



## How to Approach Leading the New Hybrid Workforce

By The Center for Creative Leadership

Before the global pandemic, remote workers who were regularly telecommuting often expressed frustration at conference calls where 80% of attendees were in one room, while they were among the 20% calling in from other locations. The 20% often reported that they felt like outliers: it could be challenging to hear, difficult to get the group's attention, and hard to read the room or contribute to the discussion.

For many of these already-remote employees, the global COVID pandemic was an equalizer: Everybody was calling in from somewhere, and so the meeting experience suddenly felt more inclusive.

With unprecedented levels of virtual team collaboration, more flexible work hours, and less time spent commuting, it's no wonder that, as has been widely reported, global productivity increased dramatically during the pandemic ... although these gains undoubtedly came at a high cost for some individuals and organizations.

Now, as we move into a post-pandemic "new normal," leaders are facing the new reality of leading a hybrid workforce. While there's no one-size-fits-all model for a hybrid workforce or team, the term usually refers to a setting where some employees work remotely, some work on-site, and others work a combination of both.

Every business or organization has its own timetable for when, how, or whether to return to in-person work. And on a broader scale, many organizations are eager for a return to normal, yet want to maintain productivity gains and stem the tide of widespread burnout.

## Transitioning to the New Normal of the Hybrid Workforce

While the shift to virtual work may have been precipitated by the emergency work-from-home measures in 2020, plans for the new hybrid workforce model are becoming less reactionary and more deliberate now.

The details aren't clear yet, but one thing is certain: The post-pandemic world of work is definitely going to look different.

According to a recent study from Lattice, nearly 1 in 4 companies say they expect to maintain a 90–100% remote workforce in 2023. The study also indicates that the hybrid workforce is succeeding, as companies with a 90% remote workforce reported being just as happy with manager-employee facetime as those with a 10% remote workforce.

However, this new way of working can be challenging — especially at first.

Leaders must balance differing employee preferences with a desire for continued productivity and collaboration. Some team members may be clamoring to get back to the office, but many others want to continue to work from home.

In fact, the majority of employees say they want flexible and remote work options to remain — a 2021 survey even found that 64% would prefer a permanent work-from-home situation over a \$30K pay raise.

That's why hybrid work policies and how effectively managers can lead hybrid and virtual teams will be key for attracting and retaining talent in many industries going forward.

## How to Lead a Hybrid Workforce

### 5 Tips for Leaders

How will this shift toward a more hybrid workplace model affect leaders and leadership?

Leading a hybrid team requires adaptability to change and an openness to experimentation. A recent survey found that the leadership skills most needed in 2023 are engaging and developing talent, leading and supporting change initiatives, establishing goals and priorities, and creating a sense of inclusion and belonging.

In this new and changing environment, we believe that leaders will be most successful when they incorporate the following 5 steps into their strategy.

#### 1. Acknowledge what's new and different about the hybrid workforce.

Leaders should start by acknowledging that this environment is new and different, and that what works for one person will not work for everyone. Leaders must reassure people that whether they're working in person, remotely, or a combination of those, their choice is not career-limiting, and their contributions are valued. They must also set the stage for effective team collaboration.

Culture matters, now more than ever. In the Lattice study mentioned above, the primary challenge for remote and hybrid workforces isn't productivity — it's employee engagement and organizational culture.

Work to create a psychologically safe work environment where people can be open about their uncertainties and their frustrations. Ensure team members have the skills they need to hold candid conversations with one another, no matter where they are.

It requires truth and courage to develop a coaching culture at your organization, but this will help foster more innovative solutions, greater morale, and improved productivity among members of your newly hybrid workforce. (It's also essential for building a strong organizational culture when some at your organization are remote.)

## 2. Foster empathy, equity, and inclusion in your hybrid work model.

Work to maintain or establish inclusive practices for things like team huddles or group calls. In 2020, when everyone was working from home, many experienced firsthand the challenges of contributing in virtual meetings — something already-remote workers knew all too well.

As offices reopen with newly hybrid workflow processes and teams, remember those lessons learned to ensure meetings remain inclusive. Without intentionality and clearly defined processes, it could be easy for those returning to work in-person to fall back into old habits, unintentionally excluding or overlooking colleagues who are working off-site.

Also take time to help your newly hybrid workforce to develop an identity by crafting a set of shared team norms and expectations. Everyone should understand the team's purpose and goals, work processes, meeting frequency, and how decisions will be made. Consider the following questions:

If individuals plan to work part-time remote and part-time in person, which days will they come to the office?

How can team meetings accommodate the needs and leverage the contributions of both in-person and remote participants effectively?

How will communication tools and technology platforms be used to support the team's goals and outputs?

Working through these questions allows leaders and employers to foster inclusion and connectedness among members of their hybrid workforce. And agreeing on the use of technology tools and platforms can help remote individuals feel less detached and ensure everyone's needs are being met. (That's one of our recommended best practices for managing virtual teams and meetings, but it really applies in a hybrid workforce situation as well.) Leaders of highly effective teams enable full participation of all their members, no matter where they are.

3. Cultivate the mindsets of learning agility and resilience.

Here's the reality of hybrid work: Plans will change.

Learning agility, or the ability to adapt and thrive in new situations, is crucial to your organization's hybrid work success. Leaders should schedule time every couple of weeks to talk with their team members about what's working and what isn't. In addition, they should connect with other leaders of hybrid teams throughout your organization. What are their successes and challenges?

In this uncharted territory, resilience is more important than ever and burnout continues to be a problem. So leaders should set an example for the hybrid workforce by prioritizing their own mental and physical health. Whenever possible:

Nurture your personal and professional relationships;

Prioritize regular exercise and sleep each night;

Make time for mindfulness; and

Respect downtime and avoid contacting employees during their off hours.

#### 4. Pay close attention to direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC).

At CCL, we know that leadership is a social process. When it's working well, individuals collaborate to achieve results they never would have achieved working alone. The DAC model for leadership can help you gauge the success of your new hybrid workforce model, too:

When you look around, do you see strong direction? In other words, are team members in agreement on the group's overall goals and strategies?

Ask yourself whether your group is aligned — whether members with different tasks and roles are coordinating their work.

Finally, is there commitment, or mutual responsibility for the group? When teams have strong commitment, they feel responsible for the success and wellbeing of the group and business. There's a high level of trust and psychological safety.

Compare current levels of DAC among your hybrid workforce to pre-pandemic times. (You can use our free tool to assess DAC on your team.) Organizations and businesses that switch into hybrid work mode and see DAC levels hold steady or improve should take it as a sign that things are going well. On the other hand, if DAC has decreased, recognize that your group's shared interactions aren't what they should be.

Remember that DAC is ever-evolving, similar to your hybrid model. As you discover what works best for your organization, expect to encounter bumps along the way. The most important thing leaders can do is maintain perspective by embracing change and seeing challenges as learning opportunities.

#### 5. Focus on boundary spanning — within your hybrid team and across the organization's entire hybrid workforce.

On a typical day at work, leaders must collaborate across boundaries throughout their organizations. They collaborate with peers in different departments and hierarchical levels; they work with external stakeholders; they unite diverse groups. They also traverse geographic boundaries by managing remote employees — one of the most important focus areas when some team members are working on-site and others are working remotely.

In establishing what a hybrid workforce will look like for your organization, think consciously about your individual team's network within the organization. Ask yourself:

How is my team connected with other teams off-site?

How do my team members and I best interact with those teams?

How is my team currently spanning boundaries?

How can we foster interaction, better conversations, and effective collaboration between departments in a hybrid work environment?

While a more hybrid team may present new challenges to collaborate and navigate across boundaries, the solutions to today's most pressing business challenges are often found at the intersection of multiple boundaries.

When members of your hybrid workforce see leaders recalibrate, adapt, and embrace the future with an agile and collaborative mindset, they'll likely do the same.

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