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Virtual Teams

What Great Hybrid Cultures Do Differently

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Summary. Hybrid work, in the authors' experience, only works when all employees are treated as remote employees. To do this, companies need to do five things: embrace asynchronous communication, make communication boundaries clear, champion documentation and... **more**

The pandemic acceleration toward work from home has ebbed, but while many workers have grown accustomed to the convenience and flexibility of remote work and are demanding it, many companies are pushing for a return to the office. The

compromise, increasingly, is a hybrid that blends in-person and remote teams. A recent McKinsey study of 800 corporate executives indicated that hybrid will likely be the norm going forward. Our experience, from having lead teams and companies that were hybrid pre-Covid, is that this isn't as simple as setting days to be in-office or remote.

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Hybrid cultures, instead, only thrive by treating everyone as remote. This means giving everyone access to the same information, people, tools, and opportunity to succeed, regardless of whether they are sitting in an office in Berlin or whether they are doing their work from a coffee shop in Jakarta or a bedroom in Tokyo. This is simple, but not straightforward. It requires consistent action from leadership on the following five fronts.

1. Embracing asynchronous communication

Communicating with distributed employees, especially globally, requires a special attention to ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in the conversation. This can typically be achieved by one or more of the following means:

- **Deliberately changing synchronous exchanges to asynchronous ones.** Teams that are on different time zones need to move to written or recorded communication. This could mean replacing your daily stand-up meeting with short written updates to a chat channel, or with written documents that facilitate discussion in the comments. At a wider scale, a CEO could solicit written questions ahead of time for the company town hall, and then record and broadcast it instead of doing it live.

- **Using technology to produce artefacts that can be shared after a synchronous exchange.** Sometimes a synchronous meeting is required to discuss a complex or urgent issue. However, we now have access to the technology that makes it simple to produce shareable artefacts, such as recorded Zoom meetings, collaboratively edited meeting minutes in Google Docs, and automatically generated transcripts of video calls.

2. Making communication boundaries clear

With remote work, it is often unclear when colleagues and managers are available to chat, focusing on a task, or relaxing with their family. This can lead to awkward or annoying interruptions. This isn't a new problem, of course; while one of the extolled virtues of working in the office was the ability to have spontaneous interactions and interruptions, it could be frustrating for staff who thrived on getting into flow and concentrating on deep work.

Remote work offers a reset. Teams should do two things:

- **Set rules of engagement per platform.** Working remotely means navigating emails, chat messages, video calls, and documentation with different levels of priority and urgency. Ideally, teams should clearly define what the expectations are for each. Is it reasonable to not answer a direct message on chat until the next day? What about emails? Is everyone expected to watch every meeting recording if they didn't make it, or are they optional? These rules of engagement can greatly reduce anxiety and employees' fear of missing out.
- **Make working hours clear.** Staff should record explicitly in their calendars when their working hours are so that others are able to see it, including recording their vacations. An expectation that someone is interruptible just because they are not in a meeting isn't at all close to reality when they are

spending their free afternoon writing an important proposal. Employees should block off time that they're allocating for deep thinking.

3. Championing documentation and artefacts

By forming a culture of creating company-wide archivable, searchable documentation for important information, we are creating effective historical decision-making for individuals, teams, and departments. For example, in software teams, designs for each new feature or change to the system can be written while consensus on the approach is forming. These design documents can then be archived as a snapshot of contemporaneous context so that future engineers can better understand why those decisions were made. These archives are a goldmine for new employees who wish to self-discover the genesis of the work that they are currently doing.

Additionally, encouraging a culture of writing proposals and designs in the open where others can collaborate and comment greatly increases the ability for others to read, understand, and contribute to the overall direction of the company, increasing employee morale and ownership.

4. Broadcasting communication

In the office, each day is filled with hundreds of one-to-one conversations in order to spread information. In small workplaces, this may be a workable way of communicating, but when workforces are distributed, it doesn't scale. Instead, leaders need to develop a culture of written or recorded messaging to convey the heartbeat of the company. Leaders can begin writing regular newsletters to their staff, or recording weekly messages to send out at the beginning of the week.

On a smaller scale, teams can experiment with broadcasting their regular achievements. Initially, this would be among themselves by summarizing what they've been working on. But eventually,

they can work toward broadcasting that information further: such as with other teams in their department. A culture of sharing typically encourages further sharing.

5. Providing the tooling to succeed

Effective remote working requires that everyone uses, and has access to, the same tools. These range from collaborative software such as Google Docs, where multiple participants can edit and make comments, and drawing tools such as Miro where remote groups can sketch together and collaborate as if they were in front of a whiteboard.

Tooling can also come in the form of the physical setups that employees have access to in their homes. Many workers were asked to work from home during the pandemic with a laptop and little else. These environments were poor substitutes for pre-pandemic offices where employees would have access to suitably ergonomic office furniture, widescreen monitors, and meeting rooms with good A/V equipment. Many companies are now offering work from home stipends for workers to improve their home offices, with some companies offering thousands of dollars worth of office upgrades. For fully remote companies, this expense is easier to bear, since no money is being spent on office leases. But that doesn't mean that your employees don't need the support. If hybrid work is an option, it is the company's responsibility to ensure employees can be successful wherever they are.

Continually aiming for 1% better

These five pillars are only a starting point for building a successful hybrid culture. In reality, successfully moving to a hybrid culture is a mindset that requires changing many small habits every single day. By keeping the maxim of treating everyone as remote in mind, and then applying it daily, a workforce can incrementally improve. As hybrid workplaces

become the new normal, incremental improvements across the five pillars will be key to creating a successful corporate culture in the post-pandemic world.

JS

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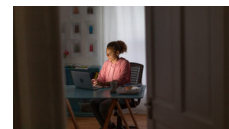
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