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Management

How to Become the Leader You've Always Wanted to Be in 2021

Incorporate these six tips into your management strategy to keep your team motivated, inspired, and focused

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January 22, 2021


Without question, it has been a challenging year. As far as the workforce goes, employees everywhere have had to adapt to a new normal, and the design world is no exception. “From managing supply chain challenges, to designing with a [socially distanced workforce](#), to incorporating new innovations like smart technology and antimicrobial materials, the focus and approach for projects shifted dramatically,” says leadership coach Jen Dalton, CEO and founder of consultancy [Brand Mirror](#). “Throw on top of that the move to a virtual or hybrid work model, and leaders and team members are understandably feeling overwhelmed.”

If you're in charge of a firm affected by all this radical change, here are a few helpful tips for adapting your leadership methods in 2021 to ensure you and your team thrive this year.

Let go of micromanaging.

Micromanaging is a significant morale killer, contributing greatly to employees' discontentment and decreasing their productivity. These days, as leaders might not see their staff in person regularly, it's easy for them to unintentionally fall into a pattern of micromanagement.

The key is to trust your team to handle their tasks. “As a leader of a firm, one of your most



important roles is to hire and fire; you have chosen the people that make up your firm,” says Antonio Argibay, founder and managing principal of [Meridian Design Associates](#). “Choose people because of their qualities, abilities, and intelligence, and then get out of the way and let them do the job you need them to do.”

Employees are far more likely to thrive when they’re given tasks and entrusted to see them through to completion. “Very few managers really embrace the degree to which they are responsible for their reports becoming extraordinary value creators,” says Amie Devero, president of management consultancy [Beyond Better](#). “This is largely just a blind spot, not overlooked because of envy or fear. But really, every senior employee is charged with fostering the greatness of those they manage.”

One way to avoid micromanaging is to hone your communication skills. “When delegating, it’s critical to explain the outcome and the strategic value of that outcome,” says Devero. “That means not telling someone what to do, but instead, telling them what to accomplish. What actions or steps they take and what order they take them in should be left to the employee.”

As your employees work through their tasks, be on hand to provide constructive feedback to ensure they are on track, but don’t overstep.

Check in with your employees regularly to find out what is and isn’t working for them—and address those things in a supportive way.

Again, communication with your employees—especially as they remain remote—is crucial to maintaining everyone’s well-being. “Now is a great time to meet one-on-one with your employees and talk to them about their favorite work from last year and what projects they are excited about working on this year,” says Dalton. “Create a development plan with each person and listen to what gets them excited and what matters to them. For example, if one or more employees wants to learn a new skill, consider bringing in a speaker on that topic.”

And if something doesn’t seem to be working with an employee, bring it up sooner rather than later. “It’s never easy to address performance concerns, especially when you know your employees are struggling to hold it all together, but no one is served by avoiding the tough conversation and letting situations fester,” says executive coach [Kelly Harris Perin](#). “It is possible to address performance concerns at this moment in a way that feels supportive and also makes sure the work gets done. I recommend starting simple: ‘How are you? How is your work feeling right now? How can I support you?’”

Create a structured space for creative ideation.

“When meetings move online, they can become project updates and a monologue, versus a dialogue,” says Dalton. In an industry like design, this can spell disaster and lead to a creative block. “Consider dedicating meeting time for innovation and creativity and rotate who leads each meeting,” adds Dalton. “It is important to create opportunities like office hours or ideation sessions where employees can drop in and ask questions, get input, and solve problems.”

Set work-life boundaries.

Work-life balance can get murky when you work from home, so you and your employees need to set boundaries. “Without guardrails as to when you work—and when you don’t—work and personal life bleed together, and you find yourself returning work emails during date night with your spouse,” says Devero. “That’s where [burnout](#) emerges.”

She suggests designating a specific space in your home to work, as well as carving out time for a lunch break and setting an end-of-day routine for logging out and transitioning into your off-hours.

As a manager, you should lead by example—sending a “goodnight” Slack message to your team at a regular time each day is one tactic to show that it’s not only okay, but essential to sign off at some point. And don’t forget to remind your employees about these techniques for setting work-life boundaries.

Allow for scheduling flexibility.

Working a nine-to-five job is not a reality for every employee who works from home, particularly if there are kids in the house who need care. “For many bosses, the idea of flexible work schedules is really uncomfortable, but it’s what so many workers have needed during this pandemic, especially those of us who are balancing work and caregiving,” says Perin. “When given trust and flexibility, employees have risen to the challenge in these tough times. I’ve seen people choosing to work early in the morning and late into the evening to make up for the midday hours they need to spend with their kids. One of my colleagues even works in her car while her kids are doing their in-person hybrid school days!”

A flexible work schedule might also promote productivity, as employees can work when they’re naturally most efficient. Some employees might thrive at 7 a.m., while others hit their work stride at 5 p.m. While employees should be available for occasional meetings during standard working hours, if you offer schedule flexibility, you might maximize your team’s output while avoiding burnout.

Determine your company’s raison d’être, and communicate it to your team.

It’s easy to fall into a bit of an emotional slump with so much chaos around us. Finding purpose in work—and not just considering it a necessity—can provide a vital [morale boost](#) to employees during difficult times. As a leader, you need to clearly articulate the bigger picture of your business to your staff.

“Build the ‘collective why,’ or the reason that you are here beyond just making money,” says entrepreneurship expert Erdin Beshimov, a lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the founder of [MIT Bootcamps](#). “It is this ‘why’ that keeps us on our path, giving us strength to overcome challenges. We all have our own unique ‘why.’ It is the job of leaders to understand the unique ‘whys’ in all of us and build the ‘collective why’ on their foundations. And when that happens, teams can achieve anything.”



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