



How To Get Remote Teams To Work Together

When the great work from home experiment started and organizations around the world sent their people to work from home, a lot of team leaders started to sense that they weren't managing a team of 12, so much as managing 12 individual employees. People know how to connect easily with their bosses and show them what was getting done. But those same people struggled to find ways to work together. Despite seemingly endless video conferences, requests for help made directly to peers dropped—and collaboration quickly followed. Newly remote employees were working alone, but they weren't working alone together.

Not everyone though.

Teams that already had experience working as a team remotely—whether in fully distributed companies or because their offices were already flexible—didn't suffer the same fate as those teams who had remote work thrust upon them. Because, having learned from experience and trial-and-error, those teams had learned how to “work out loud.” Working out loud means that the team has developed a system to keep track of what everyone is focused on, what's getting done, as well as a system for asking for and volunteering to give help. It means when project pivots happen, the team doesn't have to wait for the next all-hands call to find out about it.

In this article, we'll cover a simple and easy way to get started helping your team work out loud and, hence, to get your remote team to work together. It all revolves around three easy questions. (And if you're familiar with the world of Agile and the “scrum,” then you'll recognize these questions.) Those questions are:

- What did I just work on?
- What am I working on?
- What is blocking my progress?

You can phrase these questions in a variety of different ways. But the point is that these three, taken together, offer a time to provide a project update, a time to provide a

forecast of what's happening next, and space to make requests for help that often don't happen on newly remote teams.

Let's look at each question in turn.

What did I just work on?

Starting with the question of "What did I just work on?" may seem kind of obvious. It's about progress updates. It's about breaking the long-term project down into short-term deliverables and being able to track progress accordingly. But it's also about small wins. It can provide an opportunity to celebrate how far the team has come, and progress is a powerful way to keep a team motivated. And it provides an opportunity to share lessons learned. Rarely, if ever, does a long-term project's completion end up looking like what was intended at the beginning. That's because individuals learn, reflect, and change as they get engaged in the work. And sharing "what did I just work on?" also provides the opportunity to also answer "what did I just learn?"

What am I working on?

Asking the second question, "what am I working on?," is also about progress updates. Or better said, it's about synchronizing tasks and forecasting future progress. It provides an opportunity for everyone to share what their focus is for the next day, week, or however long it is between now and the next check-in. But this question has the added benefit of making sure no one is duplicating effort. Without keeping the team in sync, it's possible (and frequent) that two individual team members focus on the same set of tasks. Without a chance to have everyone on the team share what their next deliverable is, you could end up only finding out when those tasks are finished. The inverse is also true. Individuals might assume other teammates have got a project task covered and ignore it. And without checking to make sure, critical tasks might never get done. But, taking a quick moment for everyone to answer, "what am I working on?" helps prevent these setbacks.

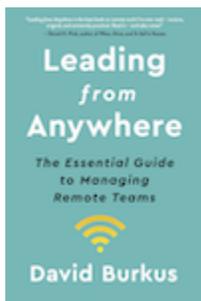
What is blocking my progress?

Speaking of setbacks, the third and final question makes extra sure that people can avoid them. By answering "What is blocking my progress?" individuals on the team have the opportunity to put out a request for help to the whole team. Setbacks

happen. People get stuck. But in a remote work environment, they mostly share their stuck-ness with their manager. And that's how a team of 12 breaks down into just 12 individual relationships. If everyone's only communicating with a team leader, then the team leader can get overloaded keeping track of who needs what and who else can help. Including this question in regular team check-ins gets the team talking to each other again. By answering "what is blocking my progress?" you make space for teammates to ask for help—and for others to volunteer help.

You don't have to ask these exact questions. Depending on the people on your team and the work that you're doing, you may want to rewrite them to fit a bit better. At the same time, you don't need to spend too much time focusing on the technology or method you use to track answers to these questions. There is existing software that you can utilize, or plugins to project management software you can install. But the technology doesn't matter as much as the questions themselves. There are multinational, virtual teams, using simple spreadsheets or daily emails. It doesn't even have to be daily. Let the team experiment and find the right interval of time that doesn't overload teammates but doesn't lead them to under communicate either. To start, just focus on asking these questions, and asking them regularly.

Because when you focus on these questions and your team is finally comfortable asking and answering them on a regular basis, you'll find that your team have a much easier time focusing on each other. And that is what really drives a remote team to work together.



If you want to learn even more about the future of remote work and how to lead your team from wherever you are, check out [Leading From Anywhere](#)

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