A GUIDE TO SUPPORTING HYBRID TEAM LEADERS

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For many organizations, the world of work and the role of offices have forever changed. Millions of employees suddenly shifted to remote work in early 2020, and now many don’t want to give up the option to work remotely some or all the time.

According to the Microsoft 2021 Work Trend Index report, which presents findings from a study of more than 31,000 people in 31 countries: “73 percent of workers surveyed want flexible remote work options to continue, while at the same time, 67 percent are craving more in-person time with their teams. ... The data is clear. Extreme flexibility and hybrid work will define the post-pandemic workplace.”

As organizations embrace flexible work, more people leaders will lead hybrid teams, a mix of virtual and in-office employees. Are they prepared to lead in this new way? What exactly does that look like?

Consider this scenario: It’s a Monday and Keesha is beginning her workday. She loves to say hello to her colleagues and team members before delving into work. She looks around to see who has started the day. First, Keesha sees her friend Omar, and they chat for a moment over coffee. Then she sees that one of her direct reports, Ray, is in already, and she catches up with him on how his weekend went and
what’s on his docket for the week. They discuss a project due that week and whiteboard a few ideas. Now she is ready to move on to her tasks and logs into her email. Did those interactions happen in person or virtually? The answer isn’t either-or. They may have been in person, virtually, or a combination of both. A good people leader can flow between work locations to connect with colleagues and team members seamlessly. That’s key. The location is irrelevant. The conversations, engagement, connection, and work are not location dependent.

Leading hybrid teams is new for many, and while some will adapt quickly, others will require support to do so. The core leadership skills are the same for guiding any team; however, managers will need to consider some nuances and unique challenges associated with a hybrid workplace.

This is an opportunity for talent development professionals to support and positively influence organizational capability, equipping people managers with the tools and guidance to support their teams.

In this issue of TD at Work, I will:
• Explain the unique qualities of hybrid teams and associated challenges.
• Highlight three critical areas of focus for managers leading hybrid teams.
• Provide strategies and tips for supporting people leaders.

Hybrid Team Leadership

Are hybrid teams really that different from office-based or entirely virtual teams? Yes, to a certain degree. They require more thought and intentionality from all team members, especially people leaders. An entirely virtual or fully co-located team experiences the organization and work in similar ways. Hybrid team members experience the organization in different ways—and those are not always equitable.

Bridging the Remote and On-Site Workforce

In a hybrid workplace, a people leader’s role is to bridge working worlds and connect team members with each other and with their work. An imbalance in staff’s focus and attention will lead to poor results. Everyone on the team should be intentional in their interactions and ensure they stay connected. However, the people leader needs to build a team culture of location inclusion where all team members can fully engage in the work and the business regardless of where they are.

People leaders’ mindset about how their team works is critical in any situation, especially a hybrid workplace.

If the manager is new to working with hybrid teams, they may default to what they know and what is comfortable by focusing more on in-office or virtual employees. Rather, they must keep the team as a whole in mind and bring direct reports together as one. They are the connector. The team will feel it if the manager doesn’t ensure location inclusion. That can lead to two classes of employees and cause confusion and frustration among team members. For example, staff who are virtual may feel left out of conversations or miss out on opportunities, especially if their supervisor is spending the bulk of their time in the office. In-office employees may feel like they are working harder and possibly aren't getting as many perks and as much flexibility as virtual workers.

The people manager needs to be aware of how they manage a team in multiple locations and areas of opportunity. They should home in on the aspects that will have the most effect on their team so that everyone has equitable experiences. Three such areas in which challenges may arise in hybrid teams revolve around clarity of work and purpose, communication and collaboration, and connection and cohesion. Here are some examples. Although they are not unique to hybrid teams, they are more prevalent.

Clarity of work and purpose. Employees may feel isolated from the team and the company and not understand their impact or priorities. Team members may
not know what others are working on or where their work intersects. Isolation may lead to workers making assumptions about what’s happening on the team and within the organization.

Communication and collaboration. The team may use too many communication channels, which can lead to frustration, staff overlooking work, or employees setting up private channels. Team members may overcommunicate to make up for not seeing each other regularly or to make everyone feel seen and heard. They may lack a central collaboration hub for ideation.

Connection and cohesion. Team members may feel left out of opportunities to connect that happen for one group and not the other, such as networking or in-person celebrations. The manager may feel that working in the office is ideal and lack empathy for direct reports who prefer working remotely. The manager may also lack intentionality in creating opportunities for the entire team to regularly connect.

TD opportunities: Good leadership is still good leadership. Clarity, great communication, and connection are essential for any team. But they are slightly more complex for a hybrid team. Understand that there is a shift in managing those elements, and reinforce the importance of them through training or one-on-one discussions with people leaders. Additionally, keep in mind that people leaders may not be equipped to manage in a new way.

Mindset Matters
People leaders’ mindsets about how their team works is critical in any situation, especially a hybrid workplace. Their personal preference about where, when, and how employees work is not what’s important. What is important is balancing the business’s needs with workers’ needs.

10 Ways to Support People Leaders
What is your role in supporting the organization’s shift to hybrid work or helping leaders guide their hybrid teams? It’s more than just formal training opportunities and leadership development programs. The areas that will need the most attention are organization development and culture, talent strategy, performance improvement, change management, and future readiness.

Explore these ways you can step in and support:
• Hold coffee chats or knowledge cafés with people leaders to share knowledge, discuss what is and isn’t working, and uncover key learnings.
• In partnership with business stakeholders, launch a community of practice to support knowledge sharing on leading a hybrid team.
• Create or support opportunities to build managers’ and employees’ digital literacy skills, including asynchronous communication and collaboration. For example, hold a digital learning day or week to highlight different ways to use technology, conduct employee showcase sessions where staff share their knowledge, and host lunch & learns.
• Identify people leaders who are already successful in leading hybrid teams and ask them to mentor others.
• Consult with business partners to identify performance issues or training needs related to hybrid working.
• Offer one-on-one or group coaching for leaders that is focused on clarity and purpose, communication and collaboration, and connection and cohesion.
• Add location inclusion, recency, and proximity bias in other inclusion training efforts.
• In partnership with human resources and business leaders, make talent development opportunities accessible and equitable for all employees regardless of location.
• Support efforts to update onboarding to ensure an equitable experience between virtual and in-office colleagues.
• Review all current training offerings to identify where you can reinforce your organization’s approach to hybrid work, including new-leader onboarding.
Managers often want staff to work in an office or come in to collaborate in person because that is what they know and are used to. They may not know how to effectively lead in a hybrid or virtual environment.

A people leader who is unable to shift their mindsets to embrace hybrid work and lead their team in a new way may delegate and collaborate less because of a command-and-control style of leadership. They may also micromanage because they don’t trust staff members to complete work if they can’t see those individuals working. Additionally, the team may have lower engagement, creativity, and innovation because employees believe their manager doesn’t trust them or isn’t open to new ways of working. And the company may experience higher turnover, whether because people are leaving that specific team or the organization.

It’s essential for leaders to have a mindset of experimentation and agility. What works for one leader and team may not for another. And what works now may require adjustment as the team composition shifts or as business and employee needs change. People leaders need to be open to trying new approaches and admitting when something isn’t successful. Just because a process is established doesn’t mean that it works well. According to McKinsey and Company, “Embracing a test-and-learn culture will entail a real mindset shift for some leaders. The big answers may not emerge for years.”

To more easily shift their mindsets, leaders need three skills:

- **Continuous learning and adaptability.** They need to be open to learning new ways of working and leading, including digital skills. They must continually reflect on what they are learning about themselves and how the team accomplishes tasks and adapt to engage their team in these new processes and approaches.

- **Active listening.** People leaders need to listen and understand what their direct reports are saying both verbally and in text-based messages. Being present in all conversations is imperative, especially when the leaders aren’t in the same space with the employees.
• **Emotional intelligence.** Understanding and managing their own emotions is vital for people leaders as the workplace environment continues to change. Emotionally intelligent leaders are able to understand the emotions behind others’ behavior and empathize with them.

**TD opportunities:** Consult with your business partners to identify opportunities to experiment and try new things. Help leaders think differently about when, where, and how people work and to embrace new modes and means. For example, the team may do better shifting away from weekly stand-up meetings to using a team wiki page to share status updates. Likewise, consider the mindset shifts that some managers may need to be effective leaders in the hybrid workplace (see chart), and start with helping them adjust their mindsets before building their skills and capabilities in other areas, including communication, connection, and clarity.

**Clarity of Work and Purpose**

Body language can say a lot. When colleagues work in the same location, they can gain clarity from:
- Nonverbal cues, such as a look of confusion or frustration
- Overhearing conversations about what others are working on
- Seeing their supervisor’s office door open and knowing they can stop by to ask a quick question
- Observing team members working, which can generate a sense of community and shared purpose

In the hybrid workplace, individuals don’t have the same opportunities to see a quizzical look on a colleague’s face or to pick up on deep sighs or other nonverbal cues. But that doesn’t mean they will lack clarity or that team members must meet constantly to ensure everyone is on the same page. The question people leaders need to consider is: When team members don’t see each other every day or overhear conversations, how do they understand what each person is working on, their focus, and their impact on the organization so that they spend their time on the right work? Answering that doesn’t correlate with being in the office. Rather, it comes down to people leaders establishing clear expectations, ensuring shared understanding among the team, and facilitating regular check-ins and team members holding each other accountable.

While those should all be standard aspects of how every team works, hybrid teams may struggle with those elements until they establish a standard process. What many leaders have relied on when everyone was in the same office space may no longer be effective. For example, if the team had weekly stand-up meetings to review work for the week and used nonverbal cues such as head nods or facial expressions to go deeper and translate as needed, that may no longer work via a videoconference where only a few team members turn on their cameras.

**When Clarity Isn’t Present**

Employees who are clear on their priorities and how their work contributes to the organizational purpose and to the team’s success are more likely to engage in their work fully, focus on priority tasks, and remain with the company longer. According to Gallup, “Teams with engaged managers are more likely to be engaged. And teams with higher engagement achieve a whole host of important business outcomes, higher resiliency during tough times, and higher wellbeing.”

Clarity of work and purpose is even more critical in a hybrid environment when employees do not see each other every day. It’s easy to lose sight of the group’s work when it’s out of sight; however, it’s still important for all to stay engaged in what everyone is doing. When individuals work on their own, silos can form. Virtual workers may feel isolated and abandoned and start to question their work and value. Co-located employees may focus on working only with in-office colleagues. Leaders may come to think that virtual employees are not working as hard as in-office staff.

A lack of clarity can show up in a variety of ways:
- Employees may work on low-priority items or send in work late because they aren’t sure what to prioritize and they don’t see their supervisor regularly to ask questions. Virtual employees may also believe that their manager, who goes into the office, pays more attention to staff who are also in the office.
- Team members may duplicate work because they don’t know what others are doing.
• Virtual employees may believe they can't progress in their careers when only in-office workers receive development opportunities or promotions. When a people leader isn't clear on available opportunities, the criteria, and why some team members participated, employees may draw their own conclusions.

• Staff may not ask for help or reach out to collaborate because they don't know who is working on what projects or how their own work adds value. They may feel isolated and conclude that their work isn't making an impact, that no one cares, and that they aren't doing the right thing. Those feelings could lead them to further isolate and even look for a new job.

• People leaders are unclear what direct reports are doing and hold numerous meetings or frequently email team members to ask as their distrust grows.

Promote Clarity

Hybrid team leaders must ensure that all team members are clear on their responsibilities, how those intersect with others on the team and across the business, and their impact. The leader brings the team together, breaks down silos, and promotes clarity. They do that through:

• Frequent and regular one-on-one meetings to discuss projects, priorities, expectations, roadblocks, challenges, and ways staff are meeting expectations

• Clear team goals and metrics to measure performance and results

• Regular team check-ins, individualized priorities, and relaying how each person's work supports the team and organizational goals

• Identification of teamwork intersections and gaps in knowledge sharing across the team

• Feedback from internal and external customers

• Discussions of team accomplishments and lessons learned

• Consistent review with individuals and the whole team about development and career opportunities

Promoting clarity does not mean micromanaging. Clarity is about setting expectations, letting employees do their work, and having regular conversations with them. By setting clear expectations, discussing priorities, revisiting expectations, and holding team members accountable, the people leader and team members will know their roles and purpose. The manager will have assurance that the team is accomplishing its responsibilities, and staff will know that their supervisor is interested in all they are doing and in their individual success.

Virtual Performance Conversations

It's never easy for managers to provide employees with critical feedback, especially if it's related to performance improvement. In a hybrid workplace, managers may feel uncomfortable offering that feedback virtually. For those with direct reports who come into the office some days, they may wonder whether to wait to have that conversation for when a hybrid worker is in the office. That depends both on the nature of the feedback and the timing of the individual coming to the office.

Still, why wait? If managers only have performance conversations when an employee is in the office, the individual may start to dread coming in. It's an unfair practice. Help managers overcome any trepidation with holding virtual performance conversations by offering them this advice:

• Ensure you and the employee are each in a private setting. Don't give feedback in front of others.

• Focus solely on the employee and the conversation. Turn off notifications and close the door or post a “Do Not Disturb” sign.

• Use video when possible. Turn off your self-view to focus on the employee, and be aware of your body language.

• Stay relaxed, don't fidget (it's distracting), and look into the camera to show you are engaged in the conversation.

• If only using the phone, listen for cues that the other person is struggling with the conversation, such as one-word responses, sighs, extremely long pauses, or background noise such as shuffling of paper or pens tapping.

• Don't fill the silence. Give the other person time to consider what you shared and to respond before you jump in and speak again.
TD opportunities: Support people leaders by educating them on the importance of clarity in the hybrid workplace, what murkiness in a team looks like, and how clarity shows up differently in a hybrid space than in a co-located environment. Build managers’ skills in leading one-on-one meetings, providing feedback, holding critical conversations, setting goals, ensuring accountability, and expanding business acumen. Partner with business leaders to create templates or frameworks for the organization for one-on-one meetings, goal setting, and feedback. Reach out to fellow TD professionals about what is working in this area.

Communication and Collaboration

Let’s be honest—many companies and, more specifically, many teams struggle with communication and collaboration, even when staff are all co-located or all virtual. Spread staff out across various modalities with potential unequal focus and you have a recipe for disaster. Consider these two scenarios:

• Three people sit around a table in a meeting room, looking up at a screen where they can see four virtual participants’ faces as well as meeting slides. The conference phone in the middle of the table connects participants. However, virtual attendees can’t see those in the room, and they can’t hear well over the sound of one person tapping their pen and papers shuffling on the table.
• Two employees in the office see each other in the hallway and start discussing a project. They go to lunch and make critical decisions. The project manager continues working virtually, unaware of those decisions.

In either scenario, did in-office employees intentionally exclude virtual colleagues? Was technology to blame? Not clearly so. Even with the best technology, if individuals aren’t intentional about communicating and collaborating in ways in which everyone can fully engage, some workers will be left out or miss opportunities to offer their valuable ideas and perspectives.

Communicating with others is challenging—in part because of all the tools and technology. Some organizations tap multiple modes and employees become overwhelmed and exhausted with keeping up with numerous notifications and streams of conversations. They grow frustrated and become disengaged. Further, in a hybrid workplace, individuals can easily fall into the trap of focusing on one group of colleagues and exclude...
others. For example, they may become accustomed to dropping by their on-site colleagues' offices to share information and check in. Or they may regularly chat with other remote peers and inadvertently neglect on-site teammates.

What’s the solution? It is the one where everyone can fully participate, engage, and be heard—whether that’s in a meeting, workshop, or brainstorming session. To ensure inclusivity and effective leadership, people leaders need to be intentional in how and where communications and collaboration take place.

### Modes and Methods

To ensure all team members are included, managers need to hold conversations in places where everyone can participate. That means thinking about digital tools and digital communications and collaboration. Although the business may have a tool stack that limits what technology individuals can use, leaders can select tools that work best for their team and, in the case of a new one, request adding it to the tool stack.

Additionally, not all communications need to be synchronous. Collaborating asynchronously can be robust.

#### Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Communications

People like habits. We fall back on what we know. That often applies to how we communicate in the workplace. We stop by someone's desk or send a chat message to ask a question. We bring a group together in a meeting room to share updates, brainstorm ideas, or work through problems. Those are examples of synchronous communications, where interactions between two or more people happen in real time.

But are those the best methods? Many people don’t stop to ask that question or consider whether there may be a better way. Instead, they go with how things have always been done. Still, that doesn’t make them effective or ideal.

When helping people managers adjust their mindsets on work methods and the hybrid model, ask them to think of a time when they were deeply focused and an individual stopped by their office to ask a question, disrupting the manager’s focus. The individual could have easily sent an email or saved the question for the upcoming meeting. How long did it take the leader to get back in the flow of work?

Next demonstrate how asynchronous communications can be highly effective. Such methods enable everyone to engage with the work at a time that works best for them. That is especially valuable for teams that are located in different time zones. Asynchronous communication enables everyone to give thought to their responses or ideas and share them without fear of being talked over or having their idea immediately dismissed. It also allows for richer documentation and knowledge repositories because asynchronous communications are held in written or video format.

There is a time and place for both synchronous and asynchronous communications. The key is to experiment to find the blend that works for all team members while fully engaging them to participate. If asynchronous communications are new to the organization or team, encourage managers to start by replacing one meeting or other synchronous communication with an asynchronous method.

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<th>Synchronous</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team status update meeting</td>
<td>Post updates online and request everyone to review, ask questions, or add follow-up thoughts by a specified time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorming session</td>
<td>Use an online collaboration tool to post ideas, ask questions, build on thoughts, and narrow choices through voting.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership meeting update</td>
<td>Post a video recording online (such as on a shared team site or a team wiki) and ask for questions or comments.</td>
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and highly inclusive. For instance, teams can use an online visual collaboration tool such as Mural or Miro for brainstorming. That enables everyone to engage, and when done so asynchronously, team members can participate when it works best for them. Managers can leverage visual collaboration tools for meeting agendas and discussion topics rather than holding a synchronous meeting; for ideation and brainstorming, whether in an synchronous session or to ideate before or after; and for celebrations and events, such as setting up a board for an event or personal recognition to which others add pictures and comments.

**TD opportunities:** People leaders need to determine which communication channels the team will use and when, including which channel is right for quick-hit information, when to use email or messaging, how to share work, and where to hold fun and social conversations. Suggest they and their team experiment, discuss the ideal options, and reach a team agreement. Create and give them an organizational template for the agreement. And remind them to revisit it regularly to ensure the means and methods in place remain effective. See the Team Connection Agreement Guide at the end of this issue.

**Concrete Actions**

In a hybrid environment, people leaders must ensure the entire team is communicating and collaborating effectively and doing so in ways that work for everyone. Here are a few things for the people leaders to keep in mind:

- **Lead by example.** Get good at communicating digitally and stay curious about technology.
- **Work with the team to establish team norms regarding communication channels, meetings, technology use, and response times.**
- **Be mindful of the potential for unconscious biases, such as recency or proximity biases.** Be sure team members aren’t always looking to collaborate with the same individuals.
- **Determine available tools and technology and what the team needs to be successful.** Champion the team’s needs.
- **Work with the team to find places and ways to meet, connect, collaborate, and celebrate.** Involve all team members because they are the architects of the hybrid workplace.

**TD opportunities:** Build basic meeting skills to set the foundation for effective gatherings regardless of the medium; then level up leaders’ skills in facilitating virtual and hybrid meetings. Educate managers and teams on asynchronous communication, what that looks like, and how teams can leverage it. Partner with IT to support a campaign about digital literacy and curiosity. Digital

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**Call Out Proximity and Recency Biases**

Proximity and recency biases may surface more frequently in the hybrid workplace. Proximity bias is when individuals treat more favorably those who work physically close to them. Recency bias is when people give preferential treatment or importance to those they have seen, heard from, or interacted with most recently. Here are examples of both:

- A people leader who works primarily in the office highlights in-office direct reports’ achievements or ideas rather than those of virtual staff.
- A leader working remotely networks with and has casual chats over coffee with virtual employees more than with those in the office.
- A manager recommends for a project or opportunity a few direct reports whom they’ve been recently working with frequently.
- A leader thinks favorably about those they see or interact with regularly.

To help managers overcome biases, set up a training session or manager discussion to help them identify their personal preferences and ways to mitigate them. Remind them to consider their entire team when opportunities arise for promotions, development, or projects. Encourage them to build relationships with everyone on the team and connect in meaningful ways to ensure they don’t spend more time with remote or in-office direct reports. Advise them to reflect regularly on the entire team’s work.
tools will continue to change, but by building employees’ foundation of digital curiosity, they will be more likely to embrace new digital tools and technology.

Remember: Communication and collaboration efforts aren’t about people leaders mandating tools their direct reports should use or dictating team norms about how everyone can speak up. Each team should discuss and agree on the combination of tools and tech they use to do their jobs. That is their opportunity to design an effective workplace. They need to think about their work individually and collectively and determine how to accomplish that work inclusively in the hybrid model. The team connection agreement (as noted earlier) is effective for this. Check in periodically, such as monthly, with people leaders to answer questions and gauge their comfort with how their team is collaborating. Talent developers may also want to share short articles or a “quick tips” email about hybrid communication best practices.

Team bonding doesn’t always have to be social.

Connection and Cohesion

Office spaces are often designed to promote opportunities for employees to connect, whether in common areas, in the hallways, or in lunchrooms. Businesses support those connections by hosting social events, such as company picnics. In a hybrid model, virtual workers can come to believe the organization has overlooked them if their employer and people leaders aren’t intentional about designing engagement opportunities that include them. Lack of intentionality can lead to silos or isolation.

Additionally, people are creatures of habit. Individuals will inevitably turn to the person next to them before reaching out to someone in another location. As Oscar Berg shares in his book Superpowering People: Designing The Collaborative Digital Organization, “If you are physically close to someone, it is likely that you will frequently communicate. Over time, you will get to know each other, perhaps even like each other. You develop trust in each other. Being physically close allows you to communicate almost effortlessly, with high quality, about even trivial things. The more steps you have to walk, the more doors you have to open, and the more doorkeepers you have to pass to talk to someone, the less likely it is that you will make the effort.” That is why it’s essential for people leaders to create opportunities for everyone to fully participate and engage.

Recognition and Celebrations

Recognizing a job well done or celebrating promotions, birthdays, or results looks different in the office versus virtual. As I have called out throughout this issue of TD at Work, people leaders’ intentionality is critical to involving all team members. It is easy to stop by an individual’s office and say a quick “Great job!” It is just as easy to do that via a digital channel. Managers shouldn’t shy away from using emojis or gifs too as long as those are socially acceptable in the organization.

A little creativity can go far. For example, managers can incorporate a regular agenda item to the weekly team meeting where a different team member shares an anecdote about someone they want to recognize for their help or a job well done. They can make a point of celebrating staff’s personal milestones, such as birthdays, weddings, or births or adoptions by hosting virtual surprise parties, giving individuals a meeting-free day on their birthday, building a kudos board via an online visual collaboration tool and asking team members to contribute, or even sending a food delivery gift card to each team member and hosting a virtual lunch.

Networking and Relationship Building

People leaders need to create opportunities and open access for direct reports to network with leadership and other individuals while encouraging employees to build their networks—both in person and virtually. While virtual workers may need guidance or support in how to connect with in-office senior leaders, in-office staff also need to hone their digital networking skills. If they focus only on interacting with individuals in close physical proximity, they miss out on valuable connections elsewhere.
Managers can make a point to regularly introduce others to team members. During one-on-one meetings, they can listen for opportunities to connect direct reports with those outside the team. They can invite others from across the business to a team meeting to share what they are doing. Or they can host leadership coffee chats. Further, people leaders can encourage staff to join and actively participate in networks or special interest groups both inside (think employee resource groups or teams assembled to address an organizational problem or issue) and outside the company.

**Team Bonding and Social Connection**

People leaders need to foster an environment where the entire team can socialize and bond. Remember that it’s not always about the business. Teams need time to get to know each other as individuals and to relax and have fun together. That may come more naturally in an office environment with quick personal chats in the hallway or on the way to a conference room. In a virtual environment, people tend to be more apt to jump straight into the meeting agenda.

To encourage social connections, managers can plan intentionally for them, such as setting aside time at the beginning of the meeting to ask a fun question or have individuals share something they are grateful for or that is weighing on their mind. Managers can host 30-minute game lunches where everyone answers trivia or plays a game such as Pictionary or bingo. They can schedule monthly or quarterly optional team hangouts where people can join and leave at any time throughout the gathering.

Another option is to engage the team in volunteer opportunities. If team members are close in locational proximity, gather in person to volunteer together. If not, encourage each person to volunteer in their own area and then coordinate a group discussion where everyone can share their individual experiences with the team.

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**Build Awareness of Digital Body Language**

When people managers don’t see direct reports daily and communicate primarily via online, text-based communications, it’s easy for them to lose the context of the messages and not grasp a complete picture of how their employees are doing. Plus, workers can hide behind their words and not fully share what may be wrong. Leaders may also forget to check in with employees on their work, health, and mood because they are out of sight and out of mind.

All is not lost. People give signals more than they realize in their messages, word choices, and how and when they interact. Managers need to think about those cues and signals—both what they are giving off and what they are sensing from team members. Support them in picking up on the subtleties but also remind them to assume positive intent. They shouldn’t read too much into a message or make assumptions about what an employee is trying to say. If they have questions, remind them to call or video call the employee rather than responding via email or chat messages.

Here are some clues managers can look for:

- An increase or decrease in responsiveness can signal someone needs support.
- Is an employee increasing their emails, chat, or online engagement? They may be feeling left out or isolated.
- Have they stopped posting online, or are they taking longer to respond to chat messages? They may be working through some personal issues or be in conflict with someone on the team.
- Is an individual sending emails or posting online in the evening or on weekends? They may feel they need to prove they are working, or they may be overworked.

Those cues and signals only tell part of the story. Managers may need to have a deeper conversation to better understand the situation. Encourage them to pursue their options.
Team bonding doesn’t always have to be social either. The team could complete a learning program together, attend a virtual conference on company time and discuss key learnings and takeaways, or read a relevant professional development book and discuss it either in a dedicated videoconference or via an online chat platform. Likewise, managers aren’t required to take the lead on all activities. They can delegate responsibility and rotate leadership of team social connections among staff. However, managers need to lead by example, show up at events, and champion them.

Next Steps
Managers can encourage team cohesion and connection in a variety of ways:

• Carve out time to connect regularly with employees, giving equal time to both in-office and virtual workers.
• Get to know staff on a personal level by expressing interest in them while encouraging them to share, as comfortable, about their own lives.
• Hold virtual office hours where direct reports can come and discuss anything on their mind.
• Plan regular team gatherings—whether yearly, quarterly, or monthly.
• Stay aware of opportunities for employees to connect with others across the organization and share them with the team.

TD opportunities: To support managers in these efforts, lead or partner with other groups to host networking events, such as special interest or employee resource groups. Foster opportunities for connection in all learning programs, both virtual and in person. Grow employees’ digital networking skills, including relationship building. Partner with the IT and communications departments to build a repository of connection ideas and practices that teams can leverage. Create frameworks for networking events and book clubs that employees can use as a template to host their own.

Remember that connection isn’t about doing something to say you did it. It’s about creating an environment for teams to connect on a human level to build relationships and get to know each other. There is a danger of overconnecting—it can become a burden or one more thing for the team to do, diminishing its value.

Opportunities for connection and building team cohesion should be meaningful and value-added—not another box to check. Remind people leaders to strike a balance.

Conclusion
It should be clear that leading a hybrid team builds off the leadership skills managers already have and requires more intentionality to engage with the team and provide support to create a location-inclusive environment. As a talent development professional, you can help encourage and guide managers to adjusting their mindset for guiding hybrid teams.

It can seem overwhelming for them to figure out what to focus on first or even where to start. Remind them that the key is to start with one area and try new things and experiment to determine what works and what doesn’t. It’s also essential that people leaders co-create norms and guidelines with their teams. When they intentionally create the environment for clarity of work and purpose, effective communication and collaboration, and meaningful connection among employees, they will have an engaged, innovative, connected, and productive team.
Books


Online Resources


Connor, S. 2020. “5 Tips to Delete Distance Bias as Some Head Back into the Office.” Virtual Work Insider, June 12. virtualworkinsider.com/2020/06/12/5-tips-to-delete-distance-bias-as-some-head-back-into-the-office.


Team Connection Agreement Guide

Share this agreement guide with people leaders for them to use it to work with their direct reports to identify approaches that will work best for the entire team. Advise managers that they can start the team conversation asynchronously by posting it via a digital whiteboard, online document, or discussion group. Note that they can expand the agreement beyond the included questions and make it as brief or as long as needed.

Guidelines
- As a team, discuss the questions, with one person capturing the points everyone agrees to.
- Ensure everyone on the team can share their ideas and opinions on how to work together more effectively.
- Regularly review this agreement, which is a living document, to determine whether the team continues to agree to all captured elements of the document. Likewise review it with new team members and incorporate their ideas.
- Hold each other accountable to these guidelines to ensure team cohesion.
- Set a date for the team to meet and review the agreement again, such as once a quarter or when circumstances warrant, such as when a new hire joins the team or office policies change and affect the hybrid work model.

Clarity of Work and Purpose
- How will we know what each team member is working on? For example, do we want a centralized task system or weekly stand-up meetings?
- What types of information do we need to share?
- What is the best method for sharing the information (for example, centralized task system, shared calendar)?
- How will we gather feedback from internal customers?
- What does success look like for the team? What metrics will we use? Where will we track those metrics?
- What other practices will we use to stay clear on our work and how it intersects with other team members?

Communication and Collaboration
- Which tools will we use for communication, for which types of communication, and when? What are expected response times?
- Which tools will we use for collaboration—and for which types of collaboration—beyond meetings?
- What is our established forum for asynchronously sharing and discussing ideas?
- What are the team’s core hours for collaboration and synchronous communication?
- How frequently will we have team meetings? What are team meeting standards (such as sending out an agenda and reading and discussion questions in advance; posting meeting minutes on the team discussion board following the meeting)?
- How will we ensure all team members are included during meetings?
- What other communication and collaboration practices will we use?

Connection and Cohesion
- How will we show appreciation and recognize others?
- What will we do to build relationships across the team?
- How do we want to celebrate as a team?
- If possible, do we want to gather in person as a team regularly? If so, at what frequency?
- How will we welcome new members and ensure they get to know the team and established approaches to work?
- What other practices do we want to embrace to stay connected as a team?
Hybrid Leadership in Action Guide

Share this chart with people leaders to offer examples of behaviors to watch for, what those behaviors may mean, and actions they can take to mitigate problems and provide employees with clarity, improve team communication and collaboration, and build a more cohesive team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Mitigation Steps</th>
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| An employee is working on their own or not engaging with the team, asking questions, or sharing when they need help. | The employee may feel isolated and alone. They may not feel connected to the people leader or may not understand how they intersect with the team or the organization. When the individual is in the physical office, seeing others collaborating can signal that everyone is working together to make a difference. | • During a one-on-one meeting, ask the employee to share how their work supports the team goals and intersects with others.  
  • Discuss how employees can connect with what's happening in the organization and share how the individual employee adds value to the team.  
  • Use a videoconference or chat tool to set up virtual office hours where you are available for any team member to discuss any topic. |
| A team member does not share or ask questions regularly during team check-in meetings or only shares a list of their work. | Team members may not feel that they are working toward common goals and may not be interested in their success but only their work. They may not feel valued or part of a fully engaged team and they may not feel connected to a purpose. | Regularly (such as during one-on-one meetings) discuss how the employee’s work supports the team and organizational goals. Invite the individual to share what they are working on and how it supports team goals. |
| An employee turns in work late or works on low-priority items.         | The employee needs clarity on their work and purpose. They may not understand what they should be working on, may have trouble prioritizing work, or may not want to work on tasks that do not interest them. | During one-on-one meetings, discuss the team and individual goals and which tasks the employee should prioritize. Ask what roadblocks the person is facing and how you can support. |
| In-office employees regularly connect among themselves but do not connect with their virtual team members or vice versa. | The team may be experiencing proximity or recency biases and may not understand how regular connections with all team members help them understand each other and their work. | • Establish a schedule of regular, brief chats (such as over coffee) between individual team members. Rotate who meets with whom weekly or monthly.  
  • Schedule regular team gatherings—either in person or virtually, as is best for the team—or delegate that task to team members and rotate who hosts the gathering.  
  • Discuss expectations about interactions individually and as a team. Share the outcomes of missed connections and your expectations for the team to regularly connect with each other. |
| A virtual employee regularly skips lunch breaks or sends emails after hours. | The employee may be struggling with boundaries, which could lead to burnout, or lacks clarity on work expectations. Virtual staff don't have the same visual and social cues that in-office workers have about pausing or shutting down their workday, such as seeing others leave for lunch or close up at the end of the day. That may lead to overwork or unrealistic expectations they put on themselves. | Discuss the importance of breaks and disconnecting from work. Ask the employee to share what they are working on, their priorities, and how they could set boundaries for themselves. Consider recommending a development opportunity focused on well-being, time management, or prioritization. |
| Two team members are having long back-and-forth conversations in the digital team online forum. | This may be a sign of confusion or tension between team members. They may not be willing to pick up the phone to talk with one another. | During one-on-one meetings, ask each team member about the conversation to determine whether they are confused or there is tension between them and the other team member. Let them know that hashing things out in the digital team forum distracts the rest of the team and is unproductive. Further, you may need to bring both team members together to discuss the conversation if you sense or confirm tension between them. |
Communication and Collaboration Inclusion Worksheet

Ask managers to use this worksheet to think about their team’s interactions and the individual experience. Don’t assume they can figure it out as they go or keep things as they were when everyone was co-located.

How will individuals participate in meetings? Will everyone join the call individually, or will those in the office gather in a meeting space and virtual attendees will call? Does technology support everyone engaging, or does it create more challenges?

Will meeting leadership rotate between virtual and in-office team members? If so, how will you facilitate that?

What meeting etiquette rules should everyone follow (e.g., send an agenda, invite only those who are needed, and rotate who speaks or responds first)?

How will the team review project documentation (e.g., share online, review in advance of a meeting, send after a meeting)?

What meeting tools will the team use to ensure everyone is able to speak and be heard (e.g., chat, polling, whiteboard, online collaboration tools)?

What technology-related elements does the team need to discuss and agree on (e.g., whether the team will have co-facilitators for hybrid meetings; if using chat, whether a designated individual will monitor and document insights and questions)?

What digital body language best practices should the team discuss and follow (e.g., assume best intentions; have a discussion if confused; reread before sending a message to ensure tone and a clear message)?