

Establish communication culture with telecommuters

Staying connected to telecommuters requires more effort than sending random e-mails, occasional faxes or intermittent conference calls. Successful communication with employees who work outside the office requires the establishment of a communication culture — a commitment to developing several ways to convey information says **Debra Dinnocenzo**, president of **ALearnatives** and author of *101 Tips for Telecommuters*.

Here are examples of sound communication culture practices:

- **Use of various communications tools.** Employees should not rely solely on one process to communicate information. A popular telecommuting communication method, e-mail, is not ideal for a telecommuter who travels frequently and may have difficulty going online to retrieve mail, Dinnocenzo says. Telecommuters may experience problems with equipment like faxes or computers that, when they break down, may take longer to be repaired because they lack in-house technical

support. Discuss the various ways information will be distributed, the response times expected for each and contingency plans when a communication tool is inoperable or not feasible.

- **Consistent personal interaction.** Personal interaction is vital to team building, Dinnocenzo says, and the telecommuter should attend meetings but also participate in events like a customer visit, a retirement party for a colleague or a holiday gathering to develop personal relationships with co-workers.

- **Deal with conflict immediately.** Because of the nature of a telecommuting relationship, a co-worker who works outside of the office doesn't have the chance to casually talk to a co-worker over coffee to help smooth out undercurrents of conflict. If disagreement or resentment is suspected, Dinnocenzo recommends that the problem be discussed immediately. Waiting can cause communication to crumble. ■

Source: Debra Dinnocenzo, 101 Tips for Telecommuters (Berrett-Koehler 1999).

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