



zoom

Making Deep Connections with Remote Teams

A guide to courageous leadership in times of global
change

PRESENTED BY ZOOM'S PEOPLE EXPERIENCE TEAM

It's *not* business as usual.

The magnitude of the impact COVID-19 has had on all our lives, personally and professionally, is far-reaching and, in many cases, yet to be determined.

In times of massive workplace and personal disruption, the usual check-in or touch-base meetings with your team are not enough. Many employees are feeling anxious or scared, and some may also be experiencing isolation and any number of other challenges.

Your role as a leader is to provide employees with the vital connection they need and to listen to how fundamental changes to your workplace and the world are affecting them.

You must engage in meaningful, and often difficult, conversations to help employees understand this new environment and succeed. These discussions can range from how the pandemic has impacted each employee's work to its effects on their personal lives and beyond.

Zoom's People Experience Team has created this guide to help you lead your team through the uncertainty and connect with employees in a way that will help them through this crisis.

At Zoom, employees have shared the wide range of experiences they are having with remote work. Prior to COVID-19, about 25% of our workforce worked remotely. Navigating these uncharted waters together has connected our team in new ways.

The Power is in the Conversation

The real impact of meeting with your team is in the substantive conversations that come from making a real connection. Your ability to be an active listener without judgment will comfort employees and have a lasting impact. This is an opportunity for you, as a leader, to build relationships and trust by creating a space for team members to be vulnerable, and for you to share your own vulnerability.

We have developed conversation starters for five focus areas that will help you foster meaningful dialogue with your team:

1. Be a Human First
2. Change Is Not Easy
3. Goals, Roles, and Silver Linings
4. A New Normal
5. What Doesn't Change

Depending on the size of your team, it typically takes an hour to cover all five areas – but there is no right amount of time to spend in these discussions. Our conversation starters enable employees to share different perspectives in a safe and open space.

Ask your team if there is a topic they would like to prioritize, or there may be topics not covered in this guide that your team will want to explore instead. Let employees know their time is valuable and that they shape the agenda.



Preparing for discussions

1. Read all conversation starters in this guide and customize the questions to your team. It helps to think about this from multiple perspectives:
 - The perspective of your individual employees
 - The perspective of your team
 - Your perspective as a leader

2. Invite employees to each discussion and include a short note to set expectations that this won't be a typical team meeting and it will be for everyone to share openly. You can include the questions you plan to discuss or leave the agenda open.

Hi all,

Each of us is in a unique situation during this crisis and as we transition to working from home. We are all experiencing very real stress, so let's get together as a team to check in, share challenges and ideas, and provide community. Here are some of the topics I'd like to discuss: (list questions)

3. Consider your responses to each of the conversation starters and plan to share them with your team. Employees will follow your lead.



During the discussion

1. Start each conversation by encouraging openness and honesty, and allow employees to share their thoughts and feelings without judgment.
2. Treat conversation starters as a springboard for developing meaningful conversations. The discussion may move to a different topic that is just as productive.
3. Ask employees how often they would like to meet to continue these conversations. This is not a "one and done" activity. Check in regularly.
4. If there's any confusion or follow-up needed (for the team or individuals), determine how that next touchpoint or conversation will happen.

“What happens next?”

Employees and companies alike are facing a future that is impossible to predict, and you may get questions that you cannot answer. In these deeper discussions, you should not feel compelled to answer the question of “What happens next?”

This is instead an opportunity to listen and learn from employees. Give your teams the chance to talk freely about their experiences of working from home and their new day-to-day realities.

If an employee asks a “what’s next” question, acknowledge you don’t have an answer to the question now but will share any information you get moving forward. Explain that, in today’s conversation, you want to focus on employees’ experiences.



After the discussion

1. Thank employees sincerely for participating.
2. Follow up on any issues raised during the discussion if possible.
3. Set a time for your next discussion at the cadence employees requested.

Be a Human First



Key takeaway

The power is in the dialogue with individuals. Frequent meetings with your remote teams are important. The goal of these interactions is to take time to truly and more deeply understand what your team is experiencing, both in their work and personal lives.

You and your employees are all human beings with lives outside of work. Now is the time to check in with team members and learn how they are coping during this difficult time.

Start the conversation by sharing your own reflections with your team about how this crisis has affected you. Allow employees to see a more personal side of you, and then ask them to share their own reflections. Be prepared for team members to talk about personal situations, including financial hardship, loved ones' health or changes in work status, or frustrations trying to homeschool children while working.

To create a safe space for sharing and openness, maintain a non-judgmental tone and be an active listener throughout these conversations. Allow each question to be an open forum. You can ask each person to take a turn speaking, if time and the size of your team allow. It is also important to thank everyone for sharing their thoughts and experiences.

Conversation Starters

- What are your concerns and challenges right now? What are the bright spots?
- I know that in these trying times, thoughts and emotions can shift from day to day or hour by hour. Are there any examples from your life you would like to share?
- What are some of the things you are doing to manage or cope with difficult days?
- Transforming our work, collaboration, and routines affect us all. What opportunities can we find in the transformation?
- Let's plan to check in with each other about these changes. How and how often should we do this?

Change Is Not Easy



Key takeaway

Some people may feel productive and free working from home, while others might find it hard to concentrate. Some may struggle with the drastic change overall. Acknowledge the disruption of change and make room for the varied feelings employees may express, without judgment. Explore how a different work style has created opportunities for your teams.

The abrupt changes to work and other life circumstances can be overwhelming. Working from home on its own, let alone during a global crisis, may require significant adjustment for some. The difference between leadership and management is providing extra support beyond work tasks for employees who need it. Communicate that this is not the time for perfection and that “good enough” is acceptable during this time of transition. Be sure to reiterate that the team, including you, is there to support each other, no matter where each team member is.

Even under the best of circumstances, asking people to talk openly about their thoughts and feelings can be difficult and will yield different results from person to person. Some will share openly, while others will be more reserved.

There is no single correct way to manage emotions, but as a leader, having the courage to inquire about how your people are feeling or what they are thinking is powerful. It is work to actually just listen and be with your employees wherever they are emotionally, without the need to direct.

Conversation Starters

- What has remote work has been like for you? What has been difficult and where have you found success?
- What are some ideas you have about how we can support our team members should they be struggling?
- What insight have you discovered during this work-from-home period? What have you observed or learned about the team you didn't know before?
- What helps you get in the right routines or set the right environment?
- How do we do more of what's working well?
- What discoveries have you noticed about my leadership? Is there any feedback you would like to give?
- I want to share some of the things I have learned about myself over these past few weeks: (list). Some of the things I have learned about our team are: (list).

You don't have to fix everything

For leaders who like to fix things and provide solutions, now is the time to develop the skill of staying put and showing your support by being present. While leading conversations, you will learn that your employees are feeling many things with differing levels of intensity. Some are thriving while others are struggling. Some love the convenience of working at home while others want the separation of home and work. These feelings may change by the day, the hour, and even the minute. Your role is to validate where employees are emotionally at the moment. During these conversations, your team will likely make connections with one another around similar feelings and may share strategies and new approaches.

Goals, Roles, and Silver Linings



Key takeaway

Don't make employees wonder how the current state of the world has affected personal, team, and company goals and roles. Proactively address how priorities may have shifted and may need to change. You don't have to have the answers to all questions, but listening to employees' concerns will help provide comfort and reduce speculation.

It is likely that your company's most recently established goals have changed. While this may not be the time to recalibrate work toward perfection, your team will need to know how their work will be measured and what has changed as a result of the pandemic.

Focus on surfacing uncertainty and confusion, providing clarity where possible, and listening to employee concerns. As a leader, you may not have an answer for every question, but these conversations will help you see where you can provide guidance.

**Think about how you can reframe adversity into opportunity;
help employees see the innovation that can come from change.**

Working under these unusual conditions leads to building resilience and creativity.

Let employees know they may have to refocus due to the current situation, but their professional development remains paramount even if specific projects may pause.

Help think about alternative ways employees can develop personal goals outside of an impacted project.

Conversation Starters

- What might be some of the more obvious shifts in our business goals? Or in specific job responsibilities? How does that impact each of you individually? How does that impact the team?
- How has the current state of work impacted our processes? What adjustments do you feel need we need to make?
- What practices have you used to continue to keep the business top of mind?
- What roles and goals can we agree upon now without absolute clarity, and what issues do we need to live with for now and return to when we have more information?
- What other unorthodox opportunities do you each have to grow in your current role?

A New Normal



Key takeaway

Daily routines will continue to evolve in this new environment. You can provide space for employees to embrace that change. Working with your team to build a new structure can help some employees better focus and perform, as well as set expectations for all employees. Be sure to also take all opportunities to celebrate your teams' wins and foster connection.

Most people's daily routines are no more. Talking with your team about these changes can be helpful, especially for team members who crave organization. Check in with your team regularly during this time and create new structures, like "stand up" meetings and scheduled check-ins, to give your team new predictability.

Creating these new patterns and rituals together can bring a sense of structure, unity, and collaboration.

Some teams have described feeling more connected during this shift to working at home.

Explore together what beneficial practices you can translate to this new way of working; it could lead to adopting new tools, innovating more effective processes, and creating a new way of operating. It is especially important to recognize and celebrate the wins your team has experienced during this challenging time. Take a moment to celebrate things like completing a difficult project or to share creative activities that bring fun, joy, and connection to your team.

Conversation Starters

- What new positive routines have you created for yourself during this time — either with work or personally?
- What practices have we institutionalized in our few weeks together that helps us be more collaborative?
- Is there anything we did before that we can adapt or translate to our current way of working?
- What are our areas for improvement as they relate to expectations of each other or routines we can adapt or create?
- Let's talk more about the fun we have had in spite of adversity. Let's celebrate together. (share a recent win; share a hobby, pet, etc.)
- How can we engage in more fun together throughout each day?

What Doesn't Change



Key takeaway

Remind your team that your corporate values remain the same and help them reflect on how those values translate to the home office. Emphasize the connection between self-care and work productivity. During a time of chaos, self-care can easily be minimized or forgotten. The more you encourage and value people's personal well-being in this new space, the more productive teams will be.

According to LinkedIn's 2018 Workplace Culture report, nearly 9 out of 10 millennials say they would consider taking a pay cut to work for a company whose mission and values aligned with their own. The report also found that 70% of all working professionals would turn down an offer from an esteemed company if they had a poor workplace culture.

You have talked about both the “what” and the “how” of your team's work, so this is a chance to reiterate your company's “why.” Your company values inspire employees to collaborate and do their best work – and to feel like a connected team, despite a new physical divide.

And what encourages employees to strive toward company goals, mission, and vision every day? It's self-care.

Your own well-being must be your priority before you can drive the business forward.

Self-care can easily be lost in the disruption of work. Consider how you will continue to share stories and recognize others for living the company values. Model the self-care and openness you expect from you team. Share your own experiences and feelings, and encourage employees to do the same.

Conversation Starters

- What are you doing to focus on your own well-being?
- How can we support each other in valuing self-care?
- How are you living the company values now? How have others modeled the values?
- What more can we do each day to embrace our company values?

We Get Through This Together

Having the courage to engage in meaningful and authentic dialogue as change occurs is a business imperative.

We are all bound to have a range of complicated feelings and thoughts as we navigate the uncertainty caused by this pandemic. Some may even have a sense of helplessness or a lack of control over the impact COVID-19 will have on their lives.

What remains a constant, however, is your role as a leader. Whether employees are working side by side in an office or remotely, you provide the guidance and connection your team needs to work together through this crisis and remain resilient.

There is no better tool than Zoom to bring your team closer and to demonstrate care and connection with your people. Zoom, by nature, fosters relationships and facilitates work and connection. It is the leaders who use Zoom and engage their teams in conversation who will have lasting positive impact on employees and their work.

The Zoom People Experience Team regularly shares insight and guidance to help leaders address the challenges and opportunities associated with remote teams. Check [Zoom's blog](#) or follow us on [LinkedIn](#).

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