**Guidelines for Managing and Communicating with Staff Remotely**

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in most of our workforce now working remotely. For many of us, this may be our first experience managing staff remotely. Even for those with experience with remote work, the added strain of the pandemic and its ongoing impact presents new and unexpected challenges. These guidelines have been developed to support you during this period. As always, our goal is to offer our community resources and information to support their work and professional development.

There are several key considerations when successfully managing staff members remotely including technological support, **consistent communication, clear expectations, established goals and objectives, and meaningful feedback,** and perhaps most importantly, flexibility and the willingness to re-evaluate and reconsider approaches.

This guide includes helpful information on each of these areas. We encourage you to also visit our website for [additional resources](https://www.swarthmore.edu/human-resources/covid-19-wellness-and-work-life-resources#remote%20work) on supporting your staff in working remotely. If you have questions, please contact Paula MacDonald @pmacdon1@swarthmore.edu.

**Technological Support**

Working remotely, especially for people without prior experience, can prove to be challenging. Staff may feel distant and out of sync with other staff members or supervisors, and struggle with finding solid connections and consistent support. Fortunately, technology can help mediate many of the challenges. Utilizing tools like instant messaging, Zoom, Google chat and Hang Out can allow you to connect in real time, eliminating some of the sense of distance working remotely creates.

Your staff members should be adequately equipped with the necessary technology to work from home effectively. You can access ITS resources, support, and training at this link: [kb.swarthmore.edu/display/remote/Working+Remotely](https://kb.swarthmore.edu/display/remote/Working%2BRemotely).

**Consistent Communication**

Communicating in clear and consistent ways with your staff is even more important than ever. Without the usual opportunities to catch up in person in the break room, or pop by a staff member’s office, it is especially important that you intentionally create opportunities for ongoing communication throughout the day and week. If your staff members are used to a weekly meeting, continue that practice over Zoom. If you have a 1:1 meeting scheduled every week with staff members who report directly to you, continue that practice as well. Remember that all staff members are individuals and the amount of support and interaction they require must be individualized as well. Encourage them to speak up if they need more interaction, both as a whole team and from you as their supervisor.

When communicating with your staff, be mindful of the following components -

* **Intention:**  Zoom meetings can cause fatigue easily. Be mindful of whether all meetings need to occur over Zoom or if a simple phone call or text or email exchange will suffice. Use meeting times wisely by establishing and following an agenda. Be aware of the lengths of meetings and their frequency.
* **Consistency:** holding regularly scheduled meetings, including 1:1’s, staff meetings or departmental meetings, can offer structure and help build a sense of normalcy for your staff. Avoid the urge to allow regular meetings to be canceled; regular communication is key to creating a cohesive working environment and a sense of teamwork, and it is key to sustaining engagement even across distance.
* **Comprehensiveness**: Ensure that whatever means you use to keep your staff in the loop on changing priorities, projects, and deadlines are adapted to remote work. Communicating changes in writing, holding virtual stand-up meetings, using shared documents circulated amongst everyone will help ensure information trickles down to everyone.

**Suggestions for Using:**

* **Zoom:** 1:1 meetings, departmental meetings, and demonstrating new responsibilities, for example.
* **Phone:** back-up to Zoom, quick check-in or follow-up, need to ask a question/need answer, etc.
* **Email:** quick update about work, schedule conflicts, etc.

**Clear Expectations**

One of the most effective ways to ensure success when working remotely is to communicate expectations clearly, in advance, and to all staff. You should be setting clear expectations around:

* **Expected work hours/schedule**: Many staff members are currently working hours slightly different than their regular work schedule due to issues like childcare, home schooling, or care for sick family members. Whenever possible, supervisors are expected to encourage their staff members to think creatively to set work hours that best accommodate their needs. This approach could include working hours outside of the traditional daytime schedule such as in the early morning or evening. To support clear and consistent communication, it is helpful to include the work schedules of all staff members within the department on a shared calendar. This approach can also help to manage expectations and make scheduling meetings less cumbersome. If there is a specific time for all staff meetings, schedule those in advance to allow those who may be working on different schedules to plan ahead and communicate expectations about attendance clearly.
* **Preferred method and frequency of communication:** To stay connected, find tools you can use to communicate on a regular basis. Some teams use Google chat or Slack for quick response scenarios; others prefer texting when there is an immediate need. Think about how and when you communicate, and take a consistent approach; for example, you could schedule a daily check in at the beginning or end of the workday to ensure everyone is equipped to get their work done. Whatever method you establish for your staff, communicate it clearly and in writing to avoid confusion.
* **Responsiveness to emails and phone calls:** If they haven’t already, make sure your staff members implement call forwarding ([call forwarding directions](https://kb.swarthmore.edu/display/PHONES/Cisco%2BPhones#CiscoPhones-Activatecallforwarding?)) and update their outgoing email messages ([managing outgoing email message](https://kb.swarthmore.edu/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=28279751#GmailFrequentlyAskedQuestions(FAQs)-VacationResponder&EmailForwarding) ) to provide a reasonable timeframe to allow for a response. To ensure no one is without answers or resources when needed, emergency needs should be fielded through an alternative email box or phone number that is being frequently monitored.
* **Contingency plan:** In the case of a staff or family member’s illness, a contingency plan outlining who will share responsibilities or provide back-up assistance should be created and shared in an area that can be accessed by other staff members.

**Established Goals and Objectives**

Establishing goals and objectives is the first step to effectively supporting your staff members’ performance and productivity. Some duties and responsibilities translate relatively seamlessly into a remote working environment. However, it is still your responsibility as a supervisor to ensure status of the day-to-day work and specific projects or initiatives undertaken by your staff members. For staff members whose work does not easily translate into a remote working situation, it may be necessary to assign new or existing projects that may have been delayed prior to COVID-19. This is also a time to encourage your staff to take advantage of any required certification training and/or online professional development courses. Many such resources are available through the College’s LinkedIn Learning account @ [linkedin.swarthmore.edu](http://linkedin.swarthmore.edu/). For a full understanding of the status of your staff’s work, you should:

* **Establish clear goals** to be accomplished during this remote work period using the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound) method.
* **Develop a consistent reporting method:** This could include a shared document or a report that is developed by your staff member and includes regular updates. Having staff members share updates on work projects during 1:1 projects vs staff meetings increases the probability of getting accurate updates, particularly from anyone that might be struggling or in need of additional support.
* **Determine the frequency of check in’s** - establish whether you are meeting weekly, biweekly, etc. and communicate clearly what information you expect the employee to provide at that time
* **Adjust timetables and due dates as needed:** Continuously changing conditions may result in new or different initiatives needing to be prioritized. Flexibility and adaptability are especially important when setting priorities in a rapidly changing environment. Clearly communicate the priority of new developments and reassign due dates for projects that are being delayed as a result.
* **Communicate how goals, priorities, and changes impact your whole team:** It is helpful for all staff members to understand the demands being placed both on their colleagues and on their team. Clearly communicating how goals, priorities, and ongoing changes impact individual team members and the entire team opens up the opportunities for staff members to collaborate or offer assistance when possible. Additionally, it allows you to clearly align (and realign as needed) the work of individual staff members and the overall goals and objectives of the department.
* **Measure results, not simply hours worked:** There are many ways to recognize and value productivity beyond the simple number of hours worked. While some supervisors may struggle to evaluate productivity in a remote working environment, remember that simply having someone present in a shared workspace doesn’t demonstrate productivity or performance either. Supervisors should focus on the results their team is able to achieve during this period of remote work, and assess progress made on the goals and objectives they have set, both with individuals and with their whole team.

**Meaningful Feedback**

Providing meaningful feedback safeguards their success. Keep in mind that your feedback should be:

* **Timely:** Both accolades and constructive criticism should be delivered in a timely fashion. Be mindful of recognizing good work and effort openly and on a regular basis.
* **Continuous:** Your staff members deserve continuous feedback so that they can understand where they are excelling, and where they may need to strengthen their work. Too often, supervisors wait until there are a multitude of issues and address them all at once, an approach that can leave staff members feeling overwhelmed and defeated. Remember that only providing feedback when there are opportunities for improvement won’t increase your team’s morale.
* **Honest**: Your staff members deserve an honest assessment of their performance so that they can understand where they are demonstrating success and where they can improve. An honest response doesn’t have to be harsh or unkind; your focus should be on offering constructive, thoughtful criticism that can help your staff member grow professionally.
* **Mutual:** as a supervisor, it’s important to remember the value of two-way feedback. Create an environment that permits your staff members to let you know what support they need from you, and that they feel comfortable communicating struggles as they work to accomplish the goals you have set together.