

The HR SCOOP

MARCH 2021

Manage Culture Across Locations

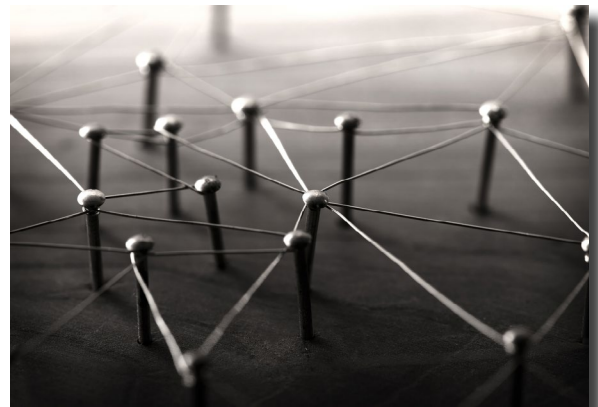
Workplace culture is experiencing one of the most significant shifts in recent memory, driven primarily by the pandemic which required all of us to find new ways to work. We moved from an office-centric environment to one where virtual work is an option, or requirement, for many positions. As offices are able to reopen many employees are asking to keep the option of working remotely.

As a result, more organizations are turning to a hybrid working model that combines the best of both remote and office-based work. Adapting to this new working model might seem straightforward in theory, but it may be difficult in reality, especially when it comes to organizational culture.

SHIFTING FOCUS

Many organizations are challenged when it comes to creating and maintaining culture when employees are working across different locations. The first step is acknowledging that culture can no longer be forged in the same way as it was in an office-centric model.

Historically, office settings and in-person interactions have been key signals of culture, which is often built and reflected in the way people behave and dress in the office. Culture is reinforced by physical settings, from open office spaces with ping pong tables to traditional offices with wood paneling and leather chairs. With fewer people working in the office, new methods are needed to communicate and reinforce the company culture.



An established company culture doesn't immediately disappear in a remote or hybrid context. Cultural beliefs and norms are still being created and reinforced, but now they're no longer guided by practices and routines that were previously established in the office. Over time, culture can be weakened or modified by the new norms of remote work.

Organizations should think about how they want to reinforce culture in new and better ways. One question to answer is how to ensure a consistent culture across those in the office and those working remotely. One of the greatest risks with hybrid work is the potential for employees to have different and incompatible understandings of the company culture. To avoid that outcome, strive for consistency by establishing a cohesive understanding of the culture within the organization's leadership, and position them to drive it forward.

LEADERS DRIVE CULTURE

When in the same location, leaders often implicitly transmit culture by modeling behaviors and values in the presence of their employees. The same signals exist when remote, but they're harder to detect and interpret.

In today's world, leadership needs to:

- Identify and understand the desired organizational culture
- Determine methods that are appropriate to communicate the culture
- Know how and when to send culture communication
- Assess which aspects of the desired culture are and are not effective in a remote or hybrid environment

This is also an opportunity to make leaders more approachable, show vulnerability, and actively transform the culture.



All-employee meetings that were once hour-long formal productions could become virtual 20-minute updates with leaders dialing in from home, combined with town hall style "ask me anything" sessions. The point is to meet people where they are, to project openness, and engage in behaviors that build the desired culture through intentional interactions.

CONNECTING VIRTUAL AND IN-OFFICE EMPLOYEES

Culture is often defined by our daily interactions. How we interact with coworkers has changed and if leaders are not intentional about how and when messages are delivered, it will be easy to create two different cultures: one for remote workers and one for in-office employees.

Effective leadership in this new hybrid world requires different skills that go beyond traditional team leadership. Organizations will need leaders who can operate well in this hybrid approach, adjusting easily from one environment to the other to ensure a healthy, cohesive culture.

RELATIONSHIPS

One of the unintended consequences of this widespread switch to virtual work is the impact on the relationships and interpersonal networks within organizations. Generally, relationships and interpersonal networks have stagnated or withered during this time of virtual work and social distancing. Managers can act to mitigate those effects by understanding how working remotely can damage connections, trust, and cooperation and taking deliberate steps to facilitate relationships.



One of the biggest drivers of who interacts with whom in organizations is typically physical proximity. When everyone goes virtual, though, employees can no longer casually run into someone in the hallway or by the printer.

Employees still keep in touch with the people they feel closest to and with coworkers they're required to work with on particular tasks, but with everyone else, the level of interaction is drastically reduced. And when interactions do occur, they are intentional, not chance encounters.

Inevitably, going all or partially virtual means that many interactions diminish, relationships recede, work networks shrink, and the organization becomes less interconnected.

Organizations can encourage interactions by:

- Inviting larger groups for 30-minute informal virtual meetings to discuss non-work related items, which normally would be talked about at the water cooler
- Making time for small talk before and/or after meetings
- Establishing expectations for leaders to connect with individuals outside of their department on a regular basis
- Encouraging peers across departments to reach out to each other
- Establishing regular, brief updates via video conference from the CEO/President

Our ability to connect meaningfully to others is diminished when we're not physically present and establishing a shared understanding is harder when we spend time apart. The absence of shared context, from body language to the type of snacks made available in the break room, dilutes the signals that convey culture.

Organizations that are adapting well to this new way of working have intentionally redesigned processes to support their desired culture and encourage communication across the organization.

SUMMARY

We're entering a new and unique time of transition as we adapt to changing workplace dynamics and envision the workplace of the future.

It will take early experimentation to generate ways of managing remote work effectively while preserving the value of in-office symbols and in person work to strengthen culture. Tolerance for failures along the way will be essential to finding a path forward.

Organizations and leadership must recognize that thriving in this new era depends on being open to new formulas for building and maintaining a strong culture.

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