

# Leading in the Hybrid Workplace

2020 and COVID-19 brought rapid disruption to workplaces around the world. The sudden shift to remote work tested most organizations' ability to adapt and adjust to the next normal. Now leaders are facing the reality that a flexible workplace is here to stay. [Microsoft's 2021 Work Trend Index](#) found that 73% of the 30,000 people surveyed across 31 countries want the option of flexible remote work to continue. However, 65% percent of workers crave more in-person time with colleagues, revealing that the future workplace will likely be made up of hybrid teams with a mix of fully remote, fully in-person, and blended schedule employees being the norm. Satya Nadella, CEO at Microsoft, explains that "Over the past year, no area has undergone more rapid transformation than the way we work. Employee expectations are changing, and we will need to define productivity much more broadly — inclusive of collaboration, learning, and wellbeing to drive career advancement for every worker, including frontline and knowledge workers, as well as for new graduates and those who are in the workforce today. All this needs to be done with flexibility in when, where, and how people work."

It will be critical for leaders to re-think their approach to managing successful teams for exceptional results. A physical location can no longer serve as the anchor to an organization's culture and identity. Instead, managers will need to reflect on their approach to leading teams and find effective ways to create a cohesive workplace culture that is not dependent on co-location. Additionally, some jobs and tasks cannot be performed remotely, so leaders must



ensure that all employees are treated fairly and feel as valued as their counterparts whether they work on-site or at home.

Organizations have already proven they can pivot quickly and be flexible. The time has come to re-imagine the future and create the structure needed to support employees, foster innovation, and drive results in the new hybrid work environment.

## Challenges of the Hybrid Workplace

Organizations that move to a hybrid workplace will face several challenges along the way. Leaders of mixed in-person and remote teams will need to carefully consider the setup of office space, the quality of equipment used, IT

infrastructure and security, and employee access to adequate internet and telephone service. To make a permanent change to a hybrid workplace, managers must design workspaces and job assignments with thoughtful consideration of individual needs. In addition to technical concerns, leaders must find new ways to create a cohesive workplace culture that encourages collaboration and effective communication. When the pandemic hit, offices around the world moved quickly to remote work, and now they must closely analyze what worked well— and what did not— to purposefully create a successful hybrid work environment.



Careful consideration of equity and inclusion is equally, if not more important in a hybrid workplace, as visibility and access to leadership can play a large role in advancing careers. Employees need to be visible to managers to access the resources they need for work and stay informed. Similarly, managers need to have access to employees to know what they are working on, be aware of any problems

that might arise, and facilitate the allocation of any resources they need. When teams are co-located, it can be easier to share this information, while remote teams sometimes feel cut off from communication and help. Additionally, it is common for remote workers to feel they have to find ways to prove their devotion and hard work. While in-office workers can be seen working long hours or skipping lunch while bent over a project at their desk, remote workers often work longer and take fewer breaks than their in-office counterparts. Remote workers may require more one-to-one time with managers to feel connected and prevent overwork and burnout.

## Hybrid Workplaces Need Effective Leaders

The success of a hybrid workplace relies heavily on effective leadership. Setting expectations and communicating them clearly across teams will be more important than ever. Keeping teams connected and creating a cohesive culture will be a top priority for managers, and it will look different from working fully in person. Findings in the Microsoft Work Trend Index Report show that [feelings of team connection](#) will depend heavily on a manager's ability to support their employees in three main areas.

## Work-Life Balance

At Microsoft, employees satisfied with work-life balance were 1.3 times more likely to feel connected to their teams. Employees working remotely may tend to lose the time-based boundaries created by a commute to and from the office. While this is a positive in terms of flexibility, it can quickly turn into overwork and burnout. Managers that focus on clear communication of priorities and deadlines create structure for the hybrid workplace. Remote team members

should communicate their available days and hours to the entire team. This is especially important in organizations with workers in different time zones. Another important consideration is to ensure team meeting times are fair for everyone or at least rotated so that everyone takes a turn being up early or staying up late to make the meeting. Clearly defined expectations regarding email response times, appropriate use of instant messaging apps and text messaging, and preferred methods of communication for asynchronous work are essential to protecting work-life balance while maintaining productivity. These expectations might evolve as time goes by, so it is a good idea for teams to revisit and refine these agreements as both personal and business circumstances change over time.

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Managers of successful hybrid workplaces lead by example when it comes to work-life balance. Modeling boundaries is the best way to encourage employees to do the same. Encouraging workers to take regular breaks is good, but when workers see their leader has blocked out time for breaks, they are more likely to feel like they have permission to do the same. In addition, managers should use their vacation and encourage employees to do the same. Rest and recovery are an important part of achieving peak performance.

## Passion for Work

In the Work Trend Index Report, Microsoft also found that employees who said they love their work were 1.4 times

more likely to feel connected to their team. As most people know, maintaining a passion for work over time can be challenging in any industry. Most employees will begin a job in a honeymoon phase full of excitement and possibility, but like any relationship, there will be peaks, valleys, and plateaus along the way. Being aware of signs that an employee is becoming disengaged will allow leaders to take action before it's too late.

Focusing on workplace satisfaction can help keep teams connected both in-person and remotely. Most employees will work harder for managers who take a personal interest in their wellbeing and provide personal growth and development opportunities. Leaders can allocate time and resources for employees to learn a new skill or take on new cross-departmental projects to get familiar with different aspects of the business. Monotony is the enemy of growth and creativity, so great leaders encourage continued skill development and learning opportunities for their teams.

In addition to providing learning opportunities, leaders can celebrate wins and point out how team members contribute to the organization's overall success. When individuals [feel their work is meaningful](#), they are more likely to report job satisfaction and feel connected to their team.



## Supportive Culture

An organization's culture refers to its unspoken beliefs, values, behaviors, and norms. However, it's also about how a company's people treat each other every day. As the workplace shifts from in-person to remote work, company culture from the top-down becomes less relevant, but individual team culture increases. So the burden of creating a supportive culture falls heavily on team leaders and managers.

[Google's People Operations set out to find out what makes teams great](#) by conducting a two-year study of their employees, looking at over 250 attributes of more than 180 active Google teams. The researchers expected to confirm that a great team is made by assembling the perfect mix of individual skills. Instead, they found that the key to team success lies in their interactions and behaviors. As a result, the researchers identified five elements of culture that explain high-performing teams:

- **Dependability** – the extent to which team members were accountable to shared expectations
- **Structure and Clarity** – having established clear rules of engagement
- **Meaning and Purpose** – having a shared sense that their work had significance
- **Impact** – individuals feel their contributions made a difference
- **Psychological Safety** – team members felt they could be vulnerable and authentic with one another



Effective leaders consider the traits of high-functioning teams and take action to strengthen them regularly. Creating clear expectations around behavior is vital to creating effective remote and hybrid teams. Additionally, great teams focus on building trust and respect to create real psychological safety. Building trust requires creating opportunities for individuals to feel trusted and behave in trusting ways. Leaders can start by trusting team members to get work done without being overly monitored and allowing them to prove their dependability to the rest of the team by following through with tasks and deadlines. Building trust in remote and hybrid teams is often dependent on modeling respectful behavior. Leaders must set the expectation of appropriate behavior while also living those values in real-time.

## Effective Communication in the Hybrid Workplace

Communication is usually a stated priority for any organization. One national survey by Pew Research Center found that 85% of people believe that communication is “extremely” or “very” important to organizational success. However, according to an Arthur J. Gallagher & CO. study, [60% of companies](#) don't have any long-term internal communication strategy, even though about half say they want improving leadership communication to be a top priority. Shockingly, these statistics were reported before the pandemic shift to remote work. In the new hybrid workplace, communication will continue to be critical to success and difficult to accomplish consistently. Leaders are challenged with ensuring everyone is working with the same information. On hybrid teams, it is vital to create clear expectations about channels of communication and how often employees should check-in.



## Remote Meeting Manners

Remote teams will need to learn video conferencing manners, such as focusing on the camera when speaking during video meetings. It is always tempting to multitask during a video meeting. However, it degrades trust and respect among team members trying to communicate or present while their co-workers look off to another screen or are visibly typing away throughout the meeting. Suppose a leader observes that team members are consistently disengaged during regularly scheduled video meetings. In that case, they might carefully evaluate if the content is relevant to attendees and if the frequency of the meetings is truly necessary. It can be helpful to communicate the importance of each member's attention and contribution frequently and to create an expectation that everyone closes all other windows on their computer during video meetings to reduce distractions.

## Hybrid Meeting Manners

Another challenge in hybrid team communication happens when holding meetings with one group of participants attending in-person and one or more attendees joining via speakerphone or video. With the right equipment in a conference room, this can be just a matter of turn-taking. However, some teams might consider it easier for everyone to join via individual video in mixed location meetings. It is best to avoid situations where everyone in the room is free to interject in the conversation fluidly while the remote attendee is forgotten on the other end of the phone or monitor. It may feel awkward at first, but the best solution is to regularly go around the group to ask for comments in turn. Participants can pass their turn if they have nothing to say, but everyone should get a moment to add value to the meeting no matter where they are located.

## Create Opportunities to Connect

Small talk in the hallways, break-rooms, and happy hours has traditionally been a very important part of workplace communication. This sort of bonding conversation is important to teambuilding and casual knowledge sharing and, without clear intention, can be difficult to replicate. Virtual happy hours and games are a great way to facilitate this type of interaction, but there are many other creative ways to create connections remotely. Remote teams can share a virtual meeting room meant for creating a co-working space. Team members can drop in for casual conversation while doing their independent work, replicating the open-office concepts where employees could talk across desks and cubicle walls. Managers could also offer to buy lunch for any team members that schedule a remote lunch meeting with a co-worker to encourage relationship building.

## Hybrid Workplace Success Requires Great Leaders

Although hybrid teams will look and operate a little differently than the traditional in-office model, the secret to success remains the same—strong, effective leadership. Hybrid workplaces can offer a great opportunity for organizations to attract diverse talent, to increase both productivity and employee satisfaction, to reduce costs and to see improved work-life balance from the C-suite to the front line. However, the success of these teams will depend upon the effectiveness of their leaders. More than ever, leaders must develop the skills they need to manage through change, engage their hybrid teams effectively, and drive for results.



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