

Managing remotely,

some tips I found, um, online and put into a language teaching context

Communication is key

There are many tools and channels out there for communication, use them and use them often.

Keep in contact

We are busy, teachers are busy, admin is busy, even our managers are busy at the moment but we do need to make sure we stay in touch with teachers. Just because we no longer see them working and therefore hearing about them and their lessons it doesn't mean things are not happening. Classes going well or badly, resources that can't be found, "How the hell do I teach this?", the buzz in the staffroom when everyone comes out of class, and countless other little daily moments.

Having regular meetings and using breakout rooms to get them to share their experiences, or setting up buddy groups and checking in with them regularly can go some way to recreating this. Of course, teachers may already be doing this themselves but do not assume everyone is involved.

Be available

This can be surprisingly difficult. At school people can see if you are busy and sense whether it feels urgent, or at least whether what you are doing is more urgent than what they need. Remotely this is not possible. Having many open channels of communication, a speed-of-reply policy and perhaps sharing some times when you are available for 'drop in chats' can all help teachers feel that they can get hold of you, or your team if needed.

Use video

We speak differently and react differently when we can see someone. When they text us saying something like, "It's ok, I'm fine now" how do we know? If we were in the room with them their face, tone, and body language would all give us clues. Video is not perfect, but it is better than emojis (even if you're an emoji and gif genius, I'm not).

Consider using something like Google Hangouts for short meetings where you don't need the functions you get in software such as Zoom or GoTo Meeting to keep from overloading one system.

Make small talk

We would do this at school, so do it online too.

Small talk builds rapport, good rapport builds trust. With any luck we have some of this in the bank already but you don't want to take it out all in one go. Keep

communicating with your team and make sure they have opportunities to communicate with you.

Ps. despite the advice above to use video, social media is a great way to communicate about non-work things.

Really, really, really try hard not to cancel meetings

This one is really hard when everyone is working from home. Kids need love and attention (i.e. feeding and the password for netflix), partners are working, and everyone is using up bandwidth. At school if there is a reason to cancel a meeting with a teacher they are usually aware enough to understand there is a more urgent work problem to deal with; and they can grab you later the next time you are both around. Online they can't see what the reason for cancelling is, and they don't know when you might next get to see them.

If you do have to cancel, when you inform the teacher(s), offer a new time in the same communication so they know that conversation is also important to you. Cancel too often, the word will go around and that all important trust will begin to ebb away.

Set clear but reasonable expectations

Back in January we all could probably categorise our teachers as really good, really very good and I-wish-I-was-that-good. With so many of us new to online teaching those assessments go out the window to some extent. But we still must expect things of our teachers. The simplest is probably just to engage with their students, but things like the Zoom can-do list from Shaun's intro session; and making sure they know how many pages of the book they should aim to cover will all help.

Understand the problems of working remotely

The obvious one here is the tech and internet connectivity. With many, many people suddenly working and studying from home not every teacher will be able to have glitch free lessons and meetings. Have a clear policy and ensure teachers know what this is.

The other big one here for many teachers will be the lack of turn-round-and-ask-someone support. Whether that is for an activity to do with their teens class, or a longer discussion about pairwork something very valuable and taken for granted (as in we know it exists rather than lack of gratitude) is no longer there. Webinars, blogs and articles are all good, but they do not replace a useful word or idea from someone you work with, who knows you and your context. Once the initial rush of getting things up and running is over, finding ways to support teachers like this might just be the most important thing. Again, making buddy groups can help ease the pressure off the academic team here.

Include non-teaching staff

Much of the above will apply to non-teaching staff too, and in many ways doing their job remotely will be more difficult than for teachers (e.g. many admin staff are working mothers who now have children at home trying to study and not get too bored). Keeping in contact with them, even if there are no problems to resolve will be important for the overall well-being of your online school.

Don't forget about yourself

Thinking of our staff is really important at this time, but so is thinking about our families and ourselves. If something can wait until the morning then make it wait until morning. Stress lowers immunity, lowered immunity makes us more susceptible to illness...you know where I am going with this.

Switch off, read, listen to music, play with your kids / dog / lover, meditate, sleep.

Dave Cleary,
Brno 23/3/2020