

How do you manage an exhausted in-house legal team?

We're connected to thousands of in-house legal teams around the world. Whether large or small, there's one constant that we're hearing: teams are showing signs of burnout.



Six key tips for in-house leaders to consider

1) Give your team enough space

One of the difficult balancing acts for managers is finding the line between providing helpful guidance and being ever-present and overbearing. If you're in every video call, you might find your team members aren't getting time and space to relax with their peers. Perhaps think about joining a meeting later or leaving earlier, allowing your team to have some time with peers only. The counterpoint here is to ensure you don't disappear completely.

One interesting initiative was to require team members to escalate queries to a peer before escalating upwards. The GC sharing this suggestion had found that this reduced the burden on more senior members of the team and encouraged helpful cross-pollination.

2) Maintain contact with the whole team - not just direct reports

Some of the feedback we heard hit on the difficulty of maintaining contact with the wider team. With direct reports, most managers naturally found a way to regularly connect despite the new working environment. However, it has been more difficult to replicate the natural 'water-cooler' moments with non-direct reports. Some measures to combat these are well-documented, including in our briefing, [Remote Connection](#), where we talked about randomly assigning team members a buddy.

The in-house legal leaders we spoke to had an assortment of different approaches, typically variations on one theme - setting aside a short period of time during the working week for non-direct reports to have a more casual chat.

3) Get every team member to complete a personal well-being plan

It's important for each individual to document how they plan to look after their physical and mental well-being. In the pandemic environment, this is more vital than ever before. The act of completing a plan is an essential part of your toolkit for boosting your team's well-being. You can lead the way by opening up the dialogue on well-being and sharing a template plan to be completed. By collaborating with your team on their plan, you will demonstrate your willingness to support them. Further, you can role-model healthy behaviours by sharing your own plan and regularly referring back to it with clear accountability.

There are plenty of free resources to help, for example, Mind's Guide to [Wellness Action Plans](#). To give this plan meaning it needs to sit alongside and equal to their personal and professional development plans.

4) Encourage asynchronous working

During the pandemic, many in-house lawyers experienced an upheaval in their working hours. Home-schooling and other lockdown restrictions have shifted a fairly typical working day into a much more unpredictable one. As a manager, you may find it easier to work later in the evening, free from daytime distractions. However, ensure you make it clear when you're sending an email at 10pm you don't require an immediate response. By providing clear timelines, you can guard against phantom deadlines and unnecessary stress.

A practical tip here is to include a note in your internal email signature (or status in Teams or the equivalent) that lets your staff know your availability and best contact times.

Further reading:

- [A one page summary of our discussion with top GCs on the subject of over-stretched teams](#)
- [LODcast on stress and mental health in the profession](#)
- [LODcast on remote working](#)
- [Remote Connection' - LOD briefing on managing juniors and new joiners remotely](#)
- [How to Lead When Your Team Is Exhausted – and You Are, Too](#) (HBR)

5) Control the meeting landscape

Everyone is now familiar with the phenomena of video meeting fatigue – sometimes called the '[Trauma of Zoom](#)'. There are a number of tactics here, all with the same objective – limit the amount of meetings. Some of the in-house leaders banned any calls during lunch, some banned Friday mornings. Whatever the moratorium, there was a shared consensus that there does need to be some allocated time in people's weekly diaries where they know they can work uninterrupted by a meeting.

6) Don't forget learning & development

During the urgency of the initial pandemic response, many organisations were in crisis mode and it was necessary to pause certain activities. As we now find ourselves in this extended period of challenge, we need to ensure some of those suspended activities are returned. We know that learning is an essential part of high-performing legal teams, so if you haven't already, it might be time to prioritise getting some learning sessions back into your team's diary. Not only do these sessions grow your team's skillsets, but they provide an opportunity for the team to refresh and be together outside of everyday work.

Conclusion

Managing a team is never easy, let alone in a pandemic. It's important to acknowledge the challenge of the moment we find ourselves in. Hopefully, these tips provided a helpful guide for you to provide the support your team needs. Despite the struggle, many in-house leaders have embraced new ways of working for their team and have already predicted they will endure beyond the crisis.