

Four principles for creating an effective hybrid workplace culture

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At last! 2021. The country heaved a collective sigh of relief – the year of the pandemic was finally over. With a vaccine having arrived, it seems that the worst may eventually be behind us. But even though we may be heading towards the other side of the crisis, COVID-19 has changed the way we work – perhaps forever.

In 2020, we discovered that many jobs can – despite what we may have thought earlier – function well remotely. And in 2021, people in these roles will return to the office environment gradually – that is, if at all. For a variety of reasons, many will request to work from home beyond the pandemic. And for those who return to the office, physical distancing may still be necessary. Even as pandemic restrictions loosen across the country, it is likely that a significant degree of virtual work will continue, most likely resulting in a hybrid work environment for the foreseeable future.

A hybrid team is one where some staff work in the office and others work out of their homes, perhaps intermittently. A virtual or remote team is one where all your staff work from home, including you.

When it comes to remote or hybrid teams, it takes more work to lead. It takes greater effort to communicate, to motivate, to resolve conflicts. A leader's job is to engage employees so as to deliver results to clients and other stakeholders. While leadership can be challenging when your entire team is in one place, those same issues multiply and compound when virtual or hybrid comes into play.

The single most important thing you can do to create a high-functioning virtual or hybrid team is to purposefully articulate, establish and maintain your team's workplace culture. Your workplace culture is the character and personality of your department or organization. It includes a team's interactions, behaviours, attitudes and values that make up the environment and norms they operate in. Your workplace culture gives your staff the signs and clues they need to determine how to behave and act. Essentially it is the unwritten, yet agreed-to, code of conduct.

Over time, team members develop particular ways of interacting with each other until those habits become behavioural expectations. Whether you were consciously aware of it or not, you had a relatively homogeneous workplace culture before COVID-19. But now, not only has the physical environment changed, but people don't have the in-person cues to tell them how they should get things done and how to relate to one another. As the leader, you have to consciously establish and maintain the workplace culture you desire.

There are four things you should be deliberate about as you establish your long-distance workplace culture:

1. Open communication. Your remote team needs to intentionally keep the right

- people in the loop. The organic discussions that naturally happened in the office are no more. So at least to start, overcompensate with information.
2. Clear expectations. Your staff need to know what you require in terms of goals, timelines, milestones and individual availability.
 3. A climate of trust. You cannot manage work effort because you cannot see what your staff are doing. You can only see what they deliver, so you need to shift to a more results-driven model.
 4. Perceived fairness, particularly in hybrid teams, between staff who are in-office and those working from home.

One of the easiest ways to build a virtual work culture that is upheld by everyone on the team is to involve them in the creation process. Schedule a meeting with all your staff and collaboratively address two things:

1. As a group, answer these questions: “How do you want the team to be perceived? What do you want to be known for?” As a fun way to engage everyone, create a collective word cloud.
2. Then, together, develop a list of the team’s norms – how everyone will interact, make decisions, deal with conflict, handle workload etc. Because they have crafted it together, their level of agreement with the norms will be high.

Remember, if you don’t deliberately act to build your workplace culture, it will happen by default – which may not result in the high-functioning culture you want, hybrid or otherwise.

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