

Hone

# Managing Remote Teams



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## Introduction

While remote work has been increasing in popularity over the last few years, the global pandemic has substantially accelerated its adoption. The last year has proved to people – and companies – that we don't need offices to do business; solidifying the fact that remote work will stick around long after the pandemic ends.

But, while we're all more familiar with working remotely, we've yet to perfect it. We've had to learn to adapt to the many challenges of remote work: learning to effectively communicate online, working with teammates in different time zones, feelings of isolation, and more. For first-time and long standing people managers alike, overcoming these challenges and adapting to change has been a steep, continuous learning curve.

In addition to these basic challenges, managers have had to figure out how to engage dispersed teams, prioritize professional development from afar, and deliver remote performance reviews; they've certainly have had their hands full over the last 12 months! At Hone, we know today's managers need new skills to keep up with the ever-changing workplace. That's why we've pulled together this guide based on our most popular modern leadership classes to help you become an outstanding remote manager.

**Here's your guide to leading a remote team and managing remote employees:**

## The Top Challenges of Managing Remote Teams

Managing an in-person team is hard enough, but managing a dispersed team comes with its own set of unique problems. From a lack of communication to complicated time zone coordination, here are the most common issues managers run into when managing a remote team and how to ensure you address them head-on:

# 01

## Communication Issues

When managing a remote team, you can't depend on casual hallway catch-ups and in-office discussions to keep everyone aligned. Even if you opt for email, chat, video conference, or a phone call, your message might not land quite as you hoped. Without proper context or non-verbal cues like body language and tone, these forms of communication can easily be misinterpreted or misunderstood.

That's why, when it comes to managing remote teams, it's important to over-communicate and ask your direct reports what form of communication works best for them. Some employees might be fine with a hands-off approach and feel more comfortable reaching out to you when they have a question, while others might want a standing 15-minute video call sync every other day to run ideas by you and ask questions. As a manager, it's your job to figure out what communication style works best for your employees and ensure they have the information to do their jobs successfully.



### Solutions:

**Regular Check-ins:** Never underestimate the power of a weekly 1-on-1 meeting. While these meetings are important for every employee, they can be particularly valuable for remote employees, as they give you time to discuss projects, sync on progress and roadblocks, and ensure you're both aligned on expectations and deadlines.

**The Right Tools:** As a manager, you need to ensure your employees have the right tools to keep everyone on the same page. In addition to email and video conferencing applications, you also want to invest in a messaging tool, like Slack, so employees can connect and collaborate outside of meetings. Similarly, investing in a project management tool can be a wise choice for remote teams, as it ensures every teammate knows which tasks they're responsible for and helps them stay up-to-date on the project's progress.

“ Make the implicit, explicit. Don't assume people will understand. Make your expectations crystal clear. ”

– Julie DeBuhr, Sr. Director, HR, InVision



## 02 Feeling Disconnected

Even with regular team meetings and 1-on-1s, remote employees often feel disconnected and isolated from their colleagues. Because of proximity, it's easy to form friendships with in-office colleagues, but remote coworkers who live three states away can often feel like they're an afterthought.

If employees feel underappreciated or cut off from their team, they'll be less engaged at work and more likely to jump ship. As a manager, you need to foster a culture and workplace environment where every employee feels valued and welcome. While you might not be able to control if they find a "work BFF" or not, you can control whether they feel supported and encouraged at work.



### Solutions:

**Goal Setting:** Being remote, often employees feel disconnected from the company's values or mission. A great way to help them understand how their day-to-day contributions are helping your company progress towards larger organizational goals is by introducing objectives and key results (OKRs). This goal-setting framework takes a top-down approach to ensure every employee's individual goals connect to a larger organizational goal. This helps employees understand how they're making a difference within the company and can help motivate them to do their best work.

**Recognition:** Just because remote employees don't work in the office doesn't make their accomplishments less important than others'. Because they might not get as much acknowledgment for their efforts, it's up to you as a manager to ensure they get the recognition they deserve. Whether it's a shoutout in a team meeting or putting them on a project with high visibility, make sure you regularly recognize their efforts and voice what an instrumental part of the team they are.

“ The biggest challenge in managing remote teams is not physical distance. It is the psychological distance people feel. ”

– Mark Murphy, Founder of Leadership IQ

# 03

## Feeling Lonely

Aside from feeling disconnected from the team, many remote employees report they feel lonely. In fact, social media software company Buffer's The 2020 State of Remote Work study revealed that 20% of remote employees listed loneliness as their biggest challenge with remote work, tied with communication. Luckily, scheduling a few times throughout the week to chat about things outside of work can help employees feel more connected to their colleagues.



### Solutions:

#### 1. Plan Remote-Friendly Team Activities:

Remote employees often miss out on in-office happy hours, dinners, and other team-building activities, but you should try to make them feel part of the celebration in some way. This could be sending them a gift card to their favorite restaurant when you have a team dinner or sending them a bottle of wine when you have a happy hour. A few times each quarter, try to go one step further and plan an all-virtual event, like a virtual happy hour, online escape room, Zoom trivia night, etc. so that everyone on your team can participate.

- Schedule Face Time:** You don't have to wait for your weekly 1-on-1 meeting to catch up with your employees. Take 5 minutes at the start of each call to catch up personally or ask everyone how they spent the weekend. Or, schedule a casual 15-minute coffee break on your direct reports calendar to catch up or plan a virtual team lunch every now and then to encourage your team to socialize during the workday.

- Provide a Remote Work Stipend:** Many companies offer a remote work stipend used to invest in home office equipment, like a printer or ergonomic chair, or to help pay for a coworking space. A coworking space can help give employees the daytime socialization they need.

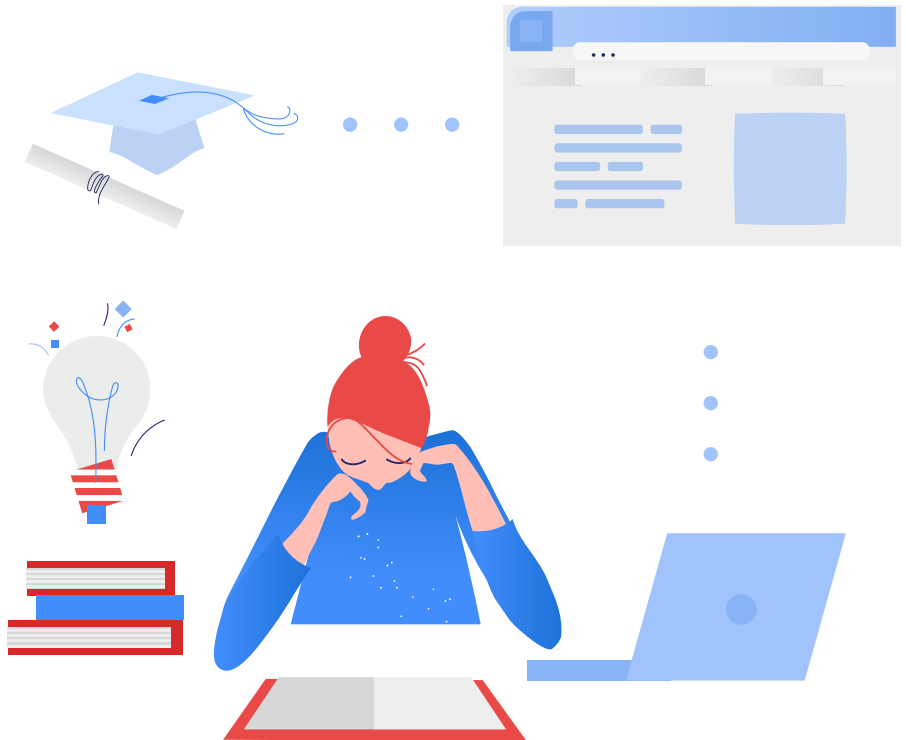


# 04

## Working Too Much

Lastly, many remote employees have trouble stepping away from their work at the end of the day, especially without a physical commute to separate their work from their home life.

As a manager, you need to keep an eye on your employees' work habits, like when they're sending emails and logging off. If kept unchecked, overworked employees can quickly burnout and their productivity and mental health can suffer.



### Solutions:

#### Remote Encourage Them to Take Time Off:

Keep an eye on your employee's time off. Studies show that employees who take more vacation time are more productive and satisfied with their jobs than those who don't, so push your employees to take a vacation or a long weekend if they haven't had a break from work in a while.

**Lead by Example:** Work habits often come from the top-down. As a manager, be sure to sign off at a reasonable time and don't send emails overnight. This sets the expectation that your employees are allowed to take the night for themselves and don't have to worry about checking and responding to their email late in the evening.



# How to Keep Remote Employees Engaged

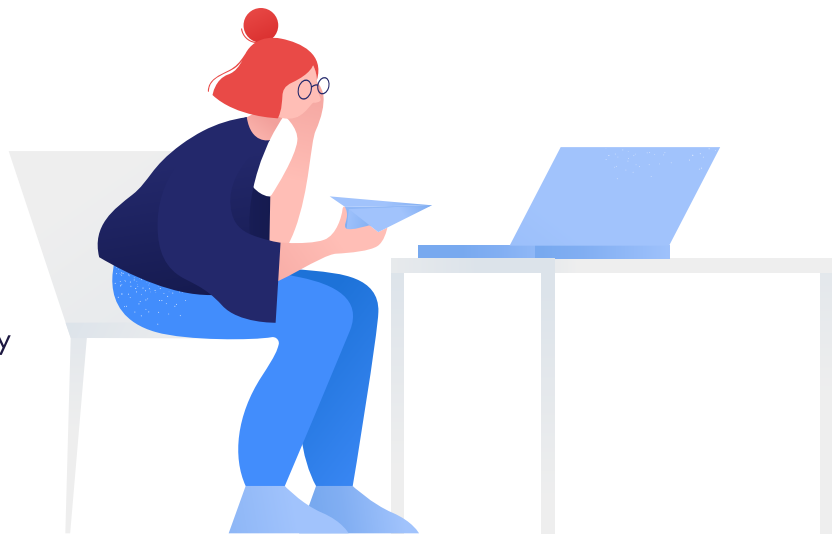
It can be often easier to get a feel for employee engagement in the office, when you can see and interact with your team every day. Unfortunately, remote teams and managers don't have that luxury everyday.

While employee engagement surveys can help you measure employee sentiment and collect feedback on how you can improve, it's up to you as a team manager to follow through on those suggestions and ensure every employee feels seen, recognized, and valued on your team.

**Here are a few areas of the employee experience that you can invest in to keep your team engaged and happy:**

## 01 Employee Recognition

Saying "good job" can go a long way. A survey by Bonusly, an employee recognition software company, revealed that 82% of employees said recognition at work makes them happy.



That said, the survey also discovered that while 89% of managers think recognition is given fairly at their companies, only 62% of employees agreed.

Every employee deserves to feel valued and appreciated at work, but oftentimes, remote employees feel out-of-sight and out-of-mind. Make sure you regularly recognize their achievements privately and publicly. This can be in the form of a cash bonus, shout out during a team meeting, department award, or even just a hand-written note of appreciation. Just taking the time to let your employees know you see how hard they work and appreciate their efforts can go a long way with your team.



## 02

### Company and Individual Goals

A 2018 study from global employee engagement company Reward Gateway revealed that only 25% of employees understand their employer's corporate mission and only 32% understand their company's values. That means 3 out of 4 employees don't understand what their company is trying to achieve, which can have significant negative consequences on employee motivation, job satisfaction, and engagement.

tied to the company's goal of "Increase quarterly up-sell revenue by \$2M," so the employee understands how their contribution can increase up-sell opportunities for the company and help better serve their customers.

Of course, goal-setting isn't the only way to increase transparency around company goals. You should also discuss them during company all-hands meetings and share updates on progress from all areas of the business. This can help people understand how the organization is fairing and feel more bought-in to the company's vision and overall success.



One way to ensure your employees understand and feel connected to your company's overall mission is to adopt OKRs or cascading goals. These goal-setting frameworks take a top-down approach to ensure every employee's personal goals are tied to a larger organizational goal.

For example, if a member of your engineering team's quarterly goal was "Roll out 2 new product releases in Q2," this goal could be

## 03

### Build Trust

Whether your employees are in-office or at-home, trust is a crucial part of any manager-employee relationship. There are three qualities that make you a trustworthy manager: credibility, reliability, and intimacy. The first two, credibility and reliability, focus on the words we speak and the actions we take. If you continuously give employees empty promises that you never follow through on, there's no way they will trust you. Intimacy, on the other hand, focuses on how safe people feel sharing with you. By leading with empathy, being inclusive of other perspectives, getting to know your employees on a personal level, and talking about failures just as much as successes, you can create an environment in which your employees feel comfortable coming forward and asking for help.



Building trust, especially remote, takes time. Consistency is key to proving to your employees you care about them and are willing to make their needs, comfort, and concerns a top priority. While trust may take a while to build with employees, it can pay off in the long run. Employees will be more forthcoming about issues, concerns, and needs, which can help you learn about and resolve things proactively as they arise, rather than reactively.



## 04 Ask for Feedback

Feedback is a two-way street. Just like how your employees want to know what they're doing well or could improve on, you should want to know the same. The best way to learn? Ask your team!

In 1-on-1 meetings or during performance reviews, ask your employees how you can be a better manager to them and to the greater team. If you're worried employees would feel uncomfortable opening up to you in person, you can share an anonymous team survey or view feedback from employee engagement surveys to look for suggestions.

Asking for feedback shows you're open-minded and committed to being a better manager and helping your employees. Just a reminder, in order to maintain this reputation, you need to also act on the feedback to prove you're listening and to build trust with your team. Otherwise, employees will think you're all talk and be less forthcoming with their feedback the next time you ask for it.



# 05

## Invest in Their Professional Growth

Lastly, to truly engage your remote employees, you need to invest in their professional growth. When employees feel they're learning new skills or have the opportunity to grow their careers, they can imagine a future at your organization and stay motivated to meet and exceed performance expectations. Professional growth doesn't have to come in the form of a promotion or raise. It could be as simple as assigning them to new projects, having them work cross-collaboratively with another team, sending them to an industry conference, encouraging them to take a class to learn a new skill, or trying something new.



If your company offers an annual or quarterly professional development stipend, be sure to encourage your employees to take and use this money. It's a great way for them to learn new skills or develop existing ones, at no cost to them. Plus, it can make your team feel you and the company are invested in their professional growth, which can inspire employee loyalty and reduce turnover.

## Investing in Professional Development from Afar

Professional development is an important part of employee engagement. According to LinkedIn's 2019 Workforce Learning Report, 94% of employees say they would stay at a company longer if it invested in their learning and development. But, professional growth can look different for every member of your team. To one employee it might mean learning a new skill or trying something new, while another employee might just define career growth as getting a promotion.



**Here are some other ways employees might define professional development:**

- Learning a new skill
- Improving existing skills
- Moving teams
- Securing a promotion
- Deepening their industry knowledge
- Working on high-visibility projects
- Taking on more responsibilities
- Stepping into a leadership role

As a manager, you need to ensure you and your employees define professional development on the same terms, so you can better understand their end goal and how to help them get there. **Once you've done that, here are a few ways to help your employees feel you're invested in their career development:**

## 01 Make Time to Talk

Talking about career development doesn't happen organically on a remote team and, as a manager, you shouldn't wait for your employees to bring it up. It's your responsibility to have professional development conversations with your direct reports.

To get started, bring up professional development during your weekly or bi-weekly 1-on-1 meetings. You should never just use these meetings to touch base on projects. Managers should make the most out of these casual check-ins to talk broadly about your direct report's career goals, give feedback, and check-in on their morale.

**Here are some sample questions that can help you lead an effective 1-on-1 meeting:**

- How are you really?
- What's going particularly well??
- What are you challenged by??
- What's something you're doing now you'd like to do more of?
- What's something you're doing now you'd like to stop doing?
- What's something you're not doing now that you would like to start doing?

These conversations rarely, if ever, happen over email. Make sure you regularly set aside the time to discuss your employees' professional development goals, check-in on

progress, and share feedback. These conversations shouldn't happen annually during performance reviews. Get in the habit of touching on professional growth opportunities frequently, so your employees know you're invested in their growth and will hold them accountable.

## 02 Know Your Resources

Oftentimes, employees don't know what career growth opportunities and professional development programs are available to them at your company. As a manager, it's your job to be familiar with your company's policies and programs so you can better help your employees achieve their goals.

According to LinkedIn's 2019 Workforce Learning Report, learners of all generations feel more motivated to learn in a social environment and want courses personalized to their needs. Gen Z led the pack in each area, with 67% saying they prefer social and collaborative learning and 80% saying they prefer personalized learning based on their career goals and skills gaps.

## 03 Invest in Online Learning

According to LinkedIn's 2019 Workforce Learning Report, learners of all generations feel more motivated to learn in a social environment and want courses personalized to their needs. Gen Z led the pack in each area, with 67% saying they prefer social and collaborative learning and 80% saying they prefer personalized learning based on their career goals and skills gaps. With a live online learning platform, like Hone, you can easily fulfill both of those requirements in one.

Hone blends the best of expert-led small group training with a powerful behavior change platform. Your employees can learn on their own time with interactive live classes that work around their busy schedules and courses that interest them and help them get closer to their professional goals.

**Hone has classes on the top skills today's employees and managers need, like:**

But for many employees it can be hard to know where to start. In fact, 54% admitted they would spend more time learning if they had specific course recommendations to help them reach their career goals. At Hone, learners can choose from curated learning tracks, like Manager Essentials and Create a Culture of Belonging, to kickstart their learning journey and take the straightest path to their leadership and career goals.

## 04 Define Career Ladders

Once your team reaches a certain size — let's say 5+ people per function — you'll need to set structure around growth opportunities.

**To build a detailed career ladder frameworks for each of its departments, you'll want to outline experience and skill requirements for each job level, like:**

- How many years of experience is needed?
- Which skills and competencies are required?
- The level of ownership over project progress and results
- Strategic involvement and planning required
- The scope of influence across teams

This let's everyone on your team — individual contributors and managers — understand how their careers can progress through the organization. It also helps your employees identify any skill or experience gaps they might have and help motivate them to broaden their skills set in order to qualify for a promotion or job change.

Once you've created your career ladder or lattice (usually, with the help of HR), share the plan with your remote team. This can help guide your professional development conversations with your direct reports and help your employees to stay motivated and steadily build the skills they need to secure a career transition.

## Conducting Remote Performance Reviews

The content you discuss in a performance review shouldn't be anything new. Reviews should be a recap of all the ongoing feedback you've given your employees in 1-on-1 meetings, as well as an opportunity to highlight their accomplishments and have a more meaningful conversation about their career aspirations and professional development.

**To encourage growth, your reviews should focus on:**

- An employee's performance
- An employee's professional achievements
- Career development opportunities
- Feedback from you (their manager)
- Feedback from the employee's teammates
- Feedback from the employee via a self-assessment



## 02 Give Feedback

The meat of any performance review is feedback. Your employees want to know what their strengths are and how they can improve their hard and soft skills. But, while 55% of managers think they give enough feedback, 68% of employees say they want more of it. As a manager, it's your job to provide them with the constructive feedback they need to become better employees and help the business succeed.



Look at your performance reviews as a way to encourage ongoing growth. Reviews are not just a chance to look back and reflect — they're also a chance to steer the future. Covering the right topics can show your team you're invested in their professional growth and are willing to go the extra mile to help them succeed.

**So, how should you conduct performance reviews remotely? Here are a few tips to help you:**

## 01 Schedule Face Time

Performance review conversations are too personal to have over e-chat or email. Talking on a video call is ideal and can help make the conversation feel as 'in person' as possible. Plus, a video call lets you read your employee's body language and connect with them on a more personal level. You can see how they react to what you discuss and better understand which areas of the review strike a chord with them.

Unfortunately, not all feedback is positive feedback. Having difficult conversations is just another part of being a manager. However, it's important to remember that the feedback you share in a performance review should never come out of left field. It should have all been previously addressed in ongoing 1-on-1 meetings as part of your ongoing feedback model.

Still, giving negative feedback is somewhat of an art. To start, you need to be objective and focus only on facts, never hearsay. Always give your employee time to respond and be sure to listen to what they have to say. Be honest, sincere, clear, and empathetic throughout your delivery. Lastly, stay future-oriented.

Try not to get bogged down in specific examples of the past, keep the conversation moving towards how you and your employee can keep this behavior from happening again in the future. Approach it as a team to show you're invested in helping them improve and come up with an action plan and follow up process to hold yourselves accountable.



## 03 Stay Positive

Try to maintain a balance between positive and constructive feedback throughout the review. If you're too negative, your employee might get disheartened and feel unmotivated. On the other hand, if you have nothing but praise for your employee, they might get frustrated that you didn't share any areas they could improve on or feel they aren't challenged enough in their current role.

## 04 Set Goals

Take time at the end of your review to look at your employee's goals for the upcoming review period. This can also help ensure you're aligned on their priorities for the period and how you both define success. Just remember to adopt SMART goals, or goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound. This will help you and your employee easily measure progress and evaluate success, which can be particularly important considering remote teams often struggle with communication. The right goals can leave little room for confusion and ensure everyone's on the same page ahead of a new quarter.

## 05 Thank Your Employees

Performance reviews are the perfect time to recognize your employees and bring up their past successes. Take a moment at the end of your review to tell them how much you appreciate their contributions over the last quarter, month, or whatever your review period is and how glad you are to have them on your team. That bit of positivity can send them back into their day feeling happy, motivated, and appreciated.



# Conclusion

Today's managers need a whole new set of skills to lead their teams successfully. Communication, trust, flexibility, and empathy became paramount as many teams transitioned to remote work almost overnight and tried to adapt to a new normal.

Aside from acclimating to remote work, managers had to help employees cope with layoffs, the loss of family members, stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic, financial insecurity, racial injustice, feelings of isolation, and a whole host of other issues. That was no small feat, especially when managers were dealing with their own set of personal issues on top of learning to lead a team from afar.

**As we continue to work from home for the foreseeable future, managers have to work to create a sense of normalcy on their team.**

That includes investing in employees' professional growth, conducting performance reviews, focusing on keeping employees engaged, and preventing burnout.

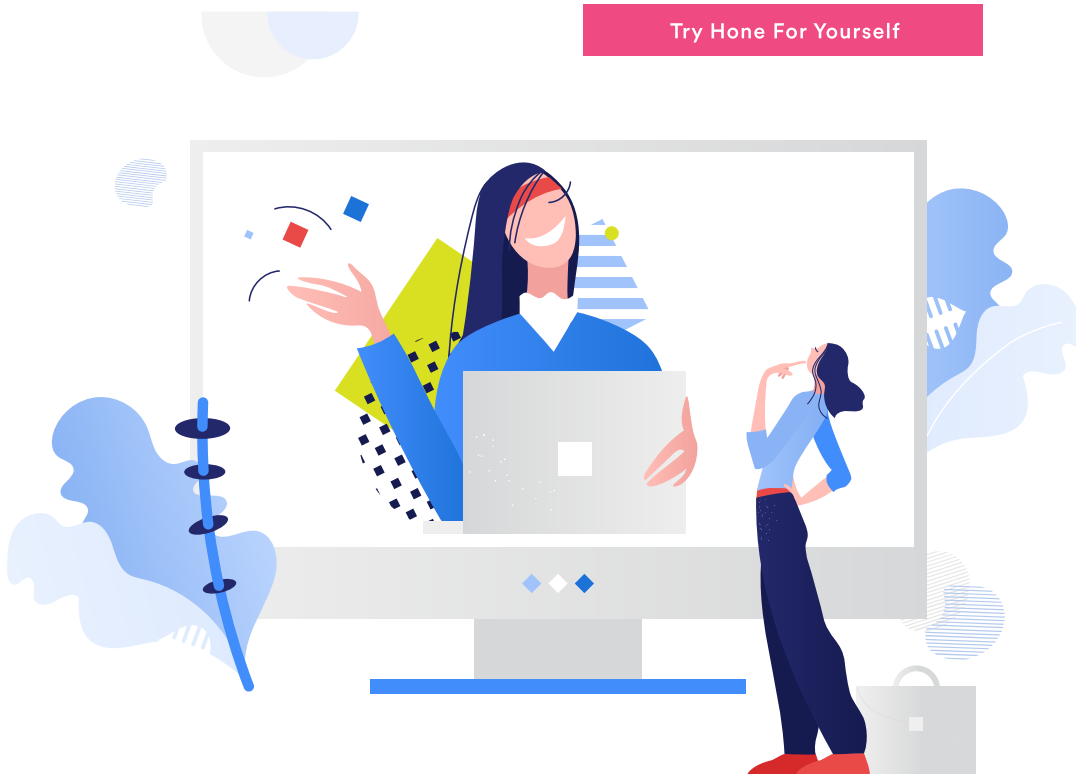
While we hope this guide has taught you how to be a stronger remote leader, it's important to remember that learning is a journey. The skills modern managers like yourself need to lead their teams are always changing, just like your team's needs. As such, you must always be learning, experimenting, and adapting your leadership skills and style to fit what your team needs. That's how you can be a great remote people manager and lead your team to success.

## **Want to brush up on your remote management skills even more?**

Sign up for a 14-day free trial of Hone and take advantage of our live online classes on subjects like how to:

- Manage Remote Teams
- Build High Trust Relationships
- Lead Through Turbulent Times
- Build a Thriving Team Culture
- And More!

[Try Hone For Yourself](#)



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# The New Way to Learn Modern Leadership

Hone provides live, expert-led classes to become a better leader, manager, and teammate for today's workplace.

Learn leadership skills through practice, get real-time feedback, and build new habits with classes that work for you. At Hone, you'll learn alongside a network of like-minded professionals through live learning experiences with your peers. Over 90% of Hone learners report lasting improvements to their leadership skills.

With expert instructors to guide your learning, provide real-time feedback, and support you along the way, we're confident you'll see results, too.

### Interested in leveling up your leadership skills?

Hone Membership gives teams and individuals unlimited access to all of our interactive classes.

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