

# What to know about managing remote employee conduct



Monitoring remote employee conduct is just as important as keeping an eye out for improper behavior in a physical office. Regardless of the setting, poor employee conduct creates a toxic atmosphere that hurts productivity and morale. Managers must take swift action that clearly demonstrates the company will not tolerate people being uncivil to one another.

When dealing with remote staff, however, leaders often face the problem of missing early signs of trouble. Their first clue about tensions may come at an advanced stage, such as when colleagues fail to make a deadline because of problems working together, when harassment pushes an employee to file a complaint with HR, or when someone quits because he has had enough of hurtful comments and unkind behavior from co-workers.

“When you’re in an office setting you can often see there’s a problem from body language or the way people interact in meetings or you can hear the shouting over the cube wall,” says Wayne Turmel, co-founder of the [Remote Leadership Institute](#). “In a remote environment, you have to look for it. Too often the signs of conflict are there -- people asking you to run interference with another employee or complaining about each other -- but we don’t pay attention. We have better things to do, or we don’t listen/read with enough concentration to pick up the subtleties. You can’t just shrug off signs of tension or bad communication and hope it will go away; it never does.”

To stop undesirable behavior in its tracks and promote better remote employee conduct, consider these measures:

## **Outline expectations**

Many a parent has given a teenager a speech about not saying anything online that you wouldn't say in person. Adults sometimes need this reminder, too, since better judgment often fails behind the "safety" of a computer screen. It's easier to be mean from a distance than when face to face, especially if thinking authority won't see or punish. The impact of the words, however, still stings.

Make sure your [employee handbook](#) clearly explains that the company will not tolerate harassment or unprofessional behavior in any setting, including in emails, texts, or chat platforms. Highlight this information to new hires as part of the onboarding process, and periodically remind staff of this stance during meetings or in newsletters. Also, clarify to everyone that electronic messages on company devices and communication channels are property of the organization and subject to back up, download, and review.

## **Provide guidance**

Do not assume that people should know inherently how to communicate well with one another when working remotely. Especially if employees are new to telecommuting – such as forced into it due to the COVID-19 pandemic – offer advice on handling interactions.

For example, workers need to understand that while email is a convenient way to communicate, it has limitations. Writers must realize that words and jokes may not get interpreted as intended and that emphasis (such as all caps or bold type) can come off as harsh or bossy.

Staff members suddenly encouraged to use Slack may be fooled by its informal nature if not educated. Casual conversation on Slack provides opportunities for co-workers to bond as they would around a water cooler or when passing one another in the hallway, but the outlet cannot become a breeding ground for cyberbullying or making others feel excluded. Similarly, more than one company has experienced an insubordinate rant on an all-staff channel from an irate employee who thinks it is acceptable to air grievances in this manner. An etiquette guide or tutorial can explain proper use of what is still a business tool, including keeping private channels and direct messages from overstepping bounds.

## **Focus on resolutions**

Remote employee conduct will not improve if problems are left to fester. Encourage team members to talk out feelings through video chat or phone conversation. Compared to written communication, these mediums allow greater give and take as well as better ability to judge how information is being received and interpreted.

Since remote workers cannot simply walk into the HR department or a manager's office to bring up concerns about employee misconduct, be certain they know how to get assistance if an issue fails to get resolved or proves too serious to handle alone. Leave no doubt about who they should contact and by what means (phone, email, etc.). Timely reporting enables leadership to address situations promptly, which creates a better work atmosphere and helps matters from escalating into someone quitting the company or taking legal action.

Periodic surveys also aid companies in monitoring remote employee conduct. Anonymous input can alert management to things such as behind-the-scenes tension or improper conversations on chat channels. Plus, such inquiries help in evaluating overall morale, which if low bears further investigation into the reasons why.

## Be vigilant

While managers hope remote employees heed guidance and display the maturity to monitor their own conduct, the role of supervisor still demands staying alert. Read email threads carefully. Pop in on chat channels to see what's going on. Examine employee conduct during meetings, and do not allow comments to become personal. Look for any signs of trouble, from a staff member who seems hesitant to work with a particular colleague to supposedly "harmless" teasing that doesn't feel quite right. Better to [investigate and find out all is fine](#) than to later regret not stepping in.

Some companies choose to use technology to monitor remote employee conduct. However, turning to such measures demands serious thought as employees may see it as a lack of trust and take offense. As Turmel notes, "There are tools that regularly scan Slack, Microsoft Teams, Email and Instant Messages for key words that might reflect tension or disagreement. (Peoplebox is one off the top of my head.) While they work pretty well, they can be seen as intrusive and 'big brother-ish.'"

Finally, be certain to do your part in promoting positive remote employee conduct. Prioritize clear communication by breaking projects down, assigning and explaining tasks, and creating awareness of deadlines. Such actions help keep people from overstepping bounds or making their own assumptions, which can lead to bickering over who is responsible for what or charging a co-worker with being bossy. Be a role model through your own mature conduct. And restate regularly that no matter the distance, you are always interested in hearing about anything going on that could be keeping team members from feeling safe, respected, and valued.