



A manager's guide to remote teamwork

Practical ways to run a distributed team for full effectiveness

A Saberr handbook

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Introduction: A manager's guide to remote teamwork

Leading a team isn't easy at the best of times. Add a newly remote workforce and stressful circumstances, and it becomes even harder.

The challenges that we hear most frequently from team managers are much less about the tasks and much more about the **people**. Challenges like:

- Trust i.e. Even though I can't see you I want to trust that you are doing your job well.
- Bonding i.e. I want to feel supported and encouraged by my remote teammates.
- Motivation i.e. I want to feel motivated to work even though I can't feel the energy or 'buzz' of the office.
- Sharing information i.e. I'd like to feel up to speed and have the latest information I need to do my job well.
- Being listened to i.e. I want to have an adequate opportunity to raise concerns or suggestions.
- Resilience i.e. I want to feel capable of handling sudden changes without feeling overwhelmed.

Our mission is to help get every team working at the top of their game, regardless of where they are in the world. This handbook will take you through simple instructions to address common challenges of remote teamwork.

If you're a manager, this is all practical advice that you can start working on right away.

Saberr's technology [CoachBot](#) makes it easier for managers to do these things effectively so we will be giving examples of how CoachBot supports it.

WHAT IS A TEAM?

This is less existential than it sounds. Figuring out the memberships, relationships, roles and responsibilities of all individuals working together is a difficult but essential step in team effectiveness.

[Project Aristotle](#) distinguishes 'teams' from 'work groups'.

- **Work groups** are characterized by the least amount of interdependence. They are based on organizational or managerial hierarchy. Work groups may meet periodically to hear and share information.
- **Teams** are highly interdependent - they plan work, solve problems, make decisions, and review progress in service of a specific project. Team members need one another to get work done.

Get your video sorted

The rest of this handbook relies on you being able to use a video-communication software that meets the following basic functionality:

- We can see each other.
- We can hear each other.
- We can share our screen.

Many of you will already have this sorted but not everyone!

At Saberr we love [Zoom](#) but any other [alternative](#) that meets the functionality outlined above will do just fine.

Keep your camera on

Seeing each other helps you reinforce human bonds, something most of us could use at the moment. When you can't see a person, you don't see their facial expressions, eye contact or body language which makes it much easier for words to be misinterpreted. It also means people are less likely to browse Instagram or entertain other distractions.

There's only one really good reason to turn it off: if your internet connection is poor and you want to prioritise sound quality over video.

Record the meeting

At the moment schedules might be unpredictable as childcare falls through and emergencies arise. If someone can't make the meeting record it for them. When you share the recording with them, be specific about whether they need to watch the whole



thing or whether you can neatly summarise the outcomes for them.

Even if they don't really need to watch the recording, it's a nice gesture and takes no effort.

If one person is remote, everyone is remote

Finally, if one person's remote, everyone else should join the call separately as if they're remote. Otherwise, people who aren't in the room get side-lined by those who are.

Remote one-to-ones

Checking in with your employees one-on-one becomes paramount. You can no longer rely on those face-to-face moments in the office as signals of how they are doing so schedule regular one-to-ones with each of your direct reports.

Schedule regular one-to-ones

The cadence will vary depending on the nature of your work but you should have one-to-ones with your direct reports **at least once per month**. If you've only just made the switch to being a distributed team, start with a **weekly** structured 1-1 with each of your direct reports and then dial it back if you need to. Overcommunication breeds clarity before it breeds annoyance.

If you've already scheduled regular one-to-ones, well done! 🙌

Co-create an agenda

It is more important than ever to have a clear agenda, created by both parties. Here is why:

- Clarity equals efficiency. Having an agenda makes it clear what needs to be discussed and, when all points have been covered, makes it clear when the meeting can end.
- Allowing your direct report to add to the agenda themselves ahead of the meeting means they're more likely to bring up difficult topics or concerns. As a leader, these are the hardest to come by and consequently the most valuable.
- It can be harder to 'jump in' to discuss something that's on your mind on a video-call than face-to-face so having it written down means it's more likely to get discussed.

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS MATTER

Professor Alex Pentland of MIT's Media Lab [shows that](#) 30-40% of performance can be explained by the patterns of communication within teams.

The most productive teams communicate frequently and equally between all members of the team.

The lowest performing teams communicate infrequently and in a way that excludes some members of the team.



High performing team



Low performing team

- Providing a structure to the conversation keeps things flowing more naturally.

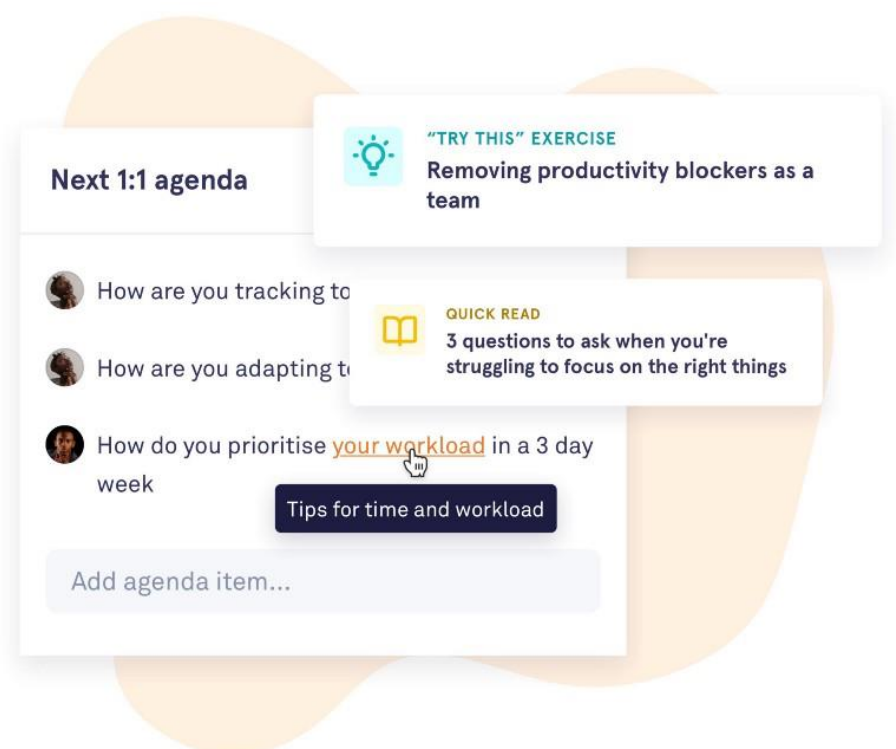
CoachBot's shared agendas make it quick and easy for both parties to have an input by considering what *they* want to get out of the conversation. Our Smart Tips feature also provides contextually relevant coaching to both parties based on what they've added to the agenda.

Step it up

Sometimes a quick status update is your one-to-ones but when you have the time, dig a little deeper for a more valuable meeting. Making time to discuss not just what they're working on but also how they are feeling is an important way to build resilience in the team. If they feel supported by you, they'll go the extra mile when needed.

CoachBot provides templates for specific types of one-to-ones. For example, if you're new to remote work, here are 6 excellent talking points to make the transition as smooth as possible:

1. What do you like most / least about working from home?
2. What is your work setup like?
3. What technology issues have you encountered?
4. How do you disconnect at the end of the day or during breaks?
5. How effective are our remote meetings (on a scale from 1-10) ?



6. What new challenges have you faced compared to in the office?

If you don't have access to CoachBot, here are some resources to help you have more meaningful conversations in your one-to-ones.

- [22 Thought Provoking Questions To Ask In Your One-To-Ones.](#)
- [6 Questions to Identify your Strengths.](#)

Create Remote Ground Rules as a Team

The way you behave as a team is governed by a set of unwritten rules and behaviours. Usually these aren't conscious or decided upon, they develop and transform over time, for the good and bad. Writing them down gives you control over them, rather than the other way round.

Investing time on the foundations of good teamwork — like agreeing on some team behaviours — can accelerate how quickly trust is built, which is hard to do remotely.

If working as a remote or distributed team is something you're trying for the first time, it's going to require a different set of norms. Small tweaks to your and your team's behaviour and interaction style will prevent a loss in clarity, productivity or morale. These tweaks are most effective if you decide on them deliberately as a collective rather than allow them to emerge organically. A bit of trial and error will be required but formally agreeing them is key.

Taking an hour to work together and define those behaviours consciously is one of the most valuable conversations you can have during these testing times.

Why create a set of behavioural norms?

Research shows that working as a team to formally define norms can have positive benefits for the team:

- Provides control and security within relationships, which some of your employees may appreciate at this time.

THE SCIENCE OF COLLECTIVE RULE MAKING

Agreeing shared behavioural norms is one way to lay the foundation for psychological safety.

Social norms allow individuals to know what is, and is not, expected from them. This reduces social anxiety around an individual's perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk or a belief that a team is safe for risk taking in the face of being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive.

Google's [Project Aristotle](#) found Psychological Safety to be the single biggest factor in distinguishing high performance in more than 180 teams.

- Improves trust, accountability and responsibility: Having a shared set of norms makes it safe for anyone in the team to flag behaviour that is outside of these norms and, more importantly, ask why it's happening.
- If teams can establish a strong foundation of trust based on their norms, this is a fantastic basis for other positive outcomes like healthy conflict and increased psychological safety.

How to create ground rules as a team

Timeframe: 1 hour (you'd spend much more than an hour in side conversations trying to keep the peace if you don't sit down as a group right at the start)

Number of people: Ideally the whole team

Facilitator: Anyone in the team, usually the team lead

Materials:

- A video-call so you can all see and hear each other.
- A digital whiteboard or card-sorting tool - Trello, Miro or [CoachBot](#).

(CoachBot is ideal since it has an interactive digital session designed to coach the team while having exactly this conversation. If you don't have access to CoachBot, you can use [Miro](#) or [Trello](#) with this facilitation guide).

Step 1: The worst things we could do

(10 mins)

Ask everyone to consider this question:

Within our team's new working environment, what are the worst ways we could behave?

Answers could range from serious things that compromise the work of the team (e.g. we stop asking for help when we need it or we miss deadlines) through to smaller things (e.g. missing people's birthdays or losing out on the casual chats that we enjoy in the office.)

Give the team 5 minutes to come up with as many answers as they like. Then, when the time is up, ask people to share their answers.

Facilitator tips:

- If people are stumped for ideas, encourage them to share anything they think of, even if it feels trivial. Ask for thoughts around topics: punctuality, asking others for help, virtual meetings, giving feedback, making decisions, dealing with stress...
- Only if people are **still** stuck should you reframe the question as; *"For you personally, what are the worst ways we could interact as a virtual team?"*

Step 2: Discuss and group your answers

(20 mins)

Take it in turns to discuss your answers – why are they important to you and what would the impact be? Try to keep to approximately 3 minutes per person.

Start grouping people's answers together in terms of themes and similarities. In CoachBot, simply drag and drop. If you're using Trello, group similar cards into columns. If you're using Miro, drag similar 'post-it' notes together.

Once they've been grouped, summarize each theme into a single statement. You should now have a collection of the worst ways a team can behave.

Facilitator tips:

1. Prompt discussion by asking any vague statements to be clarified.
2. Once themes start to emerge, ask participants whether they agree with where their own notes/ cards are placed.
3. One post-it note can have its own theme if it can't be grouped.
4. If finding one statement to encapsulate the theme is hard, perhaps those notes/ cards don't really fit together as one theme and should be regrouped.

Step 3: Turn negatives into positives

(15 mins)

Turn each of the groups of negative statements into a positive commitment. For example if one of the themes is *'Blame others for problem seek to understand the full story before*



Facilitator tips:

Make sure your behaviours are tangible and targeted to your team. Use language that you would use as a team every day. For example:

- Instead of, "We're open and honest" → "We say what we think".
- Instead of, "We believe in accountability" → "We do as we say and we call each other out".

Your behaviours will read more like a set of commitments in your own words and less like the manifesto of a sect.

It's also important to remember, behaviours that aren't specific enough are a lot harder to put into practice.

Step 4: Decide how you will check-in on these behaviours

You should now have a list of positive behaviours that will help you work well together. These are your team rules and it's important to let people know about them. Breaking one of these behaviours is not just bad form, it's one of the very worst behaviours for this team.

Decide how you remind yourselves of them. Here are some ideas:

- Save them as your laptop background.
- Put them into the agenda of every team meeting.
- Consider making an acronym if that helps.
- Take 5 minutes at the start of your team meetings to check in on how you feel you're doing against them.
- Schedule a time to talk about the difference your rules have made – this could be at your next team meeting or you could arrange a meeting in a month's time.

You can [see a video of what this session looks like here.](#)

Reflect with Regular Retrospectives

Using reflection to capture new knowledge or feelings after a project or task can help your team to continuously learn and improve. But looking beyond projects and building reflection into your workflow is a big part of being an effective team as it gives you the ability to learn and adapt quickly.

Without reflection, there is no learning.

Used regularly and done well, reflection can build trust and transparency, as your team gets used to talking openly about problems and successes. It's a way to build trust in the team, and to draw out learnings and insights the team can build on in the future.

Timeframe: 15 minutes per week or 1 hour per month, but stick to a regular schedule

Number of people: Ideally the whole team

Facilitator: Anyone in the team, usually the team lead

How does it work?

Team reflection is both an individual and collective activity.

Part 1. Individual reflection

Team members generally reflect best on their own. Before your retrospective meeting spend 10 minutes answering these three questions:

1. What's working well?

THE SCIENCE OF REFLECTION

Reflection, where a team considers what has and hasn't worked, and whether they have or haven't worked together according to their own rules, is linked to outcomes directly:

Regular team reflection has been found to significantly impact effectiveness and innovation, two of the most sought after qualities of high performing teams. In some cases increasing performance over non-reflecting teams [by 25%](#).

2. What could be improved?

3. What have I learnt?

Try to get your team into the habit of reflection. Allow them time out to reflect on their week, prompt them to diarise 10-20 minutes of reflection time if they struggle to do it otherwise.

Part 2. Collective discussion

In the retrospective meeting, share those reflections with the group. Apply collective thought to discuss the insights and potential actions to take out of the session.

CoachBot collects retrospective points and guides the team through a discussion, recording actions as you go. If you don't have access to [CoachBot](#), use [Miro](#), [Trello](#), or the chat in [Zoom](#) to share everyone's reflections and then systematically make your way through them allowing everyone to speak about their notes and recording actions somewhere you can all refer back to them later.

Check in using Pulse Surveys

It's harder to pick up on whether your colleagues are stressed or low on energy when you can't see them face-to-face.

If you're following Step 2: One-to-ones and Step 4: Regular Retrospectives, you should already have a good idea of how most of your employees are feeling, but some people will find it tricky to give you honest feedback on a call regardless of your efforts.

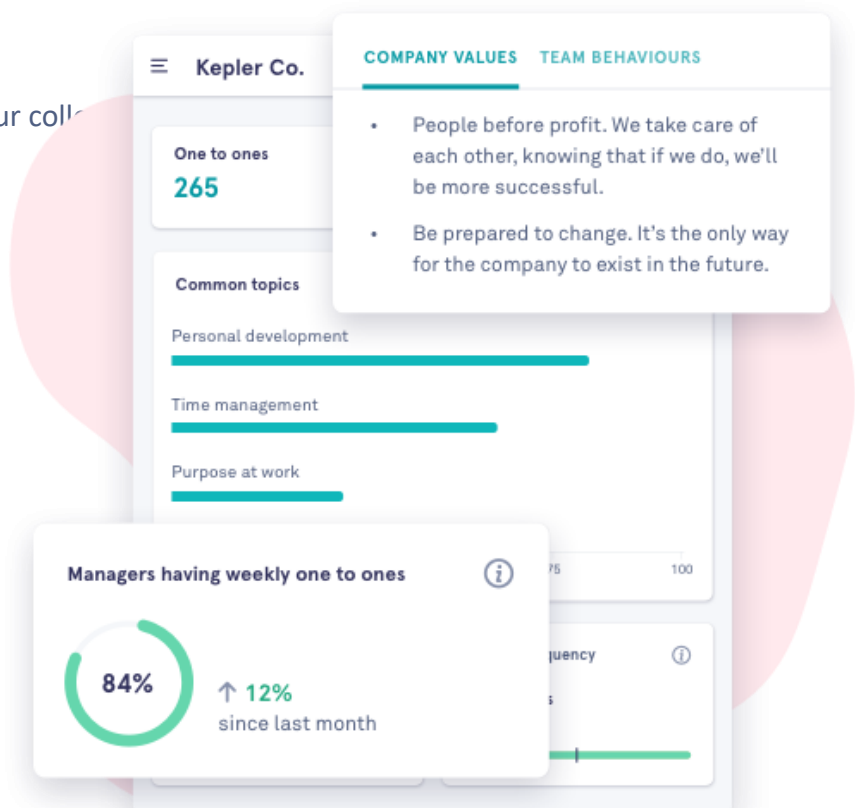
Launching a quick survey on how the team is working together is a great way to:

- invite honest, specific feedback from the team.
- improve understanding of team weaknesses.
- provide direction for next area of focus.

Step 1: Launch a survey

CoachBot's team diagnostic assesses teams using the **3 Gets Model** and collects everyone's feedback in the same place as your one-to-ones, retrospectives, behaviours etc.

1. **Get Set:** The team agrees on and is aligned behind proven fundamentals of team success



2. **Get Safe:** The team has created a safe and learning environment where team members can be honest and say how they feel
3. **Get Strong:** The team leverages high levels of safety to form strong and collaborative relationships defined by constructive and assertive (not aggressive) interactions

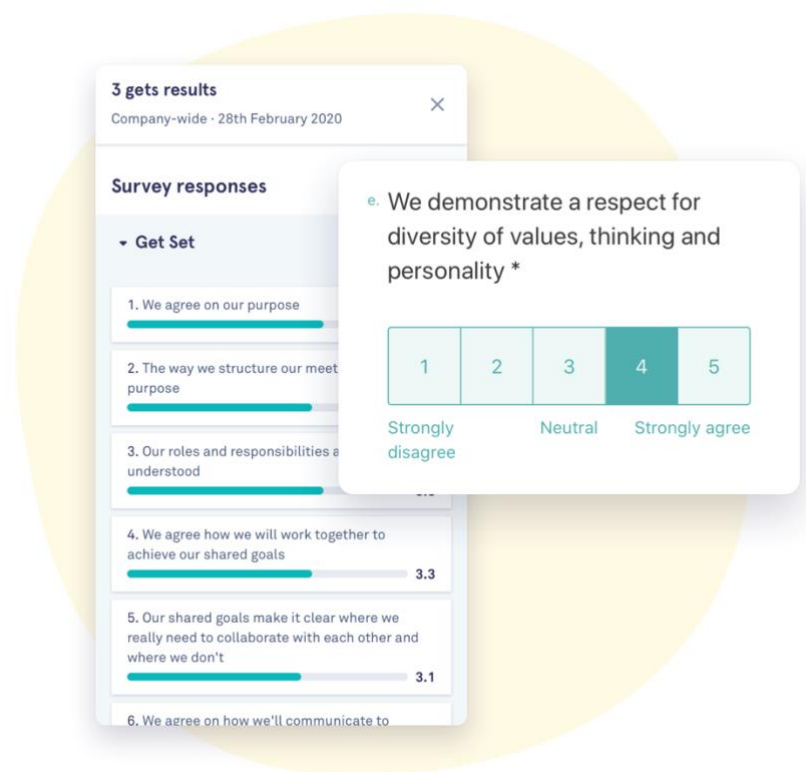
If you don't have access to [CoachBot](#), there are other team diagnostic tools out there or you can make your own survey in [Typeform](#) if you have the time.

Step 2 : Discuss the results.

Schedule an hour-long meeting to share the results with the team and discuss what they mean for you. How you facilitate the discussion will depend on the survey you've chosen.

Some rules of thumb that apply to most of I've seen:

- Focus on one or two areas of weakness to begin with or you'll lose focus.
- Decide on what you'll try to do differently as a result. Treat this as an 'experiment' rather than a solution and agree on a timeframe.
- Make a note to review the progress of your 'experiments' after the agreed timeframe.



Remote facilitation for managers

Meetings are more effective when they have an owner who chairs or facilitates. This is never more true than in remote meetings. Without a good facilitator, you'll see people taking over the meeting, others losing interest because they can't get a word in edgeways or long, awkward silences.

As the team leader, this responsibility often falls on you. However, you shouldn't be ashamed of nominating someone else in your team as facilitator if they have a knack for it! In any case, here are some golden rules to ensure remote meetings run smoothly.

If the meeting has more than 8 participants...

Agree to raise your hand to speak. It's a simple, effective way of allowing everyone to speak rather than just the loudest or pushiest person on the call. And it will make you feel like a schoolkid again so win-win.

Make sure everyone feels included in discussions

- Invite participation: Don't be afraid to call someone out by name and ask for their input.
- Watch out for interruptions. If you feel that someone was interrupted before they had a chance to finish, invite them back into the conversation, *"Ben, did you have any additional thoughts to share on this point?"*
- If you want to take a quick vote or gauge everyone's opinion on something, ask them to give a thumbs up or a thumbs down. This way everyone's view counts.

- Be aware of who is most likely to feel marginalised in the first place. The most introverted member of the group may have a hard time 'butting in' to be heard.

Start every meeting with an icebreaker

[Gallup](#) has consistently found having a good friend at work leads to better performance. Building these types of relationships in remote teams is harder so it's important to spend time on informal communication. Start every meeting with an icebreaker even if you've been working together for some time. Slowly you'll learn more about the team and they'll learn what they have in common.

Spend some time setting the scene

In face-to-face meetings, you wouldn't jump to the first agenda item/task. You'd set the scene, explain what's most important for today and encourage participation. The same principle applies for remote coaching sessions.

Four ways to increase resilience in your team

Resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. We can probably agree that our resilience is being tested right now, but how we react to times like these varies greatly from person to person.

One person may be enjoying the '*silver linings*' of these tough times: saving time on their commute, eating home cooked meals every day and feeling less distracted and more productive than ever. They're making the best out of a bad situation.

Another person on the same team may be experiencing this time very differently. They may be missing their routine. The 'noise' of the news is becoming an unbearable negative distraction. Their work feels meaningless amongst everything else that's going on.

Meanwhile, your job as a manager hasn't changed that much. You're still responsible for creating an environment where your team does their best work and delivers results.

1. Seek to understand how employees feel

As a manager, you may have no idea how some of your employees are feeling. You may have both types of people described above on your team, with others somewhere in between. You can't see the subtle hints that suggest your employee could be stressed or sad.

That's why having regular, frequent 121s is more important than ever.

You can also use personality surveys to inform you of how people are likely to respond to times of uncertainty. [Saberr Base](#)

measures how much individuals value safety and security, as well as their resilience.

Surveys should be used to inform your conversation, not replace it. E.g. “Your Base survey shows that you real security. How are you feeling at the moment?”

2. Strengthen relationships

Getting to know each other better increases team resilience. By encouraging social connections between team members, your team will respond better to uncertainty, conflict and collaboration challenges.

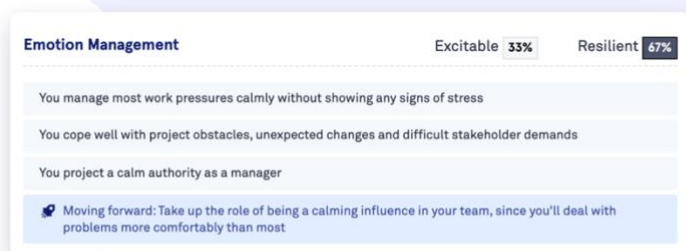
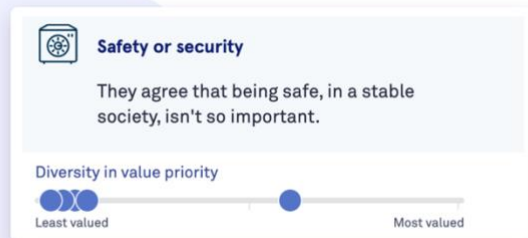
As team lead, you aren’t just responsible for your relationship with your team, you are also responsible for encouraging the network of relationships between your employees.

Peer one-to-ones are a great way to create a team spirit. Identify key relationships within the team where more trust could improve the team’s overall performance and ask them to schedule a one-to-one.

Another option is to start every meeting with an icebreaker even if you’ve been working together for some time. Slowly you’ll learn more about the team and they’ll learn what they have in common.

3. Show that you care

Reflect back on how you showed your team that you cared about them in the office. Perhaps it was a pat on the back, a round of



drinks at the pub or remembering to ask whether their child is feeling better.

Some of these may no longer be viable options now that you're working remotely. How can you remind your team that you genuinely care about their wellbeing? Think of the channels and interactions that you have available to you (direct messages, one-to-ones, team meetings...) and how you can be there for your team in each of these.

That could mean spending half of your next one-to-one discussing how to maintain work-life balance and healthy working practices at home. Incidentally, we have a quick guide on how to drive that conversation [right here](#).

4. Model Resilience

During hard times, it's crucial for team leads to model the behaviours that they want to see reflected in their teams.

That means you want to be strong but still human and approachable. Lead with resilience and yet vulnerability. Easier said than done, right?

A few quick tips:

- Focus on what is going well at work – now more than ever you need to celebrate successes, however small.
- Recall other times of adversity and how you came through as a team.
- Reframe the new challenges you're presented with as opportunities.
- Share the habits that are helping you stay positive – it's ok for your team to know that being resilient is a muscle that you need to exercise.



We'd love to help

Being a manager is more complex than ever. Modern managers have both more challenges and more opportunities to drive their organisations forward. They also have more tools at their disposal.

We created CoachBot to help managers get their team performing at the top of their game – so that both they and their team thrive.

We'd love to support you in becoming the best manager you can be.

Get in touch

www.saberr.com/contact