

How to LEAD A HYBRID TEAM in a post-Covid 19 world

Follow these top HR tips to keep your hybrid teams united.



Dr Penny Pullan

As we move into a hybrid situation in many workplaces, with some people in the office and others remote, it's important to think carefully about how to get the most out of this new way of working.

First of all, what exactly do we mean by hybrid working? This happens where a team has a mixture of some people working in the office and others working virtually, either from home or another location, such as a co-working space

or a café. Those in the office might be there full time or just a few days a month. Indeed, people might take it in turns to travel to the office, meaning that one person could work from the office one day and work remotely the next day. The key thing to remember is that the team is split on any given day, with some in the office and others dispersed geographically.

How did we get to this hybrid situation?

During the initial surge of the COVID19 pandemic, many organizations went virtual within just a few days, sending employees home to work remotely using collaboration tools. This was full virtual working, which requires a special style of leadership: virtual leadership, which is a more facilitative approach than many leaders employed beforehand. In this style of leadership, leaders focus on making it easy for each person to do the best job they can. It focuses on the people aspects, in order to get the tasks done. But we've not finished with virtual leadership yet ...

There is a major threat to team unity, which comes with hybrid working. It is very easy to overlook. This danger lies in the fact that some people will be in the office, while others remain working from home, which means that there is a disparity. Those in the office will be at an advantage compared to those working at home. They can glance over to see what others are doing. They can have conversations with the advantage of the richness of in-person communication: seeing body language really clearly, as well as hearing the full details of voice tone. This builds rapport and trust in a very natural way that just happens when people share the same space, which remote workers can't access. This disparity can cause problems and it can feel as if things are unfair to those not in the office.

The answer to this threat is to work hard to create a level playing field. Leaders need to ensure carefully and deliberately that remote team members are not forgotten or treated

as second class team members. Let's take team meetings as an example. To keep a level playing field, consider holding them as fully virtual meetings, with everyone joining from their laptops or mobile devices over video conference. The alternative would be to have those in the office together in a meeting room and the rest joining remotely. Choosing to go virtual means that you have levelled the playing field for everyone. What I find is that, unless leaders make a positive choice to create a level playing field, it just doesn't happen.

Virtual leadership

Remember virtual leadership, where the leader facilitates every member of the team to do their best? This becomes even more important in a hybrid situation. Leading in the hybrid context is not easy, in fact, it is probably harder than when everyone was remote! Keep focusing on each person, remember the level playing field and work hard to keep things fair and consistent between all members of your team. It makes sense to develop your own virtual leadership and that of your hybrid team members. I've worked on this with teams for more than a decade, during which I've found several aspects to focus on. These include:

- Yourself as leader: understanding your skills, preferences, strengths and weaknesses;
- Others in your team: understanding their skills, preferences, strengths and weaknesses, and finding ways that your team can work together effectively, building on each other's skills, strengths and preferences, and covering up for weaknesses;
- Technology: develop skills to use virtual technologies effectively, and choose an appropriate mix of live and asynchronous (different time) collaboration tools to support your whole team working together;
- Leading effective and engaging virtual meetings;
- Working effectively in between meetings, using those collaboration tools; and
- Overcoming complications such as differences across generations, cultures and languages.

My next tip concerns team performance. Under pressure, too many leaders jump into setting goals and assigning actions. Make sure that you spend time orienting the team to a clear team purpose and identity, especially if anyone new has joined or if your hybrid team is newly formed. Before diving into goals, build trust between team members. Ensure that everyone knows who the other team members are and what each person has to offer to the team as a whole. When you set goals, make sure everyone understands the assumptions you are making and, as ever with hybrid teams, be really clear.

Don't forget to have fun

Finally, having fun together as a hybrid team is a great way to feel united. With a little creativity, you can design a shared experience that works for all. One team I know sent out boxes of treats, nibbles and drinks, each crafted to suit the preferences and dietary requirements of each team member. These were marked clearly: 'Keep for the team meeting on 5th July'. When the time came, people opened up their goody boxes and joined in with their colleagues on video. This was great fun, showed each team member that they mattered and turned the team meeting into a memorable, multi-sensory experience!

So, remember the level playing field, the ongoing need for virtual leadership, the focus on team performance and having fun together. My hope is that these tips will help you to overcome the undoubted challenge of leading a hybrid team. All the best! ■

Dr Penny Pullan is an expert in Virtual and Hybrid Leadership at Making Projects Work Ltd. She's the author of the bestseller and CEO Today Top 5 book for lockdown, *Virtual Leadership: Practical strategies for getting the best out of virtual work and virtual teams* at KoganPage. Penny works with leaders and teams who are grappling with the challenges of our virtual and hybrid world, to enhance collaboration and effectiveness across dispersed and hybrid teams. Follow her on Twitter.

