MANAGING YOUR TEAM:

How to manage your faculty away from campus

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◢ Focus on Your Purpose

In this time of "Covid-19 Learning," schools all over the world have had to make significant changes. As we've transitioned from teaching students directly in the classroom to teaching students from a distance, we've innovated and modified in ways we wouldn't have thought possible just a few months ago. Yet even with all these adjustments, what hasn't changed is our purpose. As Christian educators, we still seek to provide our students excellent academics built upon Biblical truth. We still seek to influence these students for Christ in their spiritual, academic, and personal growth. The decisions we make and actions we take must focus on furthering and supporting our purpose.

With that in mind, we're focusing on ways to engage our faculty during this unique time because we realize a deeper issue is at hand: significant decrease in student academic productivity. As our students have shifted to schooling from home, many of them are falling behind due to lack of resources, time, oversight, motivation, and a shortage of immediate academic feedback. Lower academic achievement leads to potential customer dissatisfaction and decreased enrollments, and decreased enrollments leads to the Christian school having less opportunity to influence young people and its community for Christ.

We must engage and encourage our faculty because they are our primary means of reaching, encouraging, and sustaining our students. Whether we have less than two weeks until the end of the school year or more than a month, we can still assess our current practices and determine what we might still do further support our teachers.

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▶ Keep the Right Perspective

◇ **God is in control.** We find ourselves in a unique time, one that brings numerous challenges. Yet while we were all surprised by the developments of the COVID-19 pandemic, nothing surprised God. His timing and planning is always perfect.

◇ **Remote work is not new.** According to the Harvard Business Review, nearly 25% of the American workforce was already working remotely in some capacity before the COVID-19 pandemic, and plenty of studies have shown that remote work can be exceedingly productive. The abrupt switch from classroom learning to modified distance learning may have catapulted educators—Christian and non-Christian alike— into new territory, but there is plenty of research, data, and examples of remote work in other contexts available to us. We don't have to endure this time. Let's learn and thrive! In fact, we've already followed some best practices for remote work. Companies who allow employees to work from home begin with a period of work in the home office prior to a remote work arrangement. Most of our faculty was with us for ¾ of the school year before they converted to working remotely.

▶ Take Action

◇ **Trust your teachers**. You have vetted and hired them for their abilities, character, and ministry commitment. Let them flourish. If you know you tend to be domineering or easily fall into the habit of micro-managing your team, now is the time to ease back. You'll find many of your teachers exceed your expectations as you empower them with your trust.

◇ **Trim down academic expectations for students.** Neither expect nor require students to do the same amount of work at home as they do at school. Keep in mind that many students share resources, space, and time with parents and siblings. The goal is not to replicate your school in your students' homes; it is simply to deliver the essentials of an education. As you trim down the expectations for your students, you will simultaneously trim down the work of the teachers.

- Reduce assignments. Consider the most essential information students need to understand as they finish out the year and limit assignments to those that further that essential information.

- Focus on core/skills-based subjects such as language and math. Prioritize the knowledge students will need to build on next year.

    - Be sure to still meet the standards and goals your school must maintain for accreditation purposes. Several states are implementing exceptions for this year. Find out your state's expectations and carefully document the adaptations your school made during this period.

- Avoid continual changes. Be willing to adapt to meet the needs of your school but pick a path and then refine that path rather than completely changing course.

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◇ *Support your teachers.*

- **Understand the challenges they're facing.** Many of the difficulties your teachers are facing at this time have to do with the responsibilities they have of implementing and maintaining remote instruction. While we might find ourselves facing these challenges for the first time, we can still gain better understanding of this situation by looking at what studies have shown to be the weaknesses of remote work and realize that these are exacerbated by the suddenness with which our teachers were thrust into their new environments.

  - *Supervision:* With a lack of face-to-face interaction, principals can begin to doubt the efficiency and productivity of the teachers. In turn, teachers tend to perceive that they are lacking support for their needs since principals appear to be out of reach. You will find yourself battling both reality and perception.

  - *Information:* It takes more time to get basic answers. Additionally, research has revealed that coworker relationships are strained due to a decrease in communication and increased likelihood of distrust. Without the close proximity and context knowledge administrators and faculty would typically have, offense can be taken far more easily. Consider how body language, vocal inflection, and facial expression all contribute to communicating the actual meaning of the words being spoken. In contrast, the emails that most of us are relying on for communication only provide words.

  - *Social isolation:* Loneliness is one of the most common complaints with remote work. In turn, loneliness may eventually lead to disengagement and a desire to leave not just the Christian school but the Christian education ministry as a whole.

  - *Distractions:* While we could create a seemingly endless list of potential distractions, the two main ones teachers are facing are

    (1) dedicated workspace and

    (2) adequate childcare.

    Neither one of these has easy solutions at this time, but even as we aim to minimize them as much as possible, we need to expect distractions and not become overwhelmed when they occur.

- **Seek to mitigate the effects of those challenges.** We're all limited in time and resources right now, but you can take the following mitigation steps relatively quickly and inexpensively. These are recognized best practices reported by Harvard Business, Forbes, Education Week, and numerous other remote experts.

  - *Exude calm confidence.* Be the calming, reassuring leader. Just as students often mirror the level of emotional stability modeled by their parents, so your teachers will reflect the emotional stability you model. Emotional contagion research has proven that workers look to their supervisors for clues on whether a crisis is manageable. This may be new territory for you and your teachers,

but you are not pioneers. Others are doing it successfully. Your job is to find out what are successful practices and adapt to your situation. Focus on the potential rather than the unknown. Expressions such as "We've got this!" or "This will show our strengths," when sincerely given, are excellent.

- _Establish order._ Empower teachers with your trust but still clearly communicate the expectations, boundaries, guidelines, processes, and policies related to both their personal performance and their students' performance. This includes the metrics used to define success. What is the final goal and what is the path to get there? What happens if students don't meet that goal?

- _Empower._ Let your teachers be the professionals you know they are. Give them parameters for instruction methods and frequency, but then let them do what they do best. Do not micromanage the processes. Instead, focus on results.

- _Communicate frequently and clearly._ Communication is foundational to knowing if your ministry is accomplishing its goals, seeing potential problems on the horizon, and supporting your teachers. As the administrator, you become the chief information officer for the school. (Communication, if done properly, will consume a lion's share of your time right now.) Use a variety of platforms with your team—videoconferencing is best because it is most life-like. E-mail is OK for routine items. Text is fine for quick responses. Help your teachers establish communication schedules— both with you and with the parents they are serving.

    - Right now, aim for daily check-ins. These can be one-on-one or as a team, depending on the circumstances. You might plan videoconferencing as a team on Mondays and Fridays and then plan on individual check-ins on the intervening days.

    - Expectations and guidelines are best communicated in a written format. Consider emailing your teachers any new expectations and guidelines and then arranging a videoconference to clarify any points or answer any questions.

- _Protect the person._ One of the clearest pitfalls of remote instruction is the loneliness and burnout to which your teachers are quite susceptible right now. Create ways to make personal connections.

    - Create a virtual space where teachers can interact with non-work topics. In the business world, the watercooler is often the area for workers to gather. In the school, it may be the lunch room. Since teachers cannot physically gather, help them create a place where they can do so virtually.

    - Spend the first few minutes of meetings to inquire about personal matters. Use leading questions that help you quickly assess how your

teachers are doing. Such questions as "How much sleep were you able to get last night?" or "How are your children doing with their schooling?" often provide insightful answers to how the teacher is really doing.

– Help your teachers establish schedules. One of the biggest concerns we have for our teachers is burnout. Many are finding that parents and students have no qualms about contacting them late into the night. The reality is that our teachers cannot work normal school-day hours and still serve the late-night families. If evening communication is necessary, block off an earlier part of the day for personal/family time. Help your teachers limit evening communication to a set window (maybe 7:00–9:00). Although your teachers are capable professionals, they may still need encouragement and direction from you to create a manageable schedule in balancing their personal and school responsibilities.

– Supply professional development tips like the Pomodoro Technique developed by Francesco Cirillo. He suggests that once workers choose a task, they work on the task for twenty-five minutes before taking a five-minute break. They return to the task for another twenty-five minutes before yet another five-minute break. After following this cycle four times (two hours), they take a longer break. It is always our role as administrators to help our teachers develop professionally. Time management is an area of professional development that will not only benefit them with their responsibilities right now but will continue to benefit them when they return to classroom teaching.

Just as our teachers are seeking ways to engage and motivate their students, so we must be seeking ways to engage and motivate our teachers during a time when many of them are tired and discouraged. You are the leader of your team. Seek to strengthen your team's unity and focus in order to continue to live out your school's purpose of reaching students for Christ and training them to live for Him.

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