

Has Your Remote Team Defined Ground Rules Yet? Here's How



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Remember when you were in college and so excited to share your first apartment with your BFF...then a couple weeks later, you realized that it wasn't so great. She was a night owl, but you were an early bird. She left food all over the place, and you realized that you're a bit of a neat freak. Then you bumped into a stranger in the hallway one morning and decided – *Enough!*

We've got to develop some house rules. Similarly, a team is like a family and each team member has their own personality and preference. The most effective teams take the time to proactively discuss their mutual expectations around issues like how often the team meets, timing for calls, how people treat each other, discouraged behaviors, communication preferences, etc. For remote teams getting this clarity early on can mean the difference between harmony and chaos so let's explore how you can develop ground rules with your remote team.

How Do You Develop Ground Rules?

Here are a few steps that anyone on the team can take to facilitate the ground rule generation process:

1. **Explain the importance of ground rules** – First introduce the concept of ground rules and help the team understand why they're important. It might sound like this – *While we're all working remotely, it will be critically important that we really clarify how we're going to work together to be most effective. We've all worked on dysfunctional teams and know the behaviors that encourage that dysfunction so let's develop some ground rules to encourage the type of team environment that we want to foster.*

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2. **Ask each team member to propose 1-2 ground rules** – Ground rules are most effective when they come from the team, not from the leader. This is why the ground rule generation process can be initiated by anyone on the team, not just the leader. Ask each person to write down 1-2 potential ground rules, then ask each person to share one proposed ground rule with the full team until they've all been shared.

3. Discuss and reach consensus on each proposed ground rule –

Ground rules should only be adopted if everyone on the team is in agreement. Ground rules are truly effective when this isn't just an exercise, but it's an open, honest discussion that creates a sacred trust among team members. For that to happen it's critically important to garner true buy in on each ground rule. For example if someone proposes the ground rule *Respond to all emails within the same day*, but there are some who may not be able to achieve that due to the nature of their work, the team should have a candid discussion about that issue and instead develop a ground rule everyone can buy into.

4. Document the ground rules and post them virtually during meetings –

Once the team has developed ground rules, display them during virtual meetings for easy reference. Remember, ground rules are a great tool that anyone on the team can use to address negative behaviors, reengage team members as needed and gently remind the team of their mutual expectations.

What are some sample ground rules?

While ground rules tend to clarify expected behaviors, processes and timeframes, remember that they shouldn't necessarily feel restrictive or punitive. Ideally, ground rules should reflect the unique personality and work style of each team. Here are some sample ones to consider for your team.

- Start and end meetings on time
- Attack the issue, not the person
- Conduct weekly staff calls at noon ET (then rotate the time every quarter to be fair to all time zones)

- No meetings on Fridays after 12:00
- Alert your in-charge 48 hours before leaving their contact information in your out of office message
- Avoid email volleyball – pick up the phone once an email has bounced back and forth three times without resolution
- Limit virtual meetings to 45 minutes
- Anytime you voice a complaint, you must propose at least two solutions

Author of *Female Firebrands: Stories and Techniques to Ignite Change, Take Control, and Succeed in the Workplace*, Mikaela Kiner insists that taking time to develop team norms becomes even more important in this era of forced social distancing. “Most teams are not used to working remotely - this is a whole new norm,” says Kiner. “Everything has shifted including commute schedules, childcare, and the loss of informal communication; therefore, it’s important for teams to talk about how they plan to work together.”

- Are there core hours when everyone should be available?
- What’s the best way to reach each other - phone, text, email?
- How should team members communicate urgent questions that need immediate response?
- What new tools should you download and familiarize yourself with?
- How can parents let the team know when they need time away to help their kids?

Remember also that the ground rules aren’t set in stone. Again, this isn’t an

activity to just check the box. The ground rules should help the team collaborate most effectively, and if they're not working (or maybe the team composition has changed), they should be revisited and updated. Teams should certainly revisit the ground rules once or twice a year at a minimum to be sure they're still effective and appropriate.

Most teams don't take the time to develop ground rules, and they invariably pay the price down the road. Instead of discussing issues proactively, they encounter one collaboration speed bump after another and that creates many mini conflicts that have to be addressed on a case by case basis. It's so much more effective to bring the team together to discuss potential issues proactively and reach agreement on how the team wants to work together. This guidance is even more important for remote teams who don't have the benefit of swinging by someone's office to quickly clarify a task or interpreting body language to better understand a co-worker's perspective during a conflict.

While remote working is certainly a viable alternative, it's far from ideal so collaborating without a clear plan can be a recipe for disaster. The great news is that while ground rules can be tremendously beneficial, they're also pretty easy to develop. Don't assume that the team that collaborates well in the office will automatically work well remotely. Instead, take time to develop ground rules with your remote team today.

Working And Managing A Remote Workforce