. I never once felt that she was monitoring me — I always felt her as a resource.

Here are some examples of situations where micro-understanding is necessary:

Setting priorities and clarifying. A remote work environment calls for ruthless prioritization. Everyone on the team needs to understand what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, and by whom. Micro-understanding entails understanding how detailed priorities work together to produce the intended product on time and with the required level of efficiency. One of my participants, a manager, set up a weekly operating cadence across the world. She told me:

> Each Tuesday morning, I had all my supply-chain managers on a call. We would use a dashboard whereby we all would look at our output targets together and work through any reds or yellows on the dashboard, checking what support the folks needed to get it to green. Where there were glaring issues, we would follow up with one-on-one calls. This discipline enabled me to know exactly where everyone was in meeting their targets. Such calls enabled me to anticipate where I am going to have issues, which teams needed help or coaching, what I needed to communicate up so that there were no surprises. I was able to prioritize, redirect, and clarify [in] real time. It was a simple step, but we had not done this before the pandemic. I plan to continue with it as a permanent operating rhythm.

Problem solving. In a remote context, problem solving involves setting up alert mechanisms for potential problems and timely

fixes as they appear. This means that managers must develop an ability to scan constantly and instantly know vulnerabilities and obstacles. One manager, David, creatively addressed this by empowering his team to call for a meeting whenever they sense something going wrong. He called it the equivalent of "yanking the bell in the village tower when you sense danger." A "mosquito" problem meeting implied a small but irritating problem that needed to be quashed right away; a "quicksand" problem meeting was a cry for help to get out of a fix; and a "dragon" problem meeting represented a serious issue that needed escalation. It was the responsibility of the team member to call for the meeting and to ensure that everyone relevant to the meeting was there to help them. The role of the manager was to provide support and help resolve the issue, but the employee took ownership. "When we operated in an in-person setting, the responsibility for organizing meetings was on me, but in a remote setting, I am often not aware of what the issues are," he said. "Transferring the responsibility to the team members allowed me to take a step back and observe patterns on the issues that I could then specifically attend to."

Checking in and showing compassion. Checking in is about fostering interpersonal trust and connection. Remote work lacks opportunities for spontaneous connection and coaching. They need to be created. While checking in was popular in the initial days of the pandemic, it has gone down in importance and frequency over time, with managers feeling exhausted by the emotional drain it causes. However, check-ins are necessary in a remote working environment since most employees view their

immediate managers as the most important link they have with their organization.

Managers, whether they like it or not, are often required to provide emotional first aid to employees in times of distress. Unskilled managers often end up making check-ins look like check-ups, making employees feel that they are being monitored. Others never show empathy and compassion and alienate the team. More sinister is the manager who shows fake flexibility. One study participant told me: "My boss called and asked me why I am not taking my summer afternoon off as per the company's new flexibility policy. I then frankly asked him, 'Okay, I will take off, but will you cut me some slack on the deadline I am supposed to meet?' He awkwardly suggested that I could still enjoy my Friday afternoon as long as I had met my deliverable by the following Monday morning." I call this fake flexibility.

Many participants were appreciative of their managers' ability to connect with them. A random text late in the evening saying, "I'm thinking of you and am grateful you are on my team" contributed a lot more to trust than any formal program. Likewise, employees were weary of forced fun — like Thursday night bingo — while appreciating beginning formal meetings by acknowledging someone's personal accomplishment or a birthday. Humanizing the remote workplace is a special art for the remote leader, and it happens in non-obvious but conscious ways.

Micromanagement is an employee obstacle; micro-understanding is an employee resource. As the world continues to change dramatically, micro-understanding offers a new template for leading employees who are increasingly dispersed and work remotely. It will help managers learn to drive on the other side of the road — the new right side.

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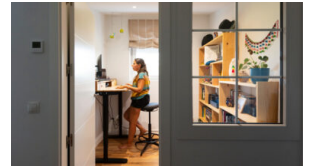## Recommended For You

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