Middle Manager's Playbook: How to Build and Lead a Strong Remote Team

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ABSTRACT

In a global company, building a strong team in a remote environment presents both unique opportunities and challenges. Remote work allows access to a wider pool of global talent, and employees can benefit from working in the safe and comfortable environment of their homes. However, motivating employees, identifying disengagement, fostering genuine connections, and cultivating a sense of belonging are among the key challenges leaders face in remote settings. Without the traditional face-to-face interactions of a shared workspace, these efforts require intentional strategies, strong communication, and a deep understanding of team dynamics. In this presentation, I will share practical solutions, including the effective use of tools like Microsoft Teams, hosting engaging virtual events, encouraging meaningful small talk, and adopting key leadership practices. This session aims to equip leaders and managers with actionable insights to build resilient, motivated, and connected teams in a virtual landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, I was already a remote worker. Even when I worked in a physical office, I collaborated more with colleagues in the EU than with those sitting nearby. I accessed a SAS environment remotely on a computer in our French office—not one down the hall. So, when the office eventually relocated out of my state and I transitioned to fully remote work from home, I discovered something: I was extremely productive. There were no noisy distractions, the temperature was always just right, I could eat healthy meals without prepping in the morning, and even bio breaks were quicker.

I suspect many programmers can relate. It may be a stereotype, but many of us are introverted. We like home.

Today, we live in a global economy. Even a relatively small company like Phastar has employees spread across multiple countries. The 17 programmers I manage are located in 10 different U.S. states and one Canadian province. Not being tied to a physical office gives us access to a much broader talent pool.

But, of course, remote work presents unique challenges—especially for middle managers.

- How do I build team cohesion?

- How do I know if someone is actually working?

- How do I monitor their progress?

- How do I check on their emotional well-being?

- How do I keep people motivated?

- And how do I help them feel connected to each other?

Remote work isn't just a perk—it's a new way of working. And while it brings many opportunities, it also requires a different mindset and approach to leadership. In this paper, I'll explore the common challenges of managing remote teams and share practical, field-tested solutions that can help middle managers build strong, connected, and effective teams—no matter where people are working from.

WHY IS IT SO HARD? – CHALLENGES OF BUILDING A REMOTE TEAM

KEEPING THE SPARK ALIVE: MOTIVATING EMPLOYEES AND MAINTAINING FOCUS, DRIVE, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

What is the "spark"? When employees are motivated and happy at work, you can often sense it through their body language, facial expressions, and behavior. Happy faces, lively conversations, spontaneous

brainstorming, or going out after work. It's all part of it. People make friends at work. Some even meet outside of the workplace. They get comfortable with each other, and yes, you can feel the "spark" in the office.

But what about in a remote setting? It's much harder to see and to feel.

Motivating employees and keeping them focused, driven, and accountable is one of the biggest challenges of remote leadership. Without shared energy, employees often work in isolation, physically separated from their team. This makes it easier to lose momentum after a meeting and disconnect from the bigger picture.

"Focus" is harder to maintain at home. People are easily distracted by kids, pets, doorbells, household chores, or even the TV. Without the structure of an office, employees may struggle with time management or prioritization, especially when juggling multiple projects.

And then there's drive: that internal push to go the extra mile. Drive can suffer without regular reinforcement or recognition. In the office, you might see colleagues chatting with managers or working closely together, creating a natural sense of momentum or even healthy competition.

Finally, accountability becomes trickier when you can't easily see progress. In the office, small status updates happen organically, and people overhear each other or give updates in passing. But in a remote setting, without a structured way to track work, managers might not realize someone is falling behind until it's too late.

In short, remote work removes many of the natural cues and routines that help support motivation and accountability. Without intentional systems in place, it's hard to keep the spark alive.

SPOTTING THE QUIET QUITTERS: RECOGNIZING WHEN EMPLOYEES ARE STRUGGLING OR DISENGAGED

When someone quietly does their job—no complaints, no fuss, just silently working—are they truly happy? I often wonder.

In programming roles, the work can be straightforward on the surface. You're assigned a deliverable, like a dataset or a table, listing, or figure. You're either on the production side or the QC side. Sometimes, you inherit someone else's code, make a few tweaks, and run it.

Some team members never ask questions or raise concerns. They just keep working. At first, this might seem ideal—but are they actually doing well? In some cases, we've discovered that these individuals were simply running programs without thoroughly understanding the task. Some made repeated mistakes or hard-coded results just to match the output of their counterpart—without addressing the underlying logic.

Then there are employees who work hard every day. They meet deadlines and occasionally receive compliments from management. But there's no broader recognition. So, they push themselves harder— still, nothing changes. Then one day, a recruiter calls. The offer sounds better. And suddenly, we hear: "No one really listens to me here. It just seems better over there."

Quiet doesn't always mean content. Sometimes, it means disengaged. And by the time we notice, it's already too late.

BUILDING BRIDGES, NOT WALLS: OVERCOMING THE LACK OF FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTIONS TO FOSTER GENUINE CONNECTIONS

In the office, people connect in all kinds of organic ways: around the coffee machine, in the hallways, even stopping by each other's cubicles. These little interactions help build relationships without much effort. But in a remote environment, especially among programmers, those natural moments often disappear. I've been in many meetings where no one says a word until the facilitator starts the agenda. The silence can feel uncomfortable. Who are these people? Are they just unfriendly?

Of course, they're not mean—they're often just shy or unsure. But breaking the silence isn't easy. Without facial expressions or body language to guide the conversation, it can feel like there's a wall between you and the person on the other side of the screen. That wall can be hard to break through unless someone takes the first step.

Also, if you are a newcomer, even sending a message to someone can be intimidating. And if the person you want to talk to is a manager or higher, the wall looks even taller. Especially, the manager's status often appears "red" (not available) all the time.

FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE PUZZLE: CULTIVATING A SENSE OF BELONGING AND INCLUSIVITY

In an office setting, people often find small comforts—a favorite chair, a desk neighbor, a lunch buddy. That physical space naturally helps people find their place. But remotely, it's easier to feel disconnected or unsure where you fit in.

I've noticed that some people start acting superior when they're conducting interviews. When I was younger, I found that intimidating. But over time, I realized something important: job hunting is like finding the love of your life. It's not just about impressing someone—it's about finding the right match. You need to find a company where there's genuine chemistry.

Now, when I interview someone, I think the person could be a good fit, I make an effort to be open and transparent. I tell them what we're looking for, and I try to assess if we would work well together. I'm upfront about both the good and the challenging aspects of the company. If I see potential, I suggest ways we can collaborate to make things better. Because in a remote environment, a mismatch can be more than inconvenient—it can be truly isolating.

WHO'S DOING WHAT?: IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL WORKLOADS AND TRACKING PROGRESS

I often hear concerns from managers about trusting remote employees. What if they're goofing off? What if they're watching a baseball game instead of working? But I always wonder: does it really matter where someone is if the work is getting done?

The real question is: if a manager doesn't know what their employee is doing, whose fault is that? Should a manager know exactly what everyone is working on? Maybe not in minute detail—but there should be clarity around expectations and deliverables.

People work at different paces. Some are lightning fast, some are slow but methodical. Some are highly detail-oriented, while others may be more prone to oversight. Regardless of their style, if you clearly define what needs to be done and by when, it shouldn't matter how they work—as long as the work gets done well. Tracking progress isn't about control—it's about clarity, communication, and fairness.

WHAT DO WE DO? – PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

TECH TO THE RESCUE

Mastering Microsoft Teams

Do you use Microsoft Teams—or a similar tool? Most of us use it for meetings, quick chats, or pinging a teammate. But are you truly using it effectively?

For example, did you know you can get someone's attention by using @Name? This ensures the person receives a notification and doesn't miss the message. It's a simple but powerful way to communicate clearly in a busy workspace.

Here's how we use Microsoft Teams on our team:

1. Microsoft Teams Channels

    a. Photo Zone – A space where individuals post pictures of their families, pets, vacations, or beautiful sceneries.

    b. Conference Space – Used to share past conference presentations and information about upcoming events.

    c. Programming Toolbox – A collection of useful macros, code snippets, and programming tips.

    d. Project Channels – Dedicated spaces for key projects. We post important announcements, reminders, and shared files here. Unlike Chat, the "Files" tab in Channels is easy to organize and manage.

2. MS Teams Chat

    a. We use individual and group chats regularly. I encourage team members to pin frequently used chats so they're easy to find.
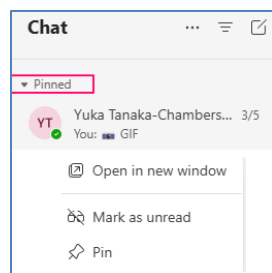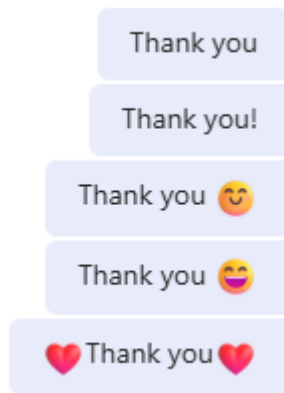

    b. Use @Name in chat to draw attention.

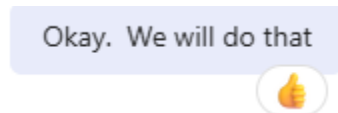   You type @Yuka Tanaka-Chambers, then I see **Yuka Tanaka-Chambers**

    You type @Everyone, then all people in the group chat see **Everyone**
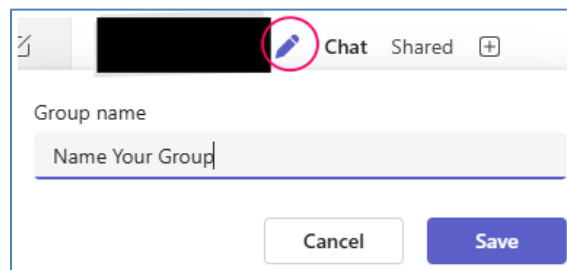
c. Effectively use "emoji."

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These describe different emotions

Don't you like a little acknowledgement like this?

d. When you create a group chat, rename it so it's clear what the group is for.
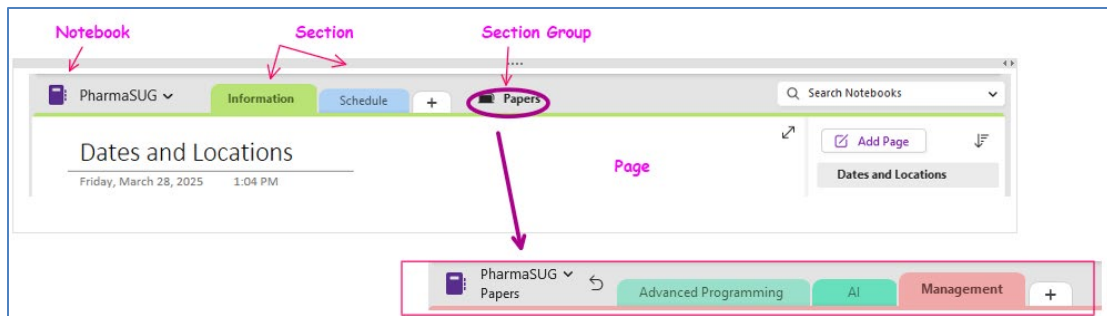

3. Microsoft OneNote

I love using OneNote, both for personal note-taking and team collaboration. It's a shared workspace for documenting discussions, tracking progress, and organizing ideas.

Remember the old notebook with tabs?

OneNote is just like that except it is digitalized and you can search a text or even share with multiple people.

4. Video Calls

We tend to rely on messages and pings, but when things get complicated, a quick video call can resolve issues faster and prevent misunderstandings. Screen sharing is especially helpful for collaboration.

PARTY TIME!

Hosting Engaging Virtual Events

Virtual events are hard. People are busy, and engagement can be low—but it's still worth the effort. We've had a few memorable events, like our Holiday Party. Everyone ordered food (expensed by the company) according to their local time—some had breakfast, others lunch or a snack. We played quizzes and had an "ugly sweater" contest.

We also organized a surprise baby shower. We told the mom-to-be it was a project handover meeting before her maternity leave. We secretly collected contributions via Venmo and sent her gifts. She was truly touched.

Another tradition is our monthly "One-Sentence Sessions". We meet briefly and each person shares a one-sentence response to a fun prompt, like:

"What are your holiday plans?"

"What's your New Year's resolution?"

"How are you celebrating Valentine's Day?"

"St. Patrick's Day – What's Your Lucky Charm?"

We've learned surprising things—who loves or hates tofu, who cooks, who doesn't. It's a light but effective way to connect.

Small Talk, Big Impact

In an office, small talk happens naturally—at the coffee machine, in hallways, in elevators. In remote settings, we must create those moments on purpose.

1. Starting Meetings with Small Talk

   In an office, small talk happens naturally—at the coffee machine, in hallways, in elevators. II was never the type to connect deeply in person. But working remotely, using a headset and having one-on-one conversations, I've learned to listen more closely. I can't see their facial expressions, but I can hear their tone—happy, sad, frustrated, indifferent. I want to hear it all. Sad stories and happy ones—they're all part of being human.

2. Using Weather as a Conversation Starter

   In an office, small talk happens naturally—at the coffee machine, in hallways, in elevator. When I start at a new company remotely, I often walk into silent meetings. No one talks until the facilitator starts. That used to make me uncomfortable—so I began with the simplest topic: the weather. It works surprisingly well. In a global team, someone might be enjoying the sunshine while someone else is snowed in. One might say, "It's a rainy morning," while another says, "It's a lovely evening."

   One great advantage of virtual meetings? You can take notes. I jot down details—where someone lives, who's in their family, little stories they share. These notes help me build deeper conversations over time.

ARE YOU A GOOD BOSS?

Leading with "仁" (Compassion): The foundation of great leadership

仁

Compassion
Treating others with respect and care
Standing by them

I genuinely care about the people I work with. I make an effort to understand each programmer's strengths and weaknesses. I take the time to build relationships—through small talk and consistent engagement. Funny enough, I couldn't do this as well in the office. But in the remote environment, I feel closer to my team. I'm sure many others feel the same way—we thrive in this setting.

Walking in Their Shoes: Understanding your team's struggles and perspectives

Everyone's in a different stage of life. Some are single, some are raising young kids, some are approaching retirement. People have different needs—and in a remote setting, flexibility is key.

I worked in an office for many years. I missed a lot of time with my child. I wish I had had more flexibility. Remote work allows that now. Let your people have it.

Let your team know that they have the ability to take control of their work-life balance—more so than they ever could in a traditional office setting. Remote work puts that power in their hands. They have the autonomy, the flexibility, and the self-discipline to design a rhythm that works for them. The structure is there, but the drive comes from within. If they choose to own it, they have the power to succeed on their own terms.

Be a Good Listener: Truly hear your team and understand their needs

To be a good listener, ask open-ended questions:

> "How was your weekend?"

> "How are you doing?"

> "Anything new in your life?"

Sometimes, these questions uncover real struggles—issues at home, mental fatigue, or something else entirely. It doesn't excuse poor performance, but it gives you context. Then, you can offer support—like time off or resources your company provides.

Know It All (or at Least Know Where to Find It): Being a reliable resource for your team

Early in my career, I rarely had a boss who could do my job. I promised myself I would be different.

You don't need to know everything—but you do need to know where to find the answers. Whether it's SDTM, ADaM, or TLFs, you should understand the standards well enough to guide your team.

You should also be well connected. Sometimes it's not a technical question, it's HR, IT, or something personal. A good boss knows whom to point their team to for help.

Show the Way: Setting clear expectations and providing guidance

I'm not always a soft-spoken boss. I set clear expectations and give direct feedback. Sometimes I come across as strong, even blunt. Maybe I could cushion my words more—but I'd rather be honest and avoid misunderstandings.

I've been the victim of a bad boss. I once received the worst performance review of my life—with no explanation. When I asked, my boss told me, "You shouldn't have asked the question."

I never want to be that kind of boss. If someone on my team gets a poor review, I provide specific examples and honest feedback—even when it's hard to hear.

I also welcome criticism. I believe in two-way communication. That's how we grow—together.

"仁" in Action: Practical ways to demonstrate care and cultivate trust in a remote setting

There's a Japanese expression: "the whip of love." It means offering tough advice not out of harshness, but out of deep care. When I give my employees difficult feedback, it's not to criticize—it's because I want them to grow, succeed, and thrive. I never set them up for failure.

I lead with 仁—compassion—because I genuinely care about my team. I have a passion for my work, and I'm deeply invested in my employees' growth. To me, leadership isn't just about managing deadlines—it's about nurturing potential.

I want to pass down the knowledge and wisdom I've gained to the next generation. Not just how to write code, but how to think critically, solve problems, and develop confidence in their own ability to find solutions. I believe in teaching the why behind the how.

In a remote environment, building trust takes intention. You don't have spontaneous hallway chats or shared lunches to bond over. So, you lead with empathy. You show consistency. You offer support—even when it's tough love.

That's 仁 in action.

CONCLUSION

Managing a remote team is more than just assigning tasks and tracking deliverables—it's about cultivating trust, encouraging connection, and showing compassion in the absence of physical presence. As middle managers, we have a unique responsibility to keep our teams motivated, engaged, and cared for.

Yes, there are real challenges: it's harder to gauge emotional well-being, build team spirit, and spot when someone is quietly struggling. But there are also real opportunities to redefine leadership in a way that prioritizes empathy, clarity, and trust.

By embracing tools like Microsoft Teams, OneNote, and video calls intentionally, we can create new forms of collaboration. Through casual conversation, virtual events, and meaningful one-on-one check-ins, we can foster real connection. And by leading with 仁—compassion—we can ensure that our team members feel seen, heard, and supported.

One of my employees suggested that I should give the presentation remotely. Yes, I would be more comfortable doing that. However, I need to step outside of my comfort zone to lead and show that sometimes we need to get out of our comfortable home office. Many of the programmers are young and skillful. I genuinely wish them success in the future and would like to share all that I know with them.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

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