

The challenge of managing at a distance

When managing at a distance using digital communication tools, we are unaware of non-verbal nuances, and this can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Managers must be able to understand the needs of their staff and address any issues despite the physical distance. However, distance can also bring advantages. Employees can organise themselves, and small-scale management is no longer required. The result is greater freedom for both managers and staff.

The freedom that managing at a distance brings can turn into a challenge when it comes to having difficult conversations and identifying mental health issues. Digital leadership has still not received the attention it deserves in many companies. This is a missed opportunity¹.

Opportunities

Many companies have paid too little attention to the issue of digital leadership in the past¹. As the world of work changes, forward-looking companies can grasp this opportunity and train their managers accordingly. In digital leadership, a leader can engage more fully with staff and make time for conversations. This is something which is often neglected in normal office life². Regular phone calls can help build a relationship of trust, motivation and cooperation. The purpose of these conversations is not primarily to issue instructions. Instead, the idea is to listen to the concerns, needs and worries of staff. This enables managers to recognise potential changes at an early stage. By defining some rules (e.g. that the camera must be turned on) a manager can see the other person's facial expressions, gestures and general state of mind despite the distance.

Facts

- Many companies have neglected the issue of distance management in recent years.
- Potential problems can be identified, even at a distance.
- Digital leadership can be an opportunity for many managers to engage more fully with their staff.
- Potential conflicts between staff members can smoulder and be identified too late.
- Digital communication skills are key.

Risks

It is not only the distance between manager and staff that can lead to problems; it is also the distance between staff members. Conflicts can fester and remain unresolved because they are not recognised by the manager³. If managers lack digital communication skills, there is a danger that they will pay too little attention to staff who are working from home (“Out of sight, out of mind”). The fact that non-verbal cues are missing from digital communication can quickly result in misunderstandings and misinterpretations⁴. It is important for leaders to set a good example by questioning and reflecting on their own communication style. Sensitive emails should be checked for potential trigger words and ambiguous terms.

Sources

¹ van Dick, R. 2016

² Rittershaus, A. 2020

³ Wiessman, F. o. D.

⁴ DEAR EMPLOYEE 2020

Relevant OHM offers

- Presence and absence management at a distance
- Healthy change management
- Resilience
- Stress