Managing Hybrid Teams - 5 Best Practices

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Hybrid teams come in all shapes and sizes. Organizational policies, along with manager discretion, will inform what they look like and the degree of flexibility that goes along with them. Some will offer employees complete flexibility to choose from fully remote, fully in the office, or something in between. Others will establish specific days or weeks where all or some team members will be in the office. Additionally, fully remote team members alongside team members who split their time working remotely and working in the office is another type of hybrid team.

For many organizations a hybrid workforce is the new norm. While most of the required competencies and skills for good in-office leadership and management are applicable to hybrid teams, there are a few differences and additional practices that are needed to effectively manage and lead hybrid teams.

There has been lots of research and many articles written on this topic, and what follows is a summary of best practices for managing hybrid teams to support employee engagement, and productivity in this new environment:

BEST PRACTICES

To learn more about each of the 5 best practices, and actions to take for each, click on the links below:

1. Trust and Inclusion
2. Guiding Principles
3. Outcomes and Accountability
4. Wellbeing and Connection
5. Meeting Facilitation Practices

Trust and Inclusion

Trust is the foundation for building productive and collaborative teams and can be one of the greatest challenges when leading hybrid teams. Remote employees might feel that those in the office have greater access to the leader and to other team members, providing them more opportunities to build trust and be included in impromptu conversations and decisions. When remote teams miss out on these opportunities this can lead to feelings of frustration or isolation.

Actions to take:

- **Establish regular interactions.** Set a cadence of regular 1:1 meetings with each of your direct reports, as well as ongoing team meetings. Discuss who will set the agenda, the purpose of the meetings, and how discussion topics are determined. Also, don't avoid 1:1 or team meetings just because a team member is not in the office that day. Virtual meetings can be just as effective.

- **Arrange for informal interactions.** Remember, trust is built over time so it's important to establish informal opportunities for the team or individuals to interact. Build-in social time within 1:1 meetings or team meetings; encourage team members to take breaks to socialize or engage in non-work-related conversations. Identify strategies that support unstructured conversations.

- **Establish psychological safety.** Leaders need to deliberately encourage all team members to share their experiences and concerns by asking for, listening and sincerely responding to opinions expressed. This will help to create a sense of inclusion and belonging.

- **Meet people in person.** Look for opportunities to have all team members together, even if you can only do so on rare occasions.

- **Summarize "water cooler" conversations.** Leaders of hybrid groups should ensure remote workers are not missing out on productive in-office chatter. Every valuable ad-hoc conversation should be summarized and shared through the team's communication channels (e.g. Teams, Slack, etc.). Significant decisions should be made only after incorporating the remote team members in the collaboration process.

Guiding Principles

Hybrid teams are usually comprised of individuals who have a history of working together. Some may have worked together in the office at one time, and some may have worked together only remotely. The hybrid team is in essence a new team, and leaders can ensure a strong start for their new team by creating Guiding Principles (sometimes called a "Team Charter").

Actions to take:

- **Develop Guiding Principles with your team.** No matter what expectations are set, it's critical that team members have input. With diverse input comes buy-in and inclusion, both of which are key to engaged and productive employees.

- **Include behavioural and process expectations.** The Guiding Principles will need to be customized for each team, but some examples of what to include are:

    o Communication expectations that determine how and when you want to keep in contact and response times.

    o Core business hours in which all team members must be accessible when needed.

    o What warrants a team meeting versus instant messages or emails.

    o How the team will resolve conflict, problem solve and make decisions.

- **Guiding Principles should be a "living" document.** All team members should have access to the document and it should be revisited periodically as a group. Commit to a schedule of reviews and revisions as you learn more about what works and what doesn't.

Outcomes and Accountability

All teams, but especially hybrid teams, work best when success is measured by outcomes and not by number of hours spent at a desk. Clearly defining expectations on an ongoing basis not only provides the roadmap for success, but also helps to clear confusion and connect employees to their purpose and impact. Accountability is achieved when leaders stay close enough to the work team members are doing to provide coaching, support, and recognition, but without micromanaging.

Actions to take:

- **Set clear performance goals.** The setting and maintaining of expectations is important to achieving the desired objectives of your hybrid team. Start by establishing clear and SMART performance goals as a team and with individual employees.

- **Establish a check-in schedule.** Provide ongoing and timely feedback. Managing performance should be an ongoing, quality dialogue between the manager and employee to promote continual growth and drive results.

- **Utilize a shared platform to post and collaborate on team goals and priorities.** When a goal or deliverable has been missed, identify an opportunity to provide constructive feedback promptly. Timely feedback assists in making corrections to keep employees on course.

- **Initiate processes and efficiency improvements.** As a team, regularly evaluate current processes or discuss new processes that need to be modified or established to improve productivity.

- **Provide context.** The informal interactions and information sharing that occur on-site do not happen as organically in hybrid work environment. To help connect employees to the purpose of the work despite this potential disconnect, provide constant context for your hybrid team about why they are asked to do something and the impact it will have.

Wellbeing and Connection

Working on a hybrid team will require all members to adapt in some way. Leaders need to remain vigilant about and empathetic to how employees are feeling, regardless of where they are located. Remote employees might feel they have to work harder and contribute more because they aren't in the office, while those in the office might feel they need to work even harder because they are more visible to leadership.

Actions to take:

- **Pay attention to and meet the personal needs of each team member.** The heightened focus on demonstrating empathy and genuine caring for team members' wellbeing that was a positive outcome of the pandemic must not waiver.

- **Frequent face-to-face (either video or in-person) conversations.** In those conversations, always ask how you can help remove any roadblocks they are facing. There can be a wide variance in employees' engagement and job satisfaction levels, and it is important not to make assumptions or let too much time go by before checking in on each individual.

- **Pay special attention to team culture.** Incorporate culture-building into already scheduled team gatherings rather than adding new ones. Simply taking a few minutes on a Monday morning team call to catch up personally can go a long way, especially for remote workers who cannot engage in that type of conversation in the office.

- **Keep team members connected.** Physical distance should not equate to social and emotional distance. Encourage team members to reach out to each other when they need help and continue to champion and attend "virtual get togethers" so that all team members feel connected to each other and to you.

- **Shift to prioritize asynchronous communication methods.** Constant "real-time" (synchronous) communication, such as via chat or immediate email responses, is detrimental to wellbeing and productivity. Although remote work offers inherent flexibility, if communication doesn't adapt, "flex time" becomes "always on." Some ways to avoid this include: encouraging the use of "do not disturb" mode in your team communication tools; setting realistic expectations around email response times; designating a specific channel for real emergencies; and ensuring team members have the workflow management skills to work effectively, with sufficient forethought.

Meeting Facilitation Practices

In a hybrid team, leaders must practice effective meeting facilitation. This means thinking beyond standard best practices (like sticking to an agenda and ensuring proper summarization of the next steps). Hybrid meeting facilitators must pay special attention to the people on the phone or video chat, since they are naturally encumbered by an inability to see the whole room and cannot easily interject into the conversation. If leaders don't find a way to equalize the input from both on-site and remote team members, the offsite workers may slowly grow distant and more removed.

Actions to take:

- **Invest in the right tools and setup for each team member.** For remote workers, this may include better Wi-Fi, headsets, and webcams. It is also essential to consider the unique needs of each team.

- **Invest in training to fill the skills gap.** Conducting fully engaged virtual meetings is a specific skill set that many people are unlikely to have. Don't leave it to your managers and team leads to figure it out on their own. It will ultimately be an investment in preserving or improving your company culture.

- **Level the playing field.** If there's a meeting that involves employees both in-office and virtual, instead of having the in-office participants in a room together, have all meeting attendees log into the virtual meeting individually, from wherever they are.

- **Don't make assumptions about silence.** Solicit input from each participant by name to make sure everyone has the opportunity to contribute. This might also help meeting leaders determine who actually needs to be involved in the meeting, thereby optimizing the number of participants for greatest efficiency.

- **Standardize in-person and remote processes.** Document everything, which includes ensuring that every meeting has an agenda that's shared in advance and that everything critical is written down.

- **Make things interactive and interesting.** Use cameras for remote one-on-one and team meetings, stay focused (don't check emails/messages), keep meetings short, and use interactive tools, such as chat, polls, and informal competitions.

Conclusion

Hybrid teams are not new, but in the past (pre-Covid), leaders and employees did not have to manage and adapt to these various and changing combinations with hybrid teams. They were predictable, and so were the ways in which these teams worked together.

In today's workforce, leaders face an atmosphere of ambiguity while managing in a hybrid environment. They have limited visibility into workloads and processes. They have fewer opportunities for impromptu two-way conversations. They fight the feeling of losing control as they track progress toward goals. They struggle to recreate the cohesiveness, collaboration, and comradery of the office as they encourage the freedom and flexibility of remote work. As a result, their leadership effectiveness is at risk. At the same time, employees are torn between a strong desire for more flexible work and an equally strong desire for the collaboration of in-person work.

While the hybrid workplace and hybrid teams might be viewed as the great compromise of the future, organizations that get this right will have a huge competitive advantage.

References

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