

Managing Remotely? Avoid the "Dreaded Bob Syndrome"

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Managing Remotely? Avoid the "Dreaded Bob Syndrome"

Managing remotely can have many challenges. One is the "Dreaded BOB Syndrome." BOB is not an acronym, it's the name of a childhood friend of mine, who, as an adult, moved in across the street from my wife and me. We renewed our friendship and occasionally socialized with him over the next ten years. (He was single and lived alone.)

Bob was a professional photographer so the first thing he did in his new house was convert one of the bedrooms to a darkroom. Over the years we noticed that Bob spent most of his time, when he wasn't on a camera shoot, in that dark room. He told me that sometimes he would not come out for days except to eat and go to the bathroom.

After a while, we noticed Bob got a bit strange. He became a bit self-centered. All he talked about was himself. He didn't seem to relate to other people. It was like he had a personality change. I don't mean he got psychotic. He just got weird.

After seeing this happen to him, my wife and I jokingly coined the term "BOB Syndrome" to refer to people who were distant or weird or are unable to hold a conversation without going off on tangents or being totally focused on themselves. (We did tell Bob that we'd created this term and to his credit, he thought it was a "hoot.")

When people who are used to working with others every day are suddenly working by themselves, they may start showing signs of suffering from the “Dreaded BOB Syndrome” just because they are suddenly by themselves. Here are some suggestions to head-off this dreaded condition:

1. Call them at least once a week. If possible, do it via some sort of video format like Skype, FaceTime, WebEx or Zoom so they can see your face. This creates a better human connection than the phone but either way, do it at least once per week.
2. Ask them what’s going well with their work. This gives them a chance to brag about themselves a little bit.
3. Ask them what they find challenging. This can be tricky because if you’re their boss, they may not want to tell you, especially if they are struggling.
4. To get around this hesitance, prime the pump to get them to open up. For example, you might self-disclose a challenge you are having with being at home. “ Gosh, I find it distracting to have the kids in the house or to just be in the house because there are so many other things to do besides the work. What kind of challenges are you facing?” This has two benefits: (1) It gives you the opportunity to help them get through whatever challenge they’re facing. (2) It helps them feel connected to you, which can help with the Hal Syndrome.
5. Ask them what you can do to help them and offer suggestions.

6. Mention something positive about their work. In their wonderful book *First Break All the Rules*, Kaufman and Buckingham found that when people reported that their supervisor had said something positive about their work within the last seven days, productivity, profitability and customer satisfaction scores were higher and employee turnover was lower.

That does mean you have to stay on top of how they're progressing on their projects and know where they are struggling. That's why you should be connecting with them weekly. Besides, it reduces the odds they will suffer from the "Dreaded BOB Syndrome."

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