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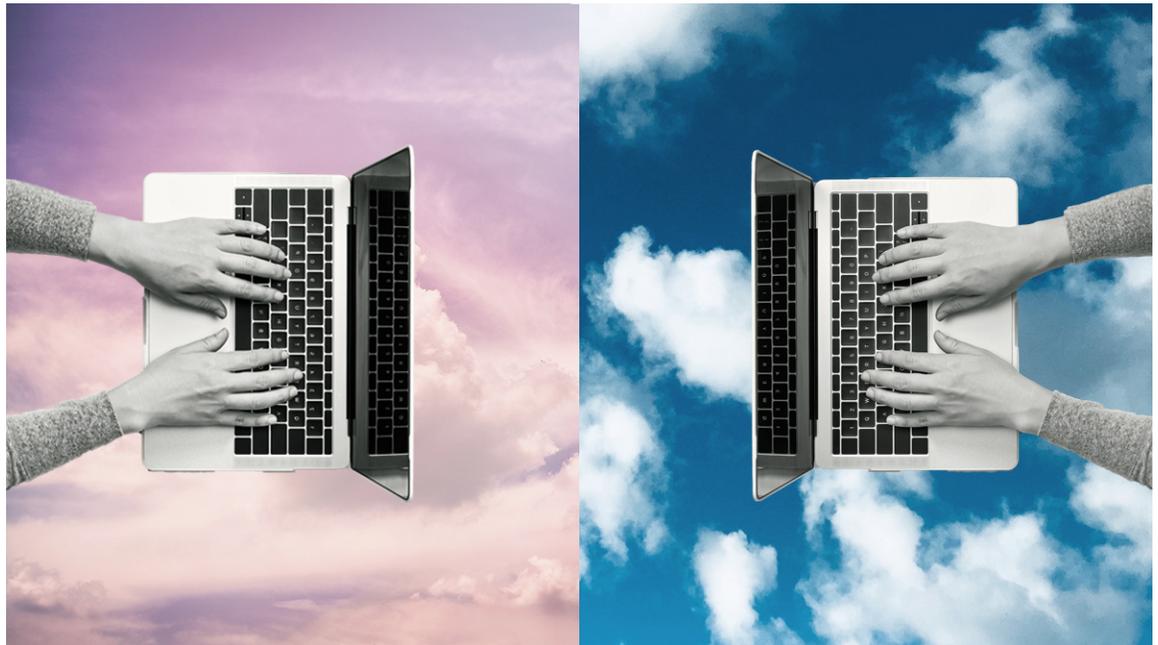
How to Manage a Hybrid Team

by Rebecca Knight

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Your employees' needs are always varied. But right now, as many companies navigate returning to an office in some shape or form, your team members are likely contending with vastly different situations. Some have limited or no childcare or are managing their kids' online school; some have health issues that preclude them from returning to in-person work; and some are eager and excited to get out of the house and head back to their cubicles. As the leader, how do you manage these various circumstances while [treating everyone fairly](#)? What protocols can you put in place to ensure that the employees in the office are in sync with those working from home? How do you remain

flexible given that plans may change at any moment? And how do you help your employees manage their stress levels through this transition?

What the Experts Say

Having a team in which some employees are co-located in an office and others are doing their jobs remotely presents a number of challenges for managers, says Liane Davey, cofounder of 3COze Inc. and author of *You First: Inspire Your Team to Grow Up, Get Along, and Get Stuff Done*. Some of these challenges might feel familiar. For instance, there could be an “us versus them” undercurrent among colleagues “similar to the phenomenon of having a head office and a satellite office,” she says. There could also be the same kind of communication, team engagement, and coordination issues that are common with [geographically distributed teams](#). But other challenges are new, according to Linda Hill, professor at Harvard Business School and the coauthor of *Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader*. For example, [working under the shadow of a global pandemic](#) adds another layer of stress and complexity. That’s why it’s critical to [lead with compassion during this time](#). Hill suggests you start by asking: “What is the experience my employees are having at work, and how can I empower them to do the best they can?” Here are some tips.

Offer support.

First things first: your primary role as a manager, pandemic or no, is [to support your employees](#). And do they ever need it. Amidst a global health crisis, economic uncertainty, and ongoing social unrest, it’s been a harrowing year. “[Employees are under immense stress](#)” and some of them “may be in shock,” says Davey. [It’s incumbent on you to reach out](#). Have socially distant conversations with colleagues at the office and one-on-one video calls with your remote workers. Ask them about their individual circumstances; find out about their worries. You may have done a lot of this when the pandemic first started but continue to check in, as circumstances have likely changed.

Some [people may feel anxious](#) or resentful of the fact that they are being asked to return to the office; some may feel that working from home leaves them at a professional disadvantage. “Allow people to admit how they’re feeling,” and give them space to “open up about their anxieties,” says Hill. Listen and offer support. Demonstrate that you’re committed to making the situation work for everyone on the team. “People want to feel safe and that they’re being cared for,” she says.

Create and set expectations.

Next, talk with your team about creating new practices and protocols. “Consider this an opportunity to affirm the aspects of your organization’s culture that you want to be the same, and talk about those that need to be adapted,” says Hill. “Have an explicit discussion about how and when you’re going to communicate, who has access to what information, who needs to be in which meetings, and who needs to be in on which decisions.” She recommends coming to an agreement on norms for communicating — Should people always include the entire team? Must recipients acknowledge every message? — and set guidelines for when to use what channel — email, Slack, phone, etc.

Talk, too, about how employees plan to structure their working hours. “The end of the day is becoming nebulous,” Hill says. “People out of the office may want flexibility and the freedom to rework their hours, and the people in the office may want more structure. Sometimes compromises will be necessary.” Your goal as a group is to [build and enforce a new culture by figuring out what makes for the best way to work](#)” in this environment.

Prioritize with flexibility in mind.

The only certainty right now is that the future is unpredictable. Schools might close — or indeed never open; health guidelines might shift; certain towns and cities may have to go on lockdown. The best way to prepare is to set clear priorities so that everyone on your “team knows what’s most important,” says Davey. She suggests holding a regular “Monday huddle,” where you prioritize the most important work that needs to get done that week. In addition, you should discuss the deliverables that would be “nice to have if workers have discretionary time.” Focusing on the most important work builds flexibility into the system. If, say, a working parent needs leeway because their child’s school shuts down, [others can ideally pick up the slack](#).

Emphasize inclusion.

[Building a fair and equitable workplace](#) is more complicated when you’re running a hybrid team, says Hill. There’s a proximity bias that leads to the incorrect assumption that “the people in the office are more productive than those who are not,” she says. As a leader, [you need to put in place practices to counteract this tendency](#). Davey suggests establishing the basic ground rule that all-team meetings take place over Zoom — even though some people may be together in the office. There’s something about having “everyone’s face appear in those little Brady Bunch boxes that equalizes things,” she says. What’s more, hybrid meetings are unfair to those not physically in the space. “It’s hard to listen when you’re not there,” she says. “There is inevitably side chatter in the room, and someone is always shuffling paper.”

You mustn’t tolerate team members in the office talking about work in a way that even inadvertently [excludes remote colleagues](#), adds Hill. You need to make sure that everyone on your team is given the opportunity to weigh in. She suggests saying something simple like, “Let’s get Jane on the phone to discuss this.”

Strive for equity.

Another risk in a hybrid environment is that it will exacerbate “[your own baggage and biases about particular employees](#),” says Davey. In other words, you’ll continue to hold your star employees in high regard and you’ll “continue to see the employees you’re adversely predisposed to in a negative light.” It may be human nature, but that doesn’t make it right.

The first step is to pay attention, says Davey. Are you inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to the employee you think is terrific? And do you discount the needs of the employee who annoys you? “Ask yourself, are there people on this team that I have not given a fair shake to, and what would it look like if I did?” she says.

Next, pay attention to how you divvy up your day. “Look at who you’re spending time with,” says Hill. Is it people who are in the office with you? “Don’t fall into easy patterns,” she says. Finally, make a concerted effort to do better. Think about ways you can position all your team members for success. Make sure, too, that you’re [using objective data to evaluate their performance](#).

Watch for signs of burnout.

It’s critical that, throughout these transitions, you to [pay close attention to your team members’ stress levels](#). Many people are stressed, irritable, and exhausted — [including you](#). But if you notice that someone is behaving differently — maybe “someone who was talkative and outspoken is now docile; or someone who was calm and composed now has a shorter fuse,” explains Hill, consider it a sign of burnout.

Davey recommends taking steps to help your employee. For instance, if a team member tells you they’re overwhelmed, try helping them prioritize. “They may have seven big things on their plate, but of those, only two things really matter,” she says. “If somebody is in a bad spot, help them through it day by day; if that’s too hard, go task by task,” she says. “Focus and connection are the antidote to burnout.”

Make it fun.

It’s also worth thinking about “how to bring some playfulness into the workday.” Many of us miss the laughter and levity from our pre-pandemic lives. She suggests holding an “informal Zoom room” every day around lunchtime so that people can chat freely like they would in the office lunchroom. “Find times where there is no agenda,” where people can chat about books they’re reading, their kids, or their latest Netflix obsessions — making sure that these events are open to everyone on the team regardless of where they’re working. You might even try themed lunches where colleagues wear crazy scarves or make different types of cuisine (or get takeout). “Have fun with it,” she says. “It doesn’t always have to be serious.” Your aim, adds Hill, is “to make people feel connected” and to create a sense of community.

Take heart.

Finally, don’t expect any of this to be easy. There will be bumps along the way. Be humble. And be patient. “It’s a new time,” says Hill. “It requires a whole new level of being present, being agile, and being able to adapt.” But look at the bright side. “This crisis is forcing you to develop skills and implement practices that will stand you in great stead for the rest of your career,” says Davey.

Principles to Remember

Do

- Set clear priorities and objectives so that everyone on your team focuses on what’s most important.
- Be inclusive. Even if some people are in the office, hold all-team meetings online to be fair to everyone.

- Reflect on your biases and predispositions. Ask yourself, “Are there people on my team that I have not given a fair shake to and what would it look like if I did?”

Don't

- Be rigid. The future right now is unpredictable, and everyone needs to be flexible.
- Ignore signs of stress from your team. Be empathetic. Help people prioritize what's important.
- Forget about fun. Look for ways to enjoy connecting with your team and bring some playfulness into the workday.

Advice in Practice

Case Study #1: Establish new routines and find ways to make sure everyone feels included.

Kirsten Dotson, Controller at Sigfox, the Boston and Dallas-based IoT company, says that managing her team through the Covid-19 pandemic has been a learning opportunity.

Sigfox's offices reopened in May, and the company allowed employees to choose whether they wanted to return to work or continue doing their jobs from home. Kirsten spoke individually with each of her reports and encouraged them to work where they felt most comfortable and productive depending on their situation.

As the transition to the hybrid office began, Kirsten held a virtual meeting with her team about how they could best work together. First, they established routine meetings. “My team had decided at the beginning of the quarantine to sync up every Tuesday and Thursday to debrief on priorities and schedules,” she says. “Now that some people are back at the office, we are keeping those meetings going forward.”

Second, they discussed how they would structure their days — and how they would adapt to changing circumstances this fall. “We all have different ways we like to work and different needs for flexibility. And in the Covid-era, we know that things can shift on a dime,” she says. “As a team, we decided that as long as our colleagues actively communicate their needs and plans, everyone would do their best to adapt.”

Third, they decided to continue to use video communication as much as possible. “We want to make sure that the people who cannot be physically present feel like they are included.”

Finally, they discussed ways to encourage social engagement. They instituted weekly happy hours, an office-wide fantasy football league, and also started a monthlong trivia game. “People miss having fun with their colleagues,” she says.

Kirsten says she has made a special effort to connect with all her employees during this period.

“During one-on-ones, I often ask, ‘How are you coping? Is there anything that I can do to improve?’”

she says. “I want my team to feel like they can approach me with suggestions and also that they have an advocate should something go pear-shaped.”

Case Study #2: Find ways to help employees communicate and collaborate and stay in sync.

After the Canadian government gave companies the green light to reopen, Marc Boscher, head of Montreal-based Unito, a workflow management platform company, allowed his employees the option of returning to the office or continuing to work from home.

“Some people really wanted to get out of their house,” he says. “Others didn’t want to come back or couldn’t for health and family reasons.”

Marc has been running a hybrid team for several months now. His top priority is to make sure all his 60 employees feel they’re being treated fairly. “In the past, there might be a first class/second class citizen dynamic with remote workers.” But now, to maintain equality, all meetings take place online. “Everyone is on the same level,” he says.

In addition, all meetings are recorded so that employees have the freedom to work asynchronously. This has been critical in a pandemic that’s increased pressures on employees’ family lives, he says.

“The person holding the meeting sends out a prepared agenda in advance so that if a colleague doesn’t think they need to be there, they can opt out,” he says. “You can read the summary or watch the meeting at twice the speed [and you’re caught up.] It removes the pressure on employees and lets them choose when they consume the information.”

Helping his team members stay on track and in sync is another priority. Teams are encouraged to leverage collaboration tools and document every change and decision that gets made. This helps everyone stay on the same page, he says.

The biggest challenge, according to Marc, is to ensure that Unito maintains its positive culture and offers opportunities for colleagues to form strong relationships. Because employees are working under different circumstances, “we constantly have to work on our culture.”

For example, he’s helped create optional outdoor team building events. The company has hosted happy hours in parks around the city, encouraging different groups of people to show up and safely interact. Colleagues have also organized team hikes, bike rides, and walking meetings.

In addition, Marc has allotted time in the week for employees to use a matching tool in Slack that puts colleagues from different departments together for 15-30-minute coffee dates. “I am trying to recreate some of the serendipity of watercooler conversations.”

All in all, he says, the hybrid workplace has been a positive “chance to experiment” and try new ways of working. “It’s been a good forcing mechanism and we are proving that we’re flexible and open-minded to change.”

Rebecca Knight is a freelance journalist in Boston and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in The New York Times, USA Today, and The Financial Times.
