



MANAGING EMPLOYEES AT A DISTANCE: STRATEGIES FOR LEADING COMMUNITY/FIELD BASED TEAMS

For many organizations, community based, or field based employees are the heart of service delivery. They work directly in neighborhoods, client homes, partner sites, jails, or distributed field locations—representing the organization in spaces leaders often never see firsthand. While this model increases impact and reach, it also introduces unique leadership challenges. Managing at a distance requires intentional communication, trust-building, structured support systems, and clear performance expectations.

This article outlines practical management strategies for managers who lead employees they rarely (or never) see in person.

Strategy #1. Shift From Presence Based Management to Outcomes Based Leadership

Traditional, presence-based management often relies on visible activity—seeing employees at their desks, observing work habits, or holding impromptu check ins. Field based work removes that reliance entirely.

Conversely, outcomes-based leadership relies or focuses on ensuring deliverables are clear and that employees know what success looks like. Outcomes-based leadership empowers employees and ensures all expectations are transparent, documented, and aligned with organizational goals.

Strategy #2. Build Trust Through Consistent, Intentional Communication

Community or Field-based roles can be isolating—physically, socially, and emotionally. Employees often work alone or in environments where they are the only representative of the organization.

To build trust and ensure these employees maintain a feeling of connectedness with the organization, it is recommended that distance managers be proactive in hosting regular one-on-one meetings, use multiple channels of communication for the meetings, and remain visible without micromanaging. The message employees should receive is: “I’m supported, not monitored.”

Strategy #3. Provide Structure Without Overloading

It’s not uncommon for community or field-based employees to juggle client needs, travel, documentation, community relationships, and shifting priorities. Without an office environment, structure must be intentionally designed.

Creating clear guidelines for daily workflow, documentation, and internal response norms are all ways that distance managers can provide the structure needed to help employees

effectively juggle work demands to minimize feeling overloaded. Clear structure offers clarity, reduces stress, and ensures consistency across distributed staff.

Strategy #4. Use Technology to Bridge Physical Distance

Technology is the backbone of effective distance management—but only when used strategically.

Project management and virtual meeting platforms, documentation systems, and shared dashboards are all tools of technology that can be used to help bridge physical distance. Still, training on how to properly use these tools is essential to ensure employees feel confident using them and that the tools serve the work—not the other way around.

Strategy #5. Prioritize Relationship Building and Team Culture

Culture does not happen accidentally with distributed teams. Managers must intentionally cultivate culture and connection. This is important because relationship building and a strong, connective team culture boosts engagement, reduces turnover, and creates a sense of belonging.

Distance managers can build culture by publicly celebrating wins, hosting peer connection activities such as group chats, or by encouraging knowledge sharing.

Strategy #6. Support Employee Well Being and Psychological Safety

Field-based employees often encounter challenging environments such as vulnerable clients, unpredictable conditions, or emotionally heavy conversations. Distance can make it harder for managers to notice early signs of burnout caused by these challenging environments.

Distance managers can gauge employees' mental and psychological well-being by staying in touch with employees and asking questions about their workload. Normalizing conversations about stress, workload, or well-being are necessary to stay abreast of signs of burnout. When employees feel safe raising concerns, issues can be addressed long before they impact performance. Additionally, distance managers can also make mental health resources available to their employees.

Strategy #7. Conduct High Quality Field Coaching and In Person Check Ins/Ride-A-Longs

Even in a distributed model, periodic, in person field visits are invaluable. These visits allow managers to:

- Observe employees' real-world challenges
- Provide immediate feedback and coaching
- Strengthen relationships through shared experience
- Validate the employee's field realities to the wider organization

If an in person check-in is impossible, virtual shadowing or recorded ride a-longs can provide similar insight.

Strategy #8. Create a Fair and Transparent Performance Management System

Distance shouldn't create confusion or ambiguity. Employees must clearly understand what is expected of them, by when, how it will be measured, and the consequences of not meeting expectations. A performance management system that is fair might include a mix of quantitative metrics and qualitative indicators.

Strategy #9. Encourage Autonomy While Maintaining Accessibility

Community or Field-based employees often thrive with independence however, they still need to know their manager is available. Distance managers can demonstrate their accessibility by being responsive to questions and by building a culture of trust and support. This balance between autonomy and accessibility empowers employees while ensuring a steady connection to their manager and team.

Conclusion

Managing community or field based employees requires a leadership style rooted in clarity, trust, connection, and intentional structure. When managers shift from monitoring presence to guiding outcomes—and when they invest in relationship-building and communication—the result is a strong, empowered, high-performing team. Distance doesn't have to weaken leadership. With the right systems in place, it can actually create a more resilient, engaged, and mission-driven workforce.