



Improving Your Hybrid Team Collaboration

In March of 2020, COVID-19 sent everyone home to work. And many remote working naysayers saw that when necessary, it was actually possible to work together anywhere.

It has, however, been a rough ride as we all discovered that working at home during a pandemic is not the usual way of remote working. Even seasoned remote workers have experienced significant stress and disruption. Between working at home with families, online schooling, navigating the various rules of lockdowns, and figuring out how all the tech works, there has been a lot of fodder for a bumpy ride. But, many of us did it. And in the process, as we smoothed out the bumps, we realized that remote working was not only possible, in some instances, it was preferable.

Many offices will not be able to open and operate at full capacity for a long time. At the same time, some people don't want to go back to the office, even when it's safe to do so. They don't miss the commute. They're more productive outside the office. And they like the freedom that remote offers. With extensive polling done of workers around the world, the answer is clear. The future of work is choice. We need to prepare ourselves and our companies for a new "hybrid" way of working.

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What is a hybrid team?

A hybrid team is a configuration where part of the team works in the office, and part of the team works elsewhere. Admittedly, this is the most difficult style of working (as opposed to everyone working in the office, or everyone working remote).

Hybrid team challenges

- Access to information
- Team alignment
- Productive, inclusive meetings
- Spontaneous meetings or celebrations
- Us vs them mentality
- Perceived work productivity: Because we can't see what our remote colleagues are doing, it can be easy for office workers to think that they're not getting as much done.
- People feeling left out
- Reduced career opportunities for remote employees

Set up your hybrid team for success

The freedom to choose when and where we are most productive is a huge benefit to remote workers. But companies also need to choose how remote they want or need to be. There is a [remote scale](#) or [maturity model](#) that outlines the different stages and needs of going remote. Every company can evaluate where they are along that scale and then design their configurations based on that.

However, regardless of where a company is on the scale, there is value in being “remote first”. Remote first indicates that, at a minimum, an organization is prepared for employees to occasionally work off-site if the need arose.

Now is the time to set up your remote workforce to succeed. How can we navigate the new world of working as a hybrid team?

Create a team agreement

When we work together in the same place, we can see what people are working on. Behavior is implicit because we tend to have an understanding of each other's behavior



because we can easily observe people and make inferences. When we go remote, we have to make our behaviors more explicit: leave nothing implied so that there is minimal room for confusion.

Whether you're starting with a fresh team on a new project, or whether you've been working together for a long time, creating a team agreement helps form the glue that binds your team together.

Download your team agreement templates [HERE](#).

Invest in great infrastructure for communication

"People don't want to be co-located. What we want is high-bandwidth communication." Simply put, we want it to be easy to communicate with our colleagues. - Agile coach and 3D world enthusiast, Bill Krebs

When it comes to technology, the advice for individuals is the same as for companies: invest in high-quality equipment. We want crystal clear, easy communication on our teams. In order to have that, we need great internet, and high-quality accessory tools like webcams, headsets, and conference room equipment.

In a global Polycom Inc. study 92 percent of respondents reported that video collaboration technology improves teamwork. This is likely because video restores in the online realm some of the sense of human interaction of on-site work.

Our office conference rooms may need an update to make it easier for remote colleagues to participate in meetings and group conversations. In the past, people would huddle around a conference room table with a spider phone. In this scenario, remote participants were rarely seen, and poor sound quality was the norm ("Can you hear me now?").

For great hybrid collaboration, modern conference rooms should be equipped with technology that allows remote participants to have "presence" by being easily seen and heard. There are a plethora of tools and apps on the market to help improve our infrastructure. Take a look [HERE](#).

At the office, we can walk down the hall to someone's office to ask a question. Online, we have to schedule a meeting. When we're hybrid, we want to make it easy to move from asynchronous modes (email or text) to synchronous ones (phone or video).



In general, it is recommended to have multiple communication channel options. In terms of software glitches, of course, this is a no-brainer. But more importantly, the benefit is that different channels work better for different situations. See [COMMUNICATION PRO's AND CON's](#).

“Non-expressive” modes of communication—such as email and text, which offer neither body language nor tone of voice—can be problematic if a conversation includes any confusion or emotion. Many recommend switching from a more static mode to a more personal one as soon as the need arises. An easy rule of thumb: **“Stick to the facts online. Save the complicated, emotional stuff for a higher bandwidth channel.”** - [Peter Hilton](#)

Learn how to facilitate hybrid meetings

It's relatively easy to have a meeting when we're either all remote or all together. But when some people are remote and some people are in person, things get more difficult. Hybrid meetings don't have to be awful, but we need to pay attention to leveling the playing field to include remote participants. Check out our tips [HERE](#).

Have fewer meetings

When lockdowns started, many companies tried to mimic the office online somehow. And what it resulted in, was endless online meetings. Soon we started to hear about “Zoom fatigue”. It turns out, some things don't translate well online. Working remote is a different medium: like the difference between radio and television. Both broadcast information, but the content needs to be designed for each medium differently.

One of the keys to this new remote medium is being more conscientious about how we use our time. An easy place to start is to shorten our online meetings and take a physical break (outside, if possible) before the next activity starts. If a meeting is longer than 45 minutes, the advice is to take a five to ten minute break in the middle.

The next step is to evaluate if we really need that meeting to begin with - or can the conversation be done asynchronously? For example: For status update meetings, perhaps post using an [app](#) instead? For presentations, consider recording a video and sending it for participants to watch before the meeting starts. Instead of brainstorming together on a call, consider posting ideas to an online whiteboard before the call to give everyone a chance to think on their own time.



Getting better at asynchronous communication means less interruptions and more control over our work day. It also gives people time to process and reply to information instead of going with knee-jerk decisions that can often be made in timeboxed meetings.

The ratio of asynchronous versus synchronous work differs for every company. The key question to ask is: what do we NEED to discuss together online? And what can be done asynchronously?

Set up feedback loops

Working together in the same space gives us constant contextual feedback and the opportunity to share concerns and delights. On remote teams, we have to create a space for things to be brought out into the open. All teams can benefit from doing a little reflection and highlighting both “the good” and “the bad”, and scheduling regular times to check in with each other gives teams the opportunity to focus on what’s going well and what can be improved.

But just like at the office, on remote teams, there’s a lot of fear behind giving feedback. Of course, we are afraid of upsetting the other person, or that the conversation will get emotional. And we’re also afraid that expressing ourselves will do more harm than good.

Feedback can be especially difficult in organizations where there are tensions around professional roles and status or where there are differences in age and educational background.

TAKE YOUR TEAM’S TEMPERATURE REGULARLY: more than biannually. Just how regularly - weekly, monthly, quarterly - depends on the team and the need, which can also change over time.

There are numerous online tools for doing this, from retrospectives to sophisticated evaluations to simple clicks on smiley or frowny faces.

DON’T FORGET YOUR ONE ON ONES: Checking in with each other one-on-one (as a manager and as a peer) helps build trust, and will often allow for the discussion of smaller, more informal, and/or more difficult topics.

VISUALIZE THE DATA: Present the data in a visual format to aid comprehension of the results.



Spotify used a “Squad Health Check Model”. They hosted quarterly workshops where teams (“squads”) evaluated themselves in eleven categories, such as product quality, teamwork, support, and fun. They then created a visual overview that summarized all the teams’ data so they could prioritize next steps. Visualizing data helps turn cyphers into stories.

KEEP IT SIMPLE: Make feedback simple. Keep the process easy, even fun.

DO SOMETHING WITH THE DATA: There’s no point in taking the team’s temperature unless you’re willing to act on the information gleaned from the process. But even more important is team morale: to repeatedly ask for feedback and then do nothing with it both wastes employees’ time and tests their patience.

ADDRESS CONFLICT CONSTRUCTIVELY: Team members can be instrumental in addressing minor disturbances before they develop into conflict. Resist the urge to express charged emotion. Instead, focus on constructively discussing the issue.

This is where having a communication toolbox is handy. Knowing techniques such as non-violent communication, clean language, coaching questions, and others will only help you in those difficult conversations.

ALL MEDIUMS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL: Remote teams can’t give face-to-face feedback, so they have to find ways of doing it written or verbally. Each form of communication has its pros and cons. Some good tips [HERE](#). Again, a reminder that having a communication toolbox is handy. One of those techniques for written feedback is the “Feedback wrap”, a Management 3.0 practice.

Team building on hybrid teams

Working together in the same place presents serendipitous moments and sharing an elevator can turn into grabbing a coffee together. Seeing each other on a daily basis enables us to build trust and increases camaraderie on our teams. But when we’re remote, we have to work extra hard to become a cohesive unit. Even though we can digitally connect with people all over the world with the click of a button, it’s sometimes more difficult to connect on a personal level. In order to do this, we must find ways to get to know our teammates and define our team culture. When we deliberately engage in virtual team building activities, we bring everyone together and bonds start to form.



Because remote teams can be focused on results, we don't often make the time to just hang out together. Team building activities can be built into our everyday interactions. And because we will never accidentally bump into each other we need to plan for and create "unstructured time" together.

VIRTUAL WATERCOOLER CHAT. When we work remotely, we don't get those chance encounters in the hallways or break room. Water cooler talks are about anything other than work, which is important in order to get to know your colleagues on a more personal level. Group chat tools can be great virtual water coolers. For example, some teams have created a "getting to know you" channel to encourage the sort of sharing that builds camaraderie.

SCHEDULE UNSTRUCTURED TIME. On remote teams, we won't accidentally hang out together. Instead, we need to schedule our unstructured time if we want to give team building the focus it deserves.

HOST A VIRTUAL COFFEE. Having virtual coffees/fikas is not that hard. We just need a little creativity, a good internet connection, a decent webcam, a beverage/treat of choice (a delicious cinnamon roll never hurt anyone), and some icebreakers, good conversation, or games to play.

CELEBRATE WITH YOUR TEAM. In the office, we gather for birthdays, lunches, after-work drinks, company outings, and, of course, holiday parties. Celebrating together helps to boost morale, form bonds, and build trust. Hybrid teams must remember to include their remote employees. If you're in the same town, choose a venue where you can all meet up and celebrate together. If you're dispersed around the world, meet up online.

More team building resources:

- [Ultimate Guide To Virtual Team Building](#)
- [CATALYST](#)