



Alone, together 2.0

Managing employees in a hybrid
work environment

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Introduction to Alone, together 2.0

The first edition of this eBook, “Alone, together,” was published by Central in March 2020. It served as a guide on how to manage employees who were suddenly working from their homes (WFH). Months later, our lives and work continue to be impacted by COVID-19. The 2.0 edition has been revised to provide advice to managers on ways to bring out the best in their employees as this crisis continues, even evolves and prompts further change – notably where employees work.

It will share some of the **lessons learned about driving performance during this difficult time** as well as advice on how to handle the emergence of a hybrid work environment.

Essentially, in this new normal, where a person works has become far less a factor than how well. It's marked by workplace flexibility. Employees may work in an office, at home or in the field. Or some combination of the three. Contributing to the creation of this new form of workplace is the realization that **WFH will be a permanent aspect** of how a business operates in the days, weeks, and years ahead.

The aim of “Alone, together 2.0” is to provide a set of **best practices to manage remotely working employees**. Because that's the working world we're in. Where employees need to perform their best from anywhere and managers need to help them succeed from anyplace.



Managing remotely working employees effectively

A study that looked at the [State of Remote Work](#), well into the COVID-19 timeframe, found remote **workers continue to struggle with loneliness**, communicating with managers and co-workers, and unplugging from work. Another found stress levels were high.

That and other research into WFH make it clear managing remotely working employees is far from easy. But possible. In fact, several companies report upticks in productivity, employee as well as customer satisfaction, and more during the past several months when compared to pre-pandemic levels. What separates those from the rest will be shared.



DR. EYAL RONEN

An organizational psychologist and co-founder of [SenseMakers](#).



"What was mission critical before the pandemic is not always mission critical today. Corporate priorities have changed, dramatically. So too have the day-to-day responsibilities and tasks of employees."



A woman with long dark hair and glasses is sitting at a desk, looking at a laptop. The background shows a modern office with large windows, plants, and framed pictures on the wall.

The 5 challenges COVID-19 created

How do you, as a manager deal with a remote workforce? The first step is to recognize the common challenges your employees are facing. Fundamentally, regardless of the business condition or culture of your company, the industry it competes in or where on the globe it operates, it faces five pandemic-derived challenges:

1

**Reducing
employee anxiety**

2

**Contending with
business volatility**

3

**Avoiding
communications
breakdowns**

4

**Closing
knowledge gaps**

5

**Managing
distractions**



CHALLENGE #1

Reducing employee anxiety

As talk of gradual, phased returns to the office grows, anxiety continues to be seen among employees. It's different than when employees first left offices for their homes. The current form is borne out of concerns over the health safety of public transportation and the offices in which employees are being asked to return to. Along with that is a post-trauma effect for employees who may have contracted the virus, lost a loved one or experienced some other kind of heartbreaking distress. Add to that the unnerving sense employees may get knowing millions of others lost their jobs, due largely to the impact of COVID-19.



40% of employees report **negative or severely negative** impact on productivity during the pandemic.

* Central survey Oct 2020

#1 reason stated for diminished productivity was a **sense of anxiety and disengagement.**

* Central survey Oct 2020

Much of the responsibility to reduce, if not remove employees' anxiety – to keep productivity where it needs to be – sits with you and other managers or team leaders.

If you don't act to lower anxiety levels here's what happens:

- Apathy spreads and employees checkout. Desire to work plummets and what amounts to absenteeism increases
- The vitally important sense of team, of being part of something larger than themselves, is reduced markedly
- Employee attitudes, performance, even skills drop

To keep employees engaged, focused, and happy you need to keep doing what you've been doing that works. Now's not the time to try something untested. With the move into a hybrid work setting, realize that when employees return to the office it's to a now-unfamiliar place. One that carries with it some health or safety concerns.

Here's what you need to do:

- Sustain the open dialog you created when employees went home
- Keep a close watch on the moods and attitudes of your employees, collectively, and individually
- Promote and commend peer-based recognition
- Recognize efforts frequently and in a personalized way
- Encourage employees to do - and be - their best as often as you can using gamification to aid engagement, motivation, and just for fun
- Reward efforts - especially those that reflect care and consideration for others

As you did at the outset of WFH, if you don't see anticipated productivity, however it might be monitored, from employees, reach out and determine what's up. **Avoid making assumptions on why productivity has dropped.** Focus on talking about it with employees. By extension, the collaboration that developed in the last few months needs to continue, but with the ability to adapt to the various work settings your employees may find themselves in.

Dr. Ronen reminds us that, **“you have to be attuned to employees' frame of mind; their emotional state. They've been asked to deal with and do so much for quite a while. And it doesn't appear there'll any reduction any time soon. More than being an excellent manager, now you need to be a highly empathetic one.”**



CHALLENGE #2

Contending with business volatility

COVID-19 has caused whole industries to grind to a halt. Millions have lost their jobs. And while economists draw graphs to explain a hoped-for recovery in the form of V's, W's, U's, and K's, it's not going to be a quick return to the pre-pandemic business environment. The U.S. Federal Reserve recently announced plans to keep interest rates near zero through 2023. In many areas, sales volumes remain low and sales velocity stays slow. Supply chains continue to be far from efficient, even discounting the effect of current political tensions on trade flow.

Business, especially on a global level, has always some degree of volatility. This pandemic has raised it to a bewildering height. WFH has had an impact as well. Consider the effect it's having on the commercial real estate, hospitality, and airline businesses.

For employees, all this unpredictability has meant a torrent of enormous, nerve-racking change. And stress.

3rd most reported reasons for diminished productivity were **constantly changing processes, targets, and regulations.**

* Central survey Oct 2020



70% of employees felt **their workload has "increased" or "greatly increased" during the pandemic.**

* Central survey Oct 2020

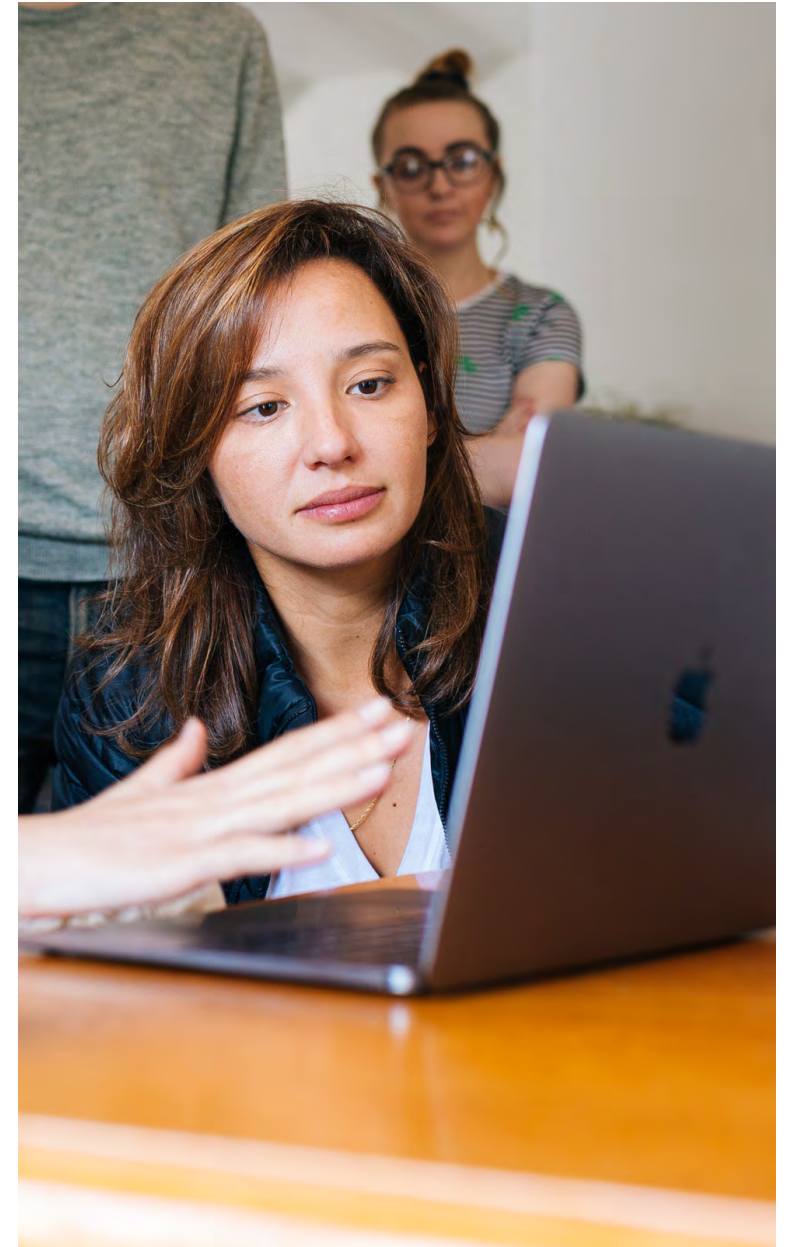
In terms of employee management, the major shifts include:

- Changing, if not increasing, workloads. Often-changing requirements and roles
- Workforce churn necessitating faster onboarding and the know-how to WFH

To deal with these changes you need to do the following:

- Make up- and reskilling a must-do, not a nice to have. Find and adapt ways of delivering quick training that can be accessed anywhere - especially from their homes - on their computers or mobile phones to be able to adjust to changing workloads
- Improve employees' agility so they can take on varying roles and responsibilities
- Re-examine employees' expectations held before the pandemic might
- Explore ways of adapting goals quickly to fit market conditions or personal circumstances"
- Employ gamified, personalized microlearning, and learning missions to speed the time to proficiency for new employees

"It's important to give employees working from anywhere a moment of fun. Kind of an afternoon pick-me-up in the form of a daily challenge, a game, really. It can be a quiz to see how much employees know about keeping themselves in a positive frame of mind or performing an aspect of their job. Done right, it can make a big difference in employees' attitudes and their performance in roles that they're not used to as well as reinforce the much-needed sense of community," Dr. Ronen says.





CHALLENGE #3

Avoiding communications breakdowns

Most companies got amazing communications programs up-and-running soon after sending their employees home. Added communications channels, catch-up sessions, and more had a quick, positive impact. Unfortunately, in the last few months, some companies reduced the communications frequency, from top-down, side-to-side, and bottom-up. A few simply turned off the channels dedicated to dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. With that kind of breakdown in communications it's safe to say individual employees, teams, entire organizations are at risk. You need to keep the communications flowing. If you don't, a difficult situation can only get worse. **The key is to communicate in better ways. More streamlined. More effective. Easier to access, anytime, anywhere.**



30% stated **limited face to face time** or **lack of insight into team members work** as the main cause for diminished team productivity.

* Central survey Oct 2020

Here's what can happen:

- A credibility gap is created or gets wider if communications flow has slowed
- Employees will look to information sources that may not be in synch with your company's policies
- Limited or curtailed communications will reduce the degree to which employees are aligned with company goals
- The positivity that was created when you conveyed interest in employees' lives outside of work will vanish, only to be replaced by skepticism and, possibly resistance
- Removal of feedback mechanisms will lead to serious misinterpretations and undesirable behaviors, among other things

More than anything, these problems create confusion and frustration among your employees. You must continue to be as committed as you were at the start of COVID-19 to get and keep everyone informed, understanding and appreciative. To accomplish that you must **be clear and consistent with your communications and to keep it continuous**. Literally over-communicate. That keeps everyone aligned and focused on what matters.

Here's what you need to do to handle this challenge:

- Maintain strong, bi-directional communications flowing up, down, and across your organization. Remember, it's still a crisis
- Continue to Issue updates from senior management on business matters – then follow up to learn if team members got the information and gets its meaning
- Build engagement with your communications with tools that go beyond messaging
- Don't hesitate to send personal messages to employees for support or motivation
- Help your managers coach with tools or dashboards that provide insight and suggestions to guide employees remotely, and personalized

"We humans tend to be creatures of habit. With frequent, predictable communications, anxiety levels won't rise. In fact, they'll likely diminish," Dr. Ronen says.





CHALLENGE #4

Closing knowledge gaps

One pre-pandemic reality of business was the knowledge and skill levels of employees had to be ever-sharpened, expanded, and adapted to meet the demands and changes created by the marketplace. That need was dealt with by a multitude of learning and development programs, formats, and methodologies. In fact, **the need for learning has never been greater as employees need to adopt new tools, learn new regulations.**

But COVID-19 impacted ongoing learning activities in these ways:

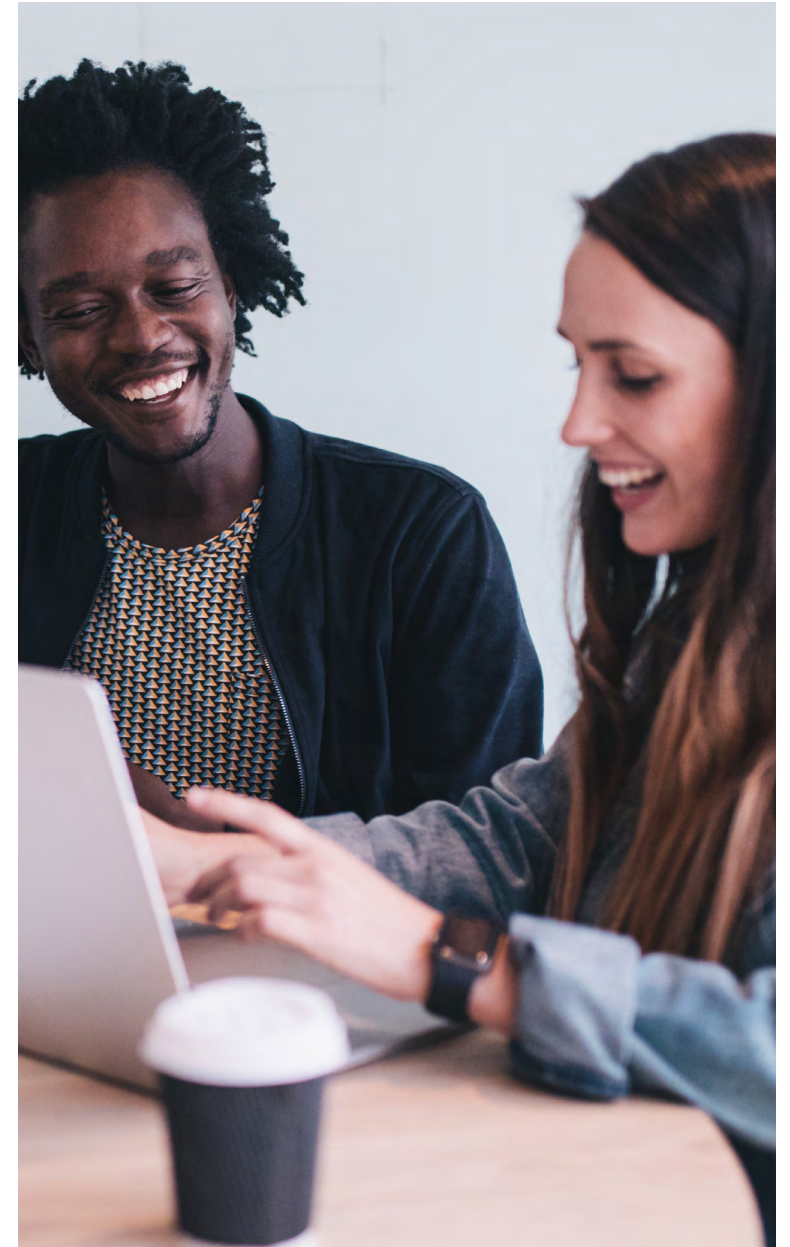
- In-classroom-type training was effectively shut down. Of late, it's been limited, at best, due to "social distancing" and headcount capacity restrictions at offices and other facilities
- Delivery and assessment of learning activities as well as follow-on coaching for improvement has moved online
- The pandemic has proven to be an accelerate companies move to digital remote learning and embrace of microlearning
- Production of learning content and delivery methods well-suited to training remotely working employees is still a work-in-progress
- Adapting training to the functional and operational changes forced by COVID-19 has been more difficult than anticipated

While it's been tough to reimagine learning during a pandemic, all involved realize learning cannot stop. Advancing employees' capabilities and their agility has always been important. In the near-term, it is super critical. And will remain that way for some time to come.

Here's what learning needs to look like in your organization:

- Activities that teach employees how to be confident, productive, and healthy during COVID-19 that use competitions to teach and test employees have to be provided so they understand how to work and conduct themselves, whether they're WFH, in the office or in the field
- Availability of learning content and activities geared to the changes in roles and responsibilities as well as reskilling, upskilling, and onboarding is a necessity
- A mechanism to assess training, determines how well it is being applied, and provides feedback and coaching must be in place
- Personalized microlearning provided in the flow of work has to be used to keep learning time shorter and deal with shorter attention spans

“Months into this crisis, things continue to happen fast. That means your learning process - be it reskilled, upskilled or just onboarded employees - must happen fast. Just-in-time training needs to be the mindset; an approach that presents training quickly and easily so it gets embraced quickly, in the flow-of-work, and is quickly applied,”
Dr. Ronen says.





CHALLENGE #5

Managing distractions

It didn't matter if you had lots of experience managing even a portion of your team working remotely, COVID-19 made it different. Very different. Lack of face-to-face time was felt to be the top reason for lowered team productivity issues and distractions at home as causes for diminished personal productivity.



28% attribute their diminished productivity to **distractions at home and technical issues.**

* Central survey Oct 2020

Reasons why include dealing with such things as:

- Unexpected distractions - from a neighbor's barking dog to quarreling children - that take employees off task
- The absence of face-to-face dealings that weakened the sense of community and/or team
- Feelings of disconnectedness that impact employees' performance and confidence
- Diminished contact/communications with you and the team that can produce uncertainty, doubt, and a drop-off in engagement

Even if you've been doing as much as you can to keep employees feeling as much like they did before being sent home, don't rest. Consider stepping up your efforts. With you being remote from them and vice versa, you need to **keep making an extra effort to achieve a feeling of normalcy. Especially now with the hybrid work environment taking shape.**

Here's how:

- Check to see – ideally daily – that employees are aligned on goals and feeling good about reaching them
- Keep communications open and bi-directional so employees can connect with you for a helping hand or to build confidence
- Encourage team members to communicate with each other with mechanisms for them to do so easily and often
- Don't wait for problems to come to you. Be proactive to understand how employees are feeling – what their moods are like - using periodic pulse surveys. Strive to have them feel good about themselves
- Share WFH tips on working from home that you know work
- For those heading to the office make certain they take appropriate precautions and follow all required procedures

As it was at the outset of the pandemic, your primary aim is to reassure employees that much of their working lives will go on - as much as possible as they had been before COVID-19. To do that you'll need empathy and a willingness to understand their situations and make an extra effort to coach them to get through whatever hassle they might be caught up in.

“After months of working from home there continues to be uncertainty for many employees on work and personal levels. The hybrid model has been described as offering workplace flexibility. Yet many will be unnerved by it simply because having multiple places to work makes it harder to create work-related routines that provide comfort. Even now, managers need to check on their team members often. In all likelihood, more often than they think,”

Dr. Ronen says.



The Remote Employee Experience



Meet Meg

- She is a customer service associate with 3 years of experience
- She is part of a team of 85

Scenario

In response to COVID-19, Meg's company initiated a business continuity plan that abruptly mandated a remote workforce. To manage the change in work environment, the company provides all remote employees with the Central platform.

DAILY NEWS NOTIFICATION

Meg sees a **pop-up notification** in the **Central platform**, informing her of the latest company guidelines and important announcements



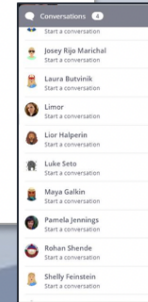
GOALS ALIGNMENT

Meg ensures she knows her goals and priorities for the week by sending them to her manager. She also makes sure to connect with her teammates

STAYING CONNECTED

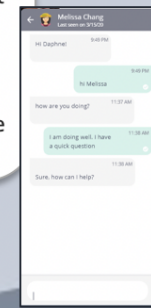
Meg posts a question in her team **Conversation** channel, where she can get immediate answers from her peers and manager.

Meg scrolls through the **Community** to feel connected to her peers and hear about the latest buzz amongst her team. A quick glance at the **leaderboard** reveals how active her colleagues have been. Meg sends **kudos** with a personal message to congratulate her friend for being in 1st place



MANAGER CHECK-IN

Meg receives a **personal message** from her manager who provides encouragement and sees what assistance she needs to do her job from home. She is also part of a **team conversation** to brainstorm how to best tackle difficult client conversations



SELF REFLECTION

Near the end of her week, Meg evaluates how her week went and how she is feeling



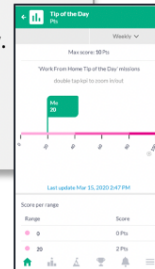
LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

Meg watches a **video** released by senior management to understand the company's business continuity strategy and HR aspects



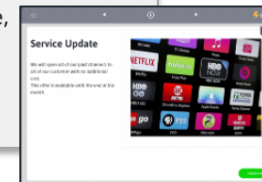
ESTABLISHING HABITS

Meg reads up on best practices for staying productive and healthy while working remotely. She also contributes her own ideas to share with her peers. Meg can win **challenges** by completing all her activities



JUST-IN-TIME TRAINING

Meg has additional trainings to complete, as her company will now provide new services in response to market changes



KEEPING UP-TO-DATE

Meg makes sure she is always informed on the latest news and recommendations from official sources. Each mission she completes brings her closer to earning the next **badge** in the **COVID-19 badge series**



TAKING A BREAK

Meg completes an energizer activity, such as a **mini-game**, to overcome the mid-afternoon slump

About Central

At Central, our platform combines advanced gamification, personalized microlearning, and real-time performance management that helps align employees with company goals and facilitates conversations with managers about targets and performance. Our Central is designed to help Fortune 500-type companies drive engagement with existing systems and processes or help build a performance-driven culture centered on achievement for their employees in the office, at home or in the field.

central.com

To learn more and see if employee engagement
& real-time performance management is right for you

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